

Fragmentary Mother

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**Abstract**

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*Fragmentary Mother* is a collection of essays and experimental creative nonfiction that explores my transition from Marine to mother. Composed during my pregnancy and following the birth of my child, these experimental essays confront past traumas that have influenced me, while also reckoning with the way I am reshaped in this new phase of my life. Ultimately, this is both a documentation of a healing process rooted in love and an acknowledgement of empathy for oneself in response to trauma. The work focuses on three distinct ideas that shape my understanding of motherhood: (1) childhood and my direct experiences with mother figures, (2) my experiences as a leader in the Military, specifically the Marine Corps and (3) the present state of pregnancy and motherhood as I transition through it. Reoccurring themes of medicine's impact on shaping my life as well as webs of interconnection are reflected in each piece. This work encapsulates the unique and beautiful experience of capturing a delicate state of change for a mom.

# ***Fragmentary Mother***

Kathryn M. Tran

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## Inside a Translucent Trap

What secrets lay in the cloaked details of darkness? In youth our world is isolated to our immediate surroundings with our scope of understanding dictated by whomever surrounds us. Some navigate the world alone. They lack a parental figure to cast light onto their darkest reality. In these circumstances, where the landscape is not lit by a protective and safe figure but rather, whatever pressing circumstance life throws at them, they must decipher it alone. If they fail to grasp a social context, or a new situation, they operate in shadow. It's not natural, but eventually, they gain the ability to sense others, a vibrational shift. Like a lone soul walking in the woods at night, they cast out their hands in front of them to play the spider at its own game and feel for its web.

\*

In folklore and classic literature, the cultural significance of a spider is interwoven with its unique ability to weave a web. Its reputation across cultures was often seen as either of a trickster or a creator due to its unique hunting method for catching prey. In the folklore of many cultures, a spider is often depicted as a cunning woman—she weaves and deceives. Stories are passed down from places across the globe that depict a female who weaves cloth and deceives a man into adultery and is then condemned by the gods to live as a spider. In folklore the creator figure is prideful and indignant leading to their own downfall, whereas the trickster spider uses cunning to succeed even if others are harmed. Similarly, the spider temptress also uses deception to attempt to cause the downfall of others, specifically men, but she does not always claim victory at the end of the story. Some historical examples in folklore include Anansi, a spider and trickster from West African mythology, Arachne the weaver turned spider from Greek mythology, and Jorogumo a half-woman half-spider temptress from Japanese mythology. All mythological narratives are extracted from the natural complexity of the spider and her web.

At night, a spider weaves her intricate web. It becomes a delicate masterpiece woven between trees and shrubs. During the day, a web is translucent, barely visible only when a ray of sunlight shines through it at a revealing angle. At night, the web vanishes completely, a perfect invisible trap for any nearby prey.

The nature of the spider's trap is complete transparency. The strands of silk may vary slightly with each breed of spider, but they appear completely clear. The way a human can perceive their placement is by noticing the black shape of the spider waiting inside, or by catching the glints of light shining off the translucent web. Most insects that are prime prey for spiders do not have this field of vision and therefore, never see the trap coming. Over time, particles of dust, filament and debris collect in the sticky web and change its opacity. At this point the web is abandoned by the spider, it abandons its post in search of a new place to set its trap.

\*

My gloves were my favorite part of my field uniform. I had never thought to wear gloves in the woods. The Marine Corps taught me the importance of self-protection, starting with the gear we wore when facing the elements. Gloves were part of our Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). We wore clear or shaded glasses, a helmet made of Kevlar, and gloves. We could customize the gloves and were allowed to buy any pair we wanted if they were tan, black, or green. I chose a pair that were made of waterproof pleather, a mix of brown and tan. They felt lightweight on my hands. I could touch anything outside and never get dirty; my own way to explore the external world with safety measures in place.

On patrols in the woods, I'd raise my hand from its resting place on my rifle and gently lift a spider from its web. For a few seconds, it sat on my palm, staring at me as I carried it over to the nearest shrub. There seemed countless spiders in the way of my squad's path through the

trees. Silver wisps and eight-legged bodies were everywhere. I began to see it as part of my duty on point, a position at the front of the patrol formation, to prevent these creatures from becoming casualties of our training mission. With my gloves as my shield, I removed each one I could, and embraced the small moment of connection. I felt sad to take down their well-built traps, but I knew they'd move on and create others. I was their safety evacuation. A rescue conducted just in time for a squad of Marines to come stomping through the space behind me.

\*

I was four when I met my stepmother at my grandpa's wake and 11 when I saw her for the last time. My dad and stepmom stayed married for around six years. It probably seemed like a blip to my father—a six-year marriage, for an adult, passes in a blink; but when you're a kid it's your whole lifetime. In the last years of their marriage, my dad was increasingly absent from home. He was dating someone from work, and while I'm not sure whether he was aware the family knew, my stepmom had repeatedly told us that his mistress was the reason he was rarely home at night. These words were usually lashed out at us in anger after she received yet another phone call announcing my dad would not be "working late." My stepmom found different ways to exact her revenge for this transgression, most commonly she would spend particularly lonely nights in her bedroom mixing opioids, psychopharmaceuticals and alcohol.

My family during this time consisted of my older stepbrother, my dad, my stepmom, and me. My stepbrother and I looked after one another as best we could; we always leaned on one another to tackle the next drama my stepmother dragged out into our sleepless nights. When the darkness came, we knew the other was only in the next room. Many nights we'd wake to pure chaos, my stepmom crying or screaming in the other room loud enough for us to come to her aide. As the older sibling, he took the brunt of the load. He was her blood; therefore, she was his lifelong obligation.

Most of the time my stepbrother handled things on his own out of protectiveness for my youth. He was a good big brother. I only have one memory of him waking me for help. On that night, a flood of urgency penetrated my bedroom. I sensed his dark outline in my door as light flooded in behind him. His presence in the room pulled my eyelids open and sent a jolt of fear down my spine. I was 8 years old.

\*

Anansi, the spider god, is a myth from West African folklore that has regional and historical variations. The tales were passed down through oral storytelling and eventually were written into children's books. Anansi was a spider or sometimes spider-human who used cunning and trickery to steal the world's stories from the skygod. The story goes that Anansi lived in the human world and heard that the skygod had the earth's stories hidden away in the sky. Anansi spun his web to reach the place in the sky where the skygod resided. He requested the stories from the skygod to return them to earth, and the skygod told Anansi that if he captured the four most dangerous creatures in the world and brought them to him then he would be willing to trade. Anansi agreed and left. The skygod believed Anansi would never complete his seemingly impossible task. Back on earth Anansi used cunning and trickery to capture all four of the most dangerous creatures and brought them back to the skygod. The skygod was surprised, but honored his deal and gave the stories to Anansi who returned them to earth and spread them around to all the people in the world. The moral of this tale is that even a small spider can defeat a god if they use cunning and wit against impossible odds. It is also seen as a symbol of importance to oral tradition and keeping alive history through collective sharing of knowledge. This would become important to preserving tradition in the face of the West African Slave Trade.

\*

The morning following my midnight wakeup call by my brother, my stepmom shook me

awake early and brought me to the hospital with her. My stepbrother was left to sleep. On the way there, she told me the story of how she fell on a wine glass. She told me that the people at the hospital may ask a lot of questions, and that I needed to tell them I saw everything happen. Then I was in a hospital room with stainless steel beds and a pale green curtain. My stepmom sat with her back against the wall and her feet up on the stiff hospital mattress. Her left arm was covered in paper towels, bandages, and tape. Her right hand gripped the bandage heap. She squeezed it tightly. Her face awash with pain. It was the usual expression she wore at the hospital; but this time I felt something different. Anxiety hung in the air between us. I sat in a chair at the end of the bed. My legs swung back and forth beneath me like a pendulum clock. A doctor marched into the space; his presence pierced the quiet calm that had filled the room. His eyes locked on my stepmom. "Okay, I'm Doctor Smith, and you are... Susan?" he peeked at the clipboard in his hand.

He was average height, weight, and build. He was white and middle aged. There wasn't anything remarkable about this man, yet I sensed the tension building in my stepmom with his arrival.

"Yes" she muttered.

"Tell me what brings you in today."

"Well..." she started.

I perked up, I anticipated my charismatic stepmom to blossom as her story unfolded. I'm always an audience to her performances. It felt like the only two people in the room were her and the doctor. "I was taking the clean dishes out of the dishwasher last night. I had been drinking after dinner, you see. My husband was out late, and I was worried. I slipped! There was some water spilled on the floor. You know when you open the dishwasher and water leaks out of the sides sometimes? Well, I slipped and fell on the dishrack. I caught myself with my arm.

But there was a broken wineglass, and the stem was very sharp. It was in the dishrack, and it sliced my arm clean open. Such a freak accident, I couldn't believe it!"

"The wineglass was broken in the dishwasher?"

"No, it broke when I fell."

"Your fall broke the wineglass and cut you at the same time?"

"Maybe it was broken during the dish cycle I'm not sure."

"Why didn't you come in last night?"

"I had been drinking and there was so much blood" She paused, a small wrinkle of worry appeared between her brows "I didn't think it was that serious."

The doctor sighed. His face wore an expression of disbelief.

\*

It is widely acknowledged that most spiders are nocturnal. They build their webs at night when their prey cannot see them weaving their trap. Spiders have some vision capability mainly used for seeing predators moving towards them. To see prey, spiders use vibrational patterns along their web. When a fly becomes ensnared and wiggles to escape, the spider awaiting at the other end is alerted to the movement and can sense its exact location based on feel. Any slight vibrational shift on their web may mean an evening meal. If a spider feels the vibration of an insect landing in their trap, they must act quickly. Most of the time an insect will not stay trapped for long on its own. The web is sticky, but it is thin. The spider will hurry over to the insect, bite it to paralyze it, and wrap it up in more silk so that it cannot escape. Once the insect is wrapped in silk it will stay in the web, stuck until the spider is ready to eat.

The story of Arachne is part of Greek mythology and is a much darker tale than some of the other legends. Arachne was a shepherd's daughter with great skill in weaving, who boasted widely how she was better than even the goddess Athena of wisdom and handicraft. Athena

heard of the boasting and appeared to Arachne disguised as an elderly woman to warn her that she should pay respect to the gods who gave her the skill in the first place. Arachne laughed it off and responded that Athena herself should come down and stop her. Offended, but not threatened Athena revealed herself and challenged Arachne to a contest in weaving.

Arachne accepted and wove an intricate tapestry that depicted stories of the gods harming and abusing mortals. Athena saw that the tapestry was both more beautiful than her own and insulting to the gods. She destroyed Arachne's work and hit her on the head three times with a shuttle. Arachne, humiliated, ran away, and hung herself out of shame. Athena felt great sorrow for the young girl's death and turned Arachne into a spider so that she could weave for eternity as a second chance to do what she loved.

\*

Doctor Smith did an about face and grabbed a fist full of the pale green curtain hanging around our exposed space. He dragged the curtain across its rod. The jarring shriek of metal on metal pierced the space between the three bodies in the room. We were enclosed in a medical bubble. His eyes scanned over my young face and paused, as if he saw me for the first time. He sighed again and grabbed a stool on wheels from the corner of our sterile room. He sat down, the wheels screeched across the linoleum hospital floor and up to my stepmom's bedside. He pulled on gloves and brought a metal tray next to him with a few supplies. His eyes directed his next words at me, "I'm going to take the bandage off; do you want to close your eyes?"

I waited to respond. My stepmom's eyes locked with mine. I sensed her permission to go ahead. "I don't mind, I already saw it before."

My stepmom chimed in "We have an injury prone family" she chuckled to the doctor. The

wrinkles creased in the corners of her eyes. She turned her left arm palm up and placed it on her leg so that the doctor could work.

He shrugged “Okay then”

He gestured for her arm and began removing the makeshift bandages. The edges came off easily, but the blood, puss and crust that had formed around the wound made the gauze and paper towel stick to the open parts of the cut. It took over 10 minutes and several tools for the wound to come free. My stepmom audibly gasped in pain at each touch and the doctor’s frustration grew. With the wound finally exposed he heaved another sigh, taking in the damage. The wound was long—at least the width of my hand. It went straight down her forearm. It started a few inches up from her hand and after an inch it curved off towards the outer portion of her arm. The red and pink flesh looked jagged like mountain ridges. I had learned that the outward portion of the skin is called the epidermis. My stepbrother and I always joked “your epidermis is showing.” I wondered what her deep red exposed layers of flesh were called. “Susan” the doctor looked at her firmly and back at me, I read concern in his eyes. “This is serious. You should have come to the hospital immediately.”

She bowed her head in shame and tears formed in the corners of her eyes.

“I know, I’m sorry. I had been drinking and I couldn’t drive.”

“You should have called an ambulance or a friend.”

“I came as soon as I could,” She explained.

I quietly pondered this last statement. *Wasn’t my uncle there last night?* My dad’s brother-in-law. *Why did he not take her to the hospital?*

“I’m obligated to ask you some questions about this. Would you like your daughter in the room or out of the room?”

She looked affronted. “She can be here for anything that you have to ask me.”

My stomach churned. *What was going on? Why wasn't she getting stitches already? Why was he questioning her?*

"Okay then..." His disapproval rang through his voice.

"This doesn't look like a cut you get from an accident."

"I know that!" her high pitched and rough voice reverberated off the sterile walls. "It is the weirdest thing. So stupid." She smacked her head with her uninjured hand. "I am such a klutz. It's humiliating really."

"Susan, did you try to harm yourself?" He continued, face firm, almost angry. My stepmom's cheeks flushed with embarrassment. As if conditioned in response, I felt heat flood my face and tears prick my eyelids. I looked away, down to my feet as they swung below me in my chair.

\*

One big misconception of spiders is that they cannot get stuck in their own webs. A common belief is that they produce oil or fluid on their legs to enable them to move around their web without getting stuck; this isn't the case. Each species is a little different, but most spiders do not touch their webs directly with their limbs. They move around the same way they sense vibrations on their web: with sensory hairs that cover their body. The indirect contact to the web they weave enables them to dance around it with ease. Some species of spiders can even control the amount of sticky substance that goes onto their web. So, some sections will be sticky, and some are pure silk. They know how to get around as they intrinsically know every design detail of their own trap.

\*

I stare down at my tan military boots planted firmly on the ground beneath my metal chair. My crisp camouflage trousers are tucked neatly into my boots. The examination table glares at me from across the room. I never sit on the exam table until I'm told I must. I feel sharp

in my uniform, shiny Captain's bars are pinned on my collar. The tag above my heart says U.S. Marines. I came to the medical center because I am three years overdue for a pap test. My first one in the military was done by my primary physician and ended with me crying while the speculum was inside of me. I had been trying to get an actual gynecologist to conduct the exam every year since, but I was always told no. I'd need to go to the primary care provider first and explain why I wanted to be seen by a doctor who specialized in the care I needed. Every time I was denied an appointment with the OBGYN, I hung up the phone in tears. So, I never got examined. I had begun to have health issues I could no longer ignore. Now I sat in the sterile room mentally preparing to plead my case to another doctor. I planned to beg for a specialist referral to avoid more pain. *The absurdity of it all overwhelmed me.*

The doctor arrived. The swish of his starched white coat sliced through my silent contemplation. He was a civilian doctor rather than the usual Naval Officers who care for us. He sat down and neither of us spoke. We assessed one another. I let the silence buoy my hope. My jaw unclenched and my eyes perked up at the chance that he would be kinder than the Navy doctors. "So" he sucked in a breath, "you don't want to be examined by a doctor here?" He launched into an interrogation. He asked me why I deserve "special treatment" to be referred to an outside provider. I was backed into a corner. He flung his words at me. One after the other. All traps to keep me stuck. I felt my emotions slip from my grasp. A few tears slipped out and rolled down my cheeks. The doctor looked at me with disgust. "Fine, I'll write the referral." He walked out.

I stare down at my uniform. Embarrassed by the emotional blunder, I consider my failure. I fought tooth and nail to develop my bearing. I regularly navigate the most difficult emotional mine fields. But in that stainless-steel room, I'm not a Marine Captain. I'm a frustrated child.

\*

Very few spiders have enough venom to harm humans, but nevertheless they eventually began to be depicted in culture as dangerous and creepy. Though the concept had permeated 1800s literature, the 1901 nursery rhyme *Little Miss Muffet* was one of the first mainstream negative descriptions of a spider:

“There came a big spider  
Who sat down beside her  
And frightened Miss Muffet away.”

Later in the mid-1900s popular fantasy novels such as *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*, both by J.R.R. Tolkien depicted giant evil spiders who hunted and killed humans and other creatures alike for food. Soon after the increase in popularity of the horror genre began an uptick in giant spider-killer movies that continues to modern day. Modern psychology brought about the diagnosis of arachnophobia—the irrational fear of spiders and other arachnids.

\*

My stepmom told me she had arachnophobia. During childhood I was frequently released into the wild of my yard when she needed space. An outdoor cat. One such day, I was meandering around the concrete pool deck, passing time, when a hideous shriek tore through my outdoor serenity. I was not a stranger to the odd outburst. But usually, I was not the only one around. She liked the show. Eventually, I heard the shriek of my name cry out from her lips, and I ran towards the house to find out what she needed me to do.

On the patio she was curled up into a ball blubbing incoherently. Horrified, she told the story of a spider invasion into our home. A massive, she indicated the size of her palm, the creature had taken over the living room. We had to move. I'm sure any attempt I made to console her was ineffective. There is no consoling a phobia. I called my dad. He could not come

home. Not only could he not come home, but surely, by the time he did come home, the spider would have moved in and started a family in our residence forcing us to relocate.

I became resolute. Like a warrior for the homeland, I marched into the living room arena. The arachnid was brown with a tiny body. It was the size of a palm, but it was a cellar spider. These spiders are known as granddaddy longlegs. My dad taught me to pick those up with my bare hands and move them to safety in the grass when we crossed paths. Harmless. I looked out at her, wailing and rocking back and forth, face splotched with dramatic red spots. She was blocking the safe exit for the bug. I went to the kitchen and got our broom. It had worn straw like bristles and a peeling yellow handle. I slammed the broom bristles with one strong stroke onto the arachnid. When I was sure it lay still, I scooped its lifeless body up with a paper towel and flushed it down the toilet. I opened the door and informed her that her space had been reclaimed.

\*

Over time, the cultural depictions of spiders moved away from weavers, a primary way of life for most spider species, and towards that of hunters out for blood. The true nature of a spider has never changed. Spiders work at night; they never need to see what is going on around them and they can feel a disturbance through vibrations on their web. They weave, they deceive, and they dance around their own trap in a way that only they know how.

Jorogumo the spider temptress is depicted through many different stories that vary with each Japanese prefecture. The similarities include the depiction of a man who is lured to his own death by a spider disguised as a beautiful woman. Much like the mythical sea creature of a siren. The Kanji translation of Jorogumo is spider-maiden and most stories deal with the man's desire to wed the Jorogumo and be with her for eternity. Some stories depict a man falling asleep in various locations and dreaming about a young woman attempting to lure him away

from his wife and family only to wake up covered in an actual spider's web. Another interesting depiction is that of a Jorogumo who lives by a waterfall in the forest. She appears to men who walk alone in the woods and entices them into their death by making them fall in love and walk into the water.

\*

My feet swung from the metal chair below me, I looked up to see my stepmom battling the doctor's interrogation. My thoughts swam. *What happened last night?*

My stepbrother's face was stricken with anguish as my door slammed open and he called out to me to awaken me from bed. He was crying. "Mom's hurt and she can't drive." In the kitchen, dark crimson puddles pooled on the white linoleum floor. My stepmom gripped a blood-soaked kitchen rag over her left arm. She stumbled around the kitchen slurring "I'm fine" and "It needs pressure" between sobs. Each step required one of us to hold onto her to avoid slipping in the blood gathered at her bare feet. It ran a deep and dark red down the left side of her body. My brother called my uncle to come help. He agreed since this was bad. The cops had been to our home often enough that 911 wasn't an option. When he got back after making the call, we forced her to sit down on the floor and elevate her arm. I got bandages and medical supplies out of the hallway closet, and we did our best to cover the wound. I woke up the next morning disoriented. My uncle was gone, and the bloody knife was gone.

Just as my stepmom said, the doctor would not let up on his cross-examination. She needed him to believe her *or... I wasn't sure what, but something bad was going to happen.*

She looked up at me desperately.

"Hun, you saw the broken glass, right?"

The doctor looked from her eyes to mine. I paused, waiting. Maybe the doctor would continue to ignore my presence.

“What did you see?” He nodded at me.

I opened my eyes wide to expose my childlike innocence and glimpse up at my stepmom. Her chubby grin quirked up at me, a signal of encouragement. I told the doctor my story. I was careful to show just the right amount of fear and reverence for a young girl helping her hurt mom.

Doctor Smith shook his head and gets up from his stool. He scoffs, “It just doesn’t look like a wine glass did that.” My eyes caught his furrowed brow and tightly pursed lips on his way out. I glanced at my stepmom. She could sense the disturbance too. She cooed to me “Honey, come hold mom’s hand for the stitches.” On cue I reached out and squeezed Susan’s hand tight and an “I love you mom” smile formed on my face as I looked into her eyes. It was a grounding rod, during an electrical storm. The tension evaporated from the room. “Okay” the doctor smiled at us both now. His shoulders sagged with relief “I’ll go get the stitch kit.”

\*

Spiders are arachnids, arachnids do not need to be taught how to accomplish the task that is intrinsic to their existence. Mammals and some other species learn by watching. But by their very nature, spiders know how to weave a web, dance around it, trap and eat their prey. When spiders have offspring, they hatch and get started. Perhaps if an insect landed in the spider’s web, and for whatever reason, the spider chose not to eat it, it might observe the spider dance until it learned too.

## *Interlude from the Notes App*

### **Mom Guilt:**

- Drank an extra half a cup of coffee over the one cup limit while visiting family. It was more like three-quarters of a cup and one-third of a cup but I'm sure it went through the placenta and into the baby immediately.
- Didn't exercise enough during pregnancy.
- Exercised too much during pregnancy.
- Slept weird and woke up on my back after the 20-week mark.
- Ate a tuna fish sandwich.
- Ate several tuna fish sandwiches.
- Thought about eating turkey.
- After 40 hours in the hospital and a medically required induction, gave up on unmedicated birth due to the 12 medications already in my system and requested an epidural.
- Slept for a four hour stretch postpartum in hospital, surely ruined milk supply.
- Did not sleep enough postpartum in hospital, surely ruined milk supply.
- Breastfeeding.
- Dad woke up with baby 3 times last night while I was pumping, I only fed her once, must figure out how to do it all.
- Breastfeeding.
- Breastfeeding.
- Breastfeeding.
- Spent too much money on items to make life easier, half of which baby doesn't like.
- Not co-sleeping.
- Co-sleeping.
- Baby crying in the bassinet while I'm peeing.
- Wearing baby so she doesn't cry while I'm peeing.
- Leaking preciously low milk supply onto a pillow/clothes/bed/couch daily rather than into baby's mouth.
- Sleeping through pumping alarms every night.
- Gave baby formula with corn syrup for the first month before realizing.

## ***Resocialization***

Seven years ago, two pale blue eyes stared at me from across my desk. The eyes held a translucent and watery sheen, much like the Pacific Ocean a mile from where we sat in Okinawa, Japan. The oceanic eyes belonged to a young Marine Corps Lance Corporal. He sat silent, his breath caught as he processed the weight of his inherent distrust of the shiny metal I wore on my collar and a pressing desire to speak his truth. I stared into his eyes as he breathed through this moment; redness streaked into the whites. They took me in, a lieutenant in the Marine Corps, 24, two years out of college and unblinking. In response to his discomfort, I molded my face in a way I had not in years. I exaggerated the creases around the corners of my eyes, opening their center and allowing my mouth to smooth into a line with a slight understanding uptick in the corners. Finally, after raking his gaze over everything but me, he sat back in his seat, and I watched his reluctance dissipate in his sigh.

“Okay” said LCpl Thomas “I did it because I was scared.”

A few years prior to that moment, I had sat in my own mentor’s office, my brown eyes peering at her from across her desk. She smiled at me, wearing that same approachable expression I would later attempt to emulate. Her last comment had given me pause.

“S-sorry?” I stuttered.

“You think I don’t approve?” She asked again patiently. “Of your decision to join the military?” The soft cushion of my chair became rigid against my spine as I debated how honest to be. Eventually my New Yorker heart won.

“Well, yes...” I started “I mean I’ve heard you use a dozen examples of the military as an agent of resocialization in your lectures. You don’t appear to think highly of the process. But you know

me better than any other professor, so I trust your opinion.” My sociology professor smiled back at me with that knowing twinkle in her eyes. “It’s always nice to know a student is paying attention.” She laughed “Sure it will change you, the Marine Corps probably more than any branch. But you know it will change you and you’re going in with that insight. Maybe someday you can write a book about it.”

I thought about my mentor’s words over the 3-month gauntlet of the Marine Corps indoctrination process. I doubt my peers thought at all about the invisible social strings shaping us as we sweated, bled, and wore the soles of our feet raw doing the hardest thing we had ever done in our lives. If we were lucky, we found a bit of time at the end of each day to spend a moment as ourselves before turning into unconscious semi-corpses. The training was tough, but the transition occurred so seamlessly and fully that you forgot you were losing your sense of self in the process. Then one day, it was over. All the screaming, pain and fear amounted to something. We became Marines. A greater entity had taken the shattered porcelain of our previous identities and super glued them together into something new. Everything we believed had changed. This kind of resocialization typically applies to extremist organizations, cults, religions, prison. It also occurs in some branches of the military.

As a Marine, I filled two roles. The first was that of an Officer. It meant I was a leader. I wore shiny silver or gold rank on my collar which contrasted the matte black rank of the Enlisted I led. I naturally have a very empathetic style of leadership. I desire to nurture and care for others deeply. That skill could be used but often had to be tapered down to execute the style of leadership expected of me. I still showed my Marines I cared. I once had a Marine accidentally call me mom. He was mortified. I always felt that the level I cared for the Marines under my charge while overseas was elevated from leader to that of a parent to an adult child. The second role I filled was my actual job. I was a Military Police Officer. I policed Marines internal to the bases upon which we lived and worked. My first duty station was overseas in Japan. As I

gained more law enforcement experience, I learned what a unique role *military police* filled. We captured moments where the system had failed. Where the training to make a perfect Marine had slipped away and the trauma and violence that they were exposed to sometimes before the military and sometimes in it, won over. Sometimes their pain crept up from their past home life and caused them to make dishonorable decisions. For others, particularly more seasoned Marines, they had spent so long suppressing the pain of war, familial displacement, interpersonal conflicts from their career such as assault or addiction, and finally those things just caught up to them and they acted out. When a Marine interacted with us, they were vulnerable and exposed. They weren't even a Marine in that moment, they were just themselves, mixed with a flood of repressed emotions. If a Marine was dealing with the Military Police, they were probably having their worst day. The Marines that I led had to deal with those ugly aspects of service daily, and it was my job to guide them.

LCpl Thomas was the first Marine I led whose humanity broke through his reprogramming. He was Frankenstein's monster, self-aware. To compound the problem, everyone in our unit called him a hero. Some used the term differently than others. Heroism can be full of irony.

When I first checked into my unit, I was tasked with writing an award for LCpl Thomas's act of heroism. Through the police report and my own additional investigation, I became clear on the facts of the case:

LCpl Thomas and his partner had been dispatched to a disturbance in the barracks. Reports showed that the subject was possibly armed in his room. The Marine on duty in the barracks had received several reports that the subject was having a mental health crisis, screaming, refusing to leave his room, and may have access to a knife. His unit had reported him absent from work.

LCpl Thomas arrived on scene and sprinted up four flights of stairs leaving his partner behind. When he arrived at the room where the subject was located, he cleared the hall. Only the Marine who had called remained in the hallway and was directed to stand back. LCpl Thomas knocked on the door, clearly and loudly identified himself as police and asked the subject to come out to speak with him. LCpl Thomas needed to ensure the subject was safe and had no weapons before a medical team could come up and evaluate his well-being.

LCpl Thomas saw the cold metal knob begin to turn and stepped back completely against the opposing wall. He left eight feet of space, the maximum distance possible between himself and the door. The knob reached maximum torque, the wooden door was flung open and the young man stepped out into the hall. He was in pajamas, his eyes wide and erratic. In his right hand he gripped a Ka-bar, a seven-inch blade that holds historical significance in the Marine Corps. It is usually awarded as a decorative but functional gift for outstanding performance.

The young man, armed with a massive knife, stepped towards LCpl Thomas. LCpl Thomas shouted clear commands, "Drop your weapon," as he moved his right hand to his belt. Hovering only for a moment over his 9mm pistol, he unclipped his Oleoresin Capsicum (OC) spray and without hesitation plastered the pajama-clad 19-year-old with the pepper spray. The young man dropped the knife, and the incident ended in arrest. The suspect's lab results showed he was on a mix of prescribed medication and over-the-counter cold medicine, frequently abused as a mind-altering substance in military communities stationed overseas.

Since everything occurred before I checked into the unit, I asked around to find out opinions on what had happened. The senior Marines, who were hardened from multiple deployments, and years of experience made it clear that they believed Thomas violated his training with the escalation of force clause. This is the rule that states the threat of a lethal weapon requires a lethal weapon be used in response. Peers of LCpl Thomas took issue with

him “playing the hero,” and how he left his partner behind and sprinted upstairs to be the first one on scene. But the junior Marines knew the suspect, just like Thomas did. Unlike the senior Marines who lived off base with their families or in separate quarters, they lived in the adjacent barracks and saw this Marine regularly. They understood his decision.

Back in my office, with Thomas on the plush couch across from me, we sipped hot, bitter coffee and I asked him to recount his version of events. They aligned with the story I’ve told here. Finally, I asked him why. “Why did you make the choice to go for your OC spray when your pistol was the textbook appropriate escalation of force?”

He looked at me, strong jaw set and hardened: “Ma’am, I could see in his eyes that he was on drugs. That he wasn’t right in the head. I didn’t think he would respond and drop his weapon with an escalation.”

I took in his words and let the silence pour through the room, settling between us like a cocoon of candor. “I’m writing an award for what you did.” His jawline set and his mouth froze in a scowl as if to say *can I please just move past this?*

“You saved someone’s life Thomas. If it hadn’t been you, if you hadn’t chosen non-lethal force, he’d be dead, and you’d be living the rest of your life reckoning with that.”

He lurched forward, shoulders out as if to stand and run.

“You don’t think I know that ma’am? I knew that guy. That moment changed how I will view myself forever. When I reached for my pistol, I just couldn’t do it.” His piercing blue eyes darkened with anger. “When it came down to it, who was I to take another Marine’s life? Just because I wear a badge. He was a peer. As Marines we are taught heroic violence, but when it came down to it, I was only brave enough to risk my life, not to take his.”

The air suddenly felt thick and heavy in the room, our quiet cocoon pressing in around us. LCpl Thomas and I gazed at one another finally seeing who we were beneath the title and rank we wore. It wasn’t the first time I wanted to reach out and touch a subordinate Marine. I felt

compelled to offer a hand on their shoulder or a gentle pat on the back. My tan hand rested on my knee in my camouflage trousers where it had to remain. I wanted to nurture, but as a female Marine I had to be painfully careful so that my behaviors were never misinterpreted either as inappropriate or too soft. I offered a warm smile now in lieu of a much-needed hug. This was as far as I could let my façade drop. We were not allowed a moment of empathetic physical connection. So instead, I searched for words with meaning. “You did a good thing Thomas; I hope one day you can see that and in the meantime I’m always here.” He looked up at me. His blue eyes were a little warmer and held more softness around the edges. “Thanks ma’am,” the slightest smile quirking at the edges of his mouth.

He stood up, and his shell hardened into the formal Marine he was expected to be.

## *Interlude from the Notes App*

### ***Emotional Breakdowns to Schedule:***

- I chose an MFA rather than an M.D., so I will never fully understand my newborns behaviors.
- I live too far from family.
- The culmination of each cute yawn, sneeze, cough, coo, and arm flail.
- I live too far from family.
- I live too far from family.
- I live too far from family.
- Still feeling split open six weeks postpartum.
- Every time my husband shows up for me with unyielding support.
- Watching my daughter meet her grandmas.
- Using the word daughter.
- Watching my dog realize I still love her, but I have a new baby now.
- The breastmilk “haul” videos of women showing how much they pump in “just one session.”

## ***The Waiting Room***

*The buildings still exist but the names and faces have changed so many times that perhaps the memories only exist within me.*

The first time I watched *Selena* was in the emergency waiting room at University Hospital. My stepmom handed me a few dollars before disappearing behind the ER doors for the night. The vending machine whirred as it deposited a tuna salad kit that would serve as my dinner. As I sat stirring the mushy gray fish onto stale crackers, I became lost in the starlit drama of Selena's whirlwind career. Her music swirled on low volume through the small room of the sick and injured waiting to be admitted. Then there was me, a small, lonely girl whose feet dangled from her chair, and hands stretched out over the arm rests, attempting to take up space, so no ill person would sit beside me. Most patrons ignored the movie whirring on in the background. I became captivated. It was my sole source of entertainment for an evening that had no end in sight. As the movie ended time weighed on me—an endless waiting that stretched out in front of me. When did we get here? How long has it been? On the TV, Selena's final concert played. The young artist was shot and killed. A tragic and hopeless ending based on a true sad story. I was heartbroken. My dad showed up at the hospital only when my stepmom called him to say she would be admitted overnight. He collected me from the waiting room, and we headed into the depths of the hospital.

*If no one tells you why you're there... then all you're waiting for is the trip back home.*

Presbyterian Medical Center ER had no TVs in their waiting room. I spent hours counting the chairs and staring openly at strangers in a childish oblivion to social courtesy. They were probably wondering who left the little girl alone. Or... maybe in the late 90's no one cared about that sort of thing. The children's emergency room was next door to the adult ER, our usual haunt. I wondered if perhaps my brother had ever been in the ER next door. I didn't understand, back then, that he had never left the NICU after his birth. He never made it out of the hospital doors. When I was 3 years old, my grandpa also died there—relatively young—from the lingering impact of old WWII injuries. I remember visiting him in his gray hospital room. He sat propped up on pillows unable to move much. That section of the hospital smelled like medicine and mothballs. He was able to give me a toothy smile and the clear tubes in his nose providing him oxygen scared me. The image of his immobile body hooked up to angrily beeping machines lingered with me. In the early years, the doors leading to the ER stood veiled in mystery as to what lay beyond. My stepmom hid from me the truth of our visit by confining me to the boundary between reception and treatment. I knew not to question her. I sat and pondered how my history was built into those walls. Eventually, my dad arrived and brought me to the cafeteria. I hated eating “sick people food.”

Little feet kick around inside of me frequently throughout the day. The doctor said her movement will be sporadic until 30 weeks but at 23 she already reminds me she's with me every few hours. I place my hand on my lower belly, and I feel her body connect with mine. *A foot? Maybe?* contacts my uterus and slides over an inch to align with my palm. For the first time, I can make out one of her limbs through my soft

stretched skin. It feels like a tiny hand with little fingers. I release an audible gasp and fight to keep tears behind my eyelids. Is she reaching for me? *I'm right here.*

At 31 years old, I look around the obstetrics office and can feel my chest tighten. How will my baby's heartbeat sound today? When was the last time I felt her move? I do not count chairs. I stare at the fish tank and squeeze my husband's hand to ease the anxiety from chest to palm. I'm not waiting to go home. I'm waiting for my name... followed shortly by the sound of little healthy heartbeats on the Fetal Doppler.

The two of us are simultaneously suspended on a liminal bridge; my fate and my baby's are intrinsically linked. The moment she is born and transitions to life, I too am reborn, now a mother. She will make me a mother, and I will ensure her survival. We bestow these gifts upon each other, although our perspectives couldn't be farther apart. She experiences life in the womb, with closed eyes and open ears, embracing the familiar comfort of the whoosh of amniotic fluid, which will soon be replaced by my soothing "shhh" to remind her of the time she spent there. She will always recognize my heartbeat as a safe and familiar place.

I take in everything, readily aware that life as I know it will never be the same. I approach the point of transition alert. Who handles it better? The child in the waiting room who does not know why they are there or when they will leave? The parent who knows exactly what they are waiting for and about how long they have left to wait.

Perspective makes things less frustrating. You don't count chairs waiting for hours for your parents to find you again.

*I like the perspective. I like knowing, and most importantly I like being a companion and safe harbor for a little one who doesn't have any of it yet.*

Vinyl chairs with plastic handles constituted the standard layout of every ER waiting room we frequented. The soft, slippery texture was routinely wiped down by janitorial staff with pungent chemicals and dirty rags every few hours. I often observed people coming and going, frequently occupying the same seats that had just been vacated by another sick or injured person. Some arrivals were obviously injured, arriving with blood-soaked cloth bandaging unseen lacerations on various parts of their bodies. However, those individuals never waited for long, as injury always carried a greater sense of urgency into the waiting room than illness. The colors of the chairs intrigued me; their tones bore a dulled hue as if a sepia wash had muted the neon fluorescence of the 1980s dreamscape. Each hospital boasted the same inescapable washed-out kaleidoscope of triage.

Carolinas Medical Center wasn't her preferred ER, but my stepmom attended most of her follow-ups and urgent care appointments at the hospital's adjacent medical building. The Orthopedist, Podiatrist, Women's Health Center, and although I can't recall exactly, I'm sure a therapist or two were all located in this main building off the larger hospital. Through the automatic glass doors, resembling the double door entrance to my

favorite mall, was a massive atrium that held balconies leading up seven floors. On the ground floor, clay tile and large planters with wide-fanned exotic ferns created a sharp contrast to the sterile carpeted visuals I was accustomed to. This floor housed a coffee shop and a few tables and chairs for seating. Instead of accompanying me upstairs to her numerous appointments, I'd be given a few dollars for a snack at the coffee shop and allowed to sit downstairs alone, pretending I was in the mall. Denied access to the usual waiting room magazines or televisions, I would read the large hanging signs that directed patients around the massive medical building. I discovered that with only a few turns and connecting hallways, one could navigate toward the main hospital, where I knew a fast-food chain had set up shop for the hospital staff. I never dared to sneak away, always fearing the consequences if my stepmom returned to find me missing from the seat where she had left me.

*I clung to the plants as my only friends. A fellow glimpse of life in the transitional expanse.*

On the brink of meeting the little one who will usher me into motherhood, I find myself making decisions while speculating about the identity of my future self. What will my motherhood look like, feel like, taste like? I can only imagine what it will smell like... perhaps a mixture of dirty diapers and newborn snuggles. That single answer I cling to desperately. I grasp onto the one aspect of my future that can be estimated with a degree of historical knowledge. The rest... remains both unknowable and undetermined.

My little one appears serene as she waits in her womb. The ultrasound tech presents me with 30 minutes of images, then distills it down to a few in my inbox at the end of the visit. The experience of seeing a tiny human, my tiny human, for the very first time drew a line through my heart, connecting me to the world in a way I had never known. This black and white 2D image was beautiful. She simply existed, inside of me. I will forever cease to be just "me." Once she is out, she will be an extension of me living out in the world, a part of my body forever externalized. Before she is born, she will gradually gain the use of her remaining senses. Yet for now, in her bubble, she knows only sound.

*We are both left waiting, but at least we each have one sense upon which to base our future.*

Lately, I find myself spending time in virtual waiting rooms. Whether I sign in early to a parenting class or check in to a therapy session before the hour starts, the screen displays my face on camera along with a note reassuring me that "the host will admit you soon." I feel tense at the edge of my seat in this digital rendition of the liminal space I know so well. Observing myself sitting there, anxious with anticipation of the impending "host arrival." I am alone, in my own home, surrounded by all the devices to distract me while waiting, yet I find this space the most challenging to control my anxiety. I have no option but to breathe calm into my lungs. It's a personal, outdated waiting room protocol resurrected by modern convenience.

I can feel the cardboard backing and plastic cover of the puzzle games that littered my pediatrician's office. The small metal beads would need to be rolled into position through an impossible maze. You'd need to strike a perfect balance of hand positioning to land the pieces in the right spot. I rarely went into the office but was amazed at how this room had so much to play with. There were picture books with worn pages, highlights magazines with all the picture search completed, and toys with broken pieces piled high in the corner. I never waited long enough to get my fill.

Before every ultrasound, an irrational fear sends cortisol coursing through my bloodstream and into the baby. I begin to imagine all the dreadful scenarios that could be revealed when the wand touches my belly. In the moments leading up to being called back, I fixate on the office aquarium to calm my nerves. Strange little fish dart around, appearing and disappearing among crevices and plants. I ponder whether the company responsible for servicing the aquarium deliberately chooses fish that don't resemble those from the dentist's office in Finding Nemo. These fish swim about, blissfully unaware that their colors and fins serve to soothe and distract patients in a doctor's office throughout the day.

Does every waiting room manager think that HGTV is going to make this agonizing wait time any more manageable? Who universally decided that watching millennials remodel homes that are out of most people's budgets already is the only television to be played in any doctor's office in America? Cable channels still play movies, right? Wasn't this the entire purpose of sitcoms? Give me Seinfeld, give me Will

& Grace. I do not find another Millennial couple spending their life savings on a dilapidated home 20 miles from their preferred location to be remotely distracting.

I see children's toys in the tiny lobby. The last clinic banned patients from bringing kids. That struck me as an ironic decision for a practice that delivers babies. A family sits across from me and my husband. The daughter is probably three. She is perched beside a bead maze, steering colored wooden beads along a tangle of wires. She looks happy. She doesn't know she's at a Midwives clinic for pregnant people. She simply plays. The father stays with her while the mom goes back for her appointment. The little girl had been too content playing to be dragged back with her mom and her father stayed so she wouldn't be left alone.

*In one moment, I knew I found the right place.*

## *Interlude from the Notes App*

### ***New Parent Google Searches:***

- Newborn normal body temperature.
- Color of baby's poop at \_\_\_ weeks.
- Newborn normal breathing.
- How to give a newborn a bath.
- How to supplement with formula.
- Why is formula supplementation horrible for my baby?
- Lactation consultants near me.
- Best formula for supplementation.
- How to feed a baby formula.
- Is sneezing normal for newborns?
- Are hiccups normal for newborns?
- Newborn hasn't pooped in 1 day.
- Newborn hasn't pooped in 2 days.
- Newborn hasn't pooped in 3 days.
- Newborn probiotics.
- Newborn hasn't pooped in 1 day.
- Swaddles for babies who love to raise their arms.
- Newborn phases of development.
- Why does my baby screech like a pterodactyl?
- Does everyone think they have the cutest baby?

# ***Mothering: A Methodology***

*A six-part exploration of certain elements of mothering.*

## Illness

*“Babies, toddlers, and preschoolers get about seven to eight colds a year, and during school age, they average five to six colds a year. Teenagers finally reach an adult level of four colds a year... and in addition to colds, children get the lovely diarrhea illnesses, with or without vomiting, two to three times a year. Some children tend to get high fevers with most of their colds or they have a sensitive tummy and develop diarrhea with the cold symptoms.” – Cindy Gellner, MD*

*Stepmom.* Purple gelatinous cubes wriggle in a glass tray, ready for consumption. “This is what sick people eat” echoes through the dimly lit room. Guilt permeates the desire for rest. What is sick enough? Minutes give way to hours occupied only by counting wallpaper flower petals. If allowed to venture beyond bed, the couch awaits. Dreary, repetitive old movies make their way onto the TV. The 1971 version of *Black Beauty* plays for 4 hours through semi-conscious lucidity. The remote is removed from the room. It’s this or counting the spots on the den’s wooden wall panels. A shadow lurks in the corner; slowly it creeps up to overtake the patient. The darkness manifests as an overwhelming desire for a kiss to descend from above and crest the brow. Such a miraculous bid has no place here: it is shoved down beneath pricking tears. The longing of sleep infiltrates weary eyes, and all other desires are soon abandoned.

*Mom.* A bedroom door opens and items float into the room: electrolytes, soup, and crackers. All comforts requested are provided. The tradeoff for such luxury is that quarantine is mandatory. The room has no wallpaper to count but books, tv, and anything can be brought. If two days pass without improvement, then the doctor is required. Love is amply provided—at a distance. After all, viruses are transmittable and sick cuddles ill-advised. A cycle takes shape: rest, sleep, drink fluids. Love is supplied through endless routine of Gatorade bottles and regular temperature checks.

*Me.* Sleep, fluids, rest all work synchronously as a path to recovery. A little hand stretches into the abyss searching for comfort. Skin finds skin despite the risk. Little bodies have less immunity than big bodies. Sometimes, all there is to do is be there, or try to. Vitamin C infused with snuggles may have a medicinal effect. May you never wonder who your caregiver will be. May you never cry out for a kiss that will not come. Patterns are broken to decrease the threat of a “toughen up” attitude. Gentle care is applied to all wounds in hopes that tender love eventually beats all illness.

*My nephew got me sick last year. He was one and we were both staying at my mom’s, or grandma’s house, for the weekend. I only see him twice a year. At one year old the little guy was learning to climb up and down the stairs. He needed a constant safety attendant to supervise his climbing. I spent the day following him around the house, watching him learn and play. I felt honored when his outstretched hands reached up to me in a request to be carried. He had a constant stream of snot flowing from his nose, but I learned that colds don’t slow down one year old’s. All day I held tissues behind my back, waiting for him to be distracted. As soon as he looked away, I swiped at his runny nose with the hidden tissue and pulled back in triumph, only to see another snot stream replacing the first. After several iterations, he began to think of it as a game. He ran away giggling if he spotted a tissue in my hand. As the day progressed, it became impossible to wash my hands as often as I touched him. I stayed as clean as possible but his persistent demands for affection superseded my need for hot water and antibacterial soap. A week after our time together I spent the day sick in bed with a cold. It was a fair trade.*

## Touch

*“Research in the US indicates that mothers touch their infants between 33 and 61% of the total time that they interact with them. Thus, touch is one of the main means of communication between parents and children. Touch regulates children’s perceptions and emotions.” (Kiselevsky, 1991)*

*Stepmom.* Thoughts come up empty. A tan leather chair lurks in the living room as a looming threat. Fights amongst siblings result in awkward collaborative time outs. An external controller of physical proximity generates a fear-based response. Perceptions of physicality are distorted by forced affection. Physical closeness is a measure of adherence and obedience. Refusal is never an option. Hugs are demanded. Hands grab and mouths kiss under the guise of love. Beautiful children are the object of everyone’s affection and showcased like playthings. Curiosity bloom around the normality of physicality and family.

*Mom.* Soft warm skin lays across the cleanest hands. Mature ridges line the hands from years of grasping school board chalk. Fingernails are pristinely wrapped with French tips that give the constant impression of sterility. A soft embrace is given on occasion and always welcome. Sometimes the squeezing embrace engulfs a tiny body with more intensity than intended. Often before a long period of uninvited absence. A delicate hand touches bare skin in an attempt at unspoken endearment. Words lose their way, but a gentle touch floats through the air to find its place of affection.

*Me.* Fear is reinforced by anxious star gazing. A fixation on past hatred for constant touch and desire for space is implanted in a long list of worries. The past steps away from a mother desperate to cling. What will happen when a body becomes a vessel for constant embrace? Unconditional comfort will be given in endless supply. A big body gives hugs to fulfill the need of a little one. Support is requested and returned. A mother fears her own requirement for physical space from a clingy baby, a temporary need that ends in dual tears. Sometimes a soul needs a reset, and a moments reprieve allows the heartache to soon be

*I found her backside the other day. I felt a force pushing against the right section of my belly. When I placed my hand upon it, I was shocked to realize it wasn’t a limb or an abstract shape but the full extent of her back. I placed my hand upon her and let my fingers glide over the shape of her tiny body. She relaxed into my touch until I took my hand away again. I felt a spasm of force pressing her back harder into the side where she lay. I placed my hand upon her again and began to rub her back in the womb. Her body calmed. Once more I removed my hand and counted: one second, two seconds pass. Tiny palms pressed against my sides and internal organs. She was pushing, with all her strength, back into the space my hand had just been. I could see her outline bulging out from the right side of my belly. I wondered how much comfort I can provide as she floats upside down waiting for the big day. I placed my cupped hand gently upon her shape and rubbed her backside until she fell fast asleep.*

## Discipline

*Among young children aged 19 to 35 months, frequent parental use of discipline strategies ranged from 26% (spanking) to 65% (taking away toy or treat), 67% (yelling), 70% (using time out), and 90% (providing explanations). In multivariate analyses, child age predicts reports of more frequent spanking and yelling, and child developmental risk is associated with increased reports of yelling. Parent frustration predicts frequent use of every discipline practice, including a greater inclination to use aversive practices. Lower parental emotional well-being is associated with reports of frequent yelling and spanking. "(Regalado, 2004)*

*Stepmom.* Sharp words and a wooden spoon kept in the kitchen drawer under the oven. A go to device that will inevitably crack, splinter, and wither with time. Underneath the Christmas tree sits a present with bright red wrapping paper and a frilly bow. Beneath the layers sits a wooden canoe paddle. A gift, to a young boy to go along with his BB gun. Adults cackle and caw at the hilarious joke, later the boy feels the pain of its reality. There is no such thing as autonomy. Misbehaving never stops; it just becomes increasingly covert. Fear incentivizes dishonesty. A creative kaleidoscope of control is built and misused on the otherwise mundane objects of life: food, affection, stability, comfort, sleep, and shelter. A child's tough lessons become entertainment for those who admonish, morphing growth into a game.

*Mom.* A standard measure of precise response is given on a consistent basis. Action begets consequence. Absent is a malicious reactionary response delayed by creative planning sessions. A measure taken of equal proportions is all that awaits the guilty party. In the corner of the bedroom sits a hard wooden chair used for timeout. Occasionally, a palm smacks a covered bottom. Eventually a teenager is forced to stay home on the weekends. Each punishment is executed by an arbitrator of justice prepared for childhood transgressions. Injustice evaporates as genuine mistakes are let off with a warning.

*Me.* Permissive, gentle, authoritative, authoritarian, or neglectful. Words like angry bats, escaping a cave of future misgivings, spin around in the space of home. The flying words zoom out of the nursery, down the hall and into the unknown; none stop to perch or explore. The middle ground seems safe, a landing platform for mild tempered parents with good intentions. The question "who are you on your worst day?" echoes through the evacuated room, remnants of a parenting article read months ago. Balance, respect, and empathy are the only groundwork laid inside. Parental emotions have no place in punishment but the control, or lack thereof, falls heavily on exhausted shoulders.

*I imagine a world in which my daughter trusts me to understand when she has acted purposely wrong and when she made a mistake. She expands her life force out into the world as she grows and develops. With that there are bound to be a plethora of mistakes, embarrassments, and misunderstandings. I want her to trust me to guide her and not punish her for unlearned shortcomings. She will one day attempt to exert her will on the world, sooner than I'd like, and an equal and effective consequence must take place. She will learn what to expect. She will know how her actions escalate my consequences as it will remain consistent. Ideally, she pushes her boundaries with me so that she can take those lessons into the world and be better for it. The administration of growing up becomes my burdern as I must keep emotion at bay.*

## Autonomy

*“It can be concluded that being controlling or providing limited or absent autonomy support undermines adolescents’ psychological needs and ultimately increases the risk of psychopathology and impairs academic success. In contrast, supportive parenting, through encouraging adolescents’ self-initiating activities, acknowledging their view, providing emotional support, and using minimal controlling strategies, contributes to adolescents’ positive academic and psychological development.” (Teuber, 2022)*

**Stepmom.** The word no does not exist. A mistaken utterance escapes in a doctor’s reception room after a direct question was posed. Audacity springs from the small mouth like a lightning bolt. It lands in the eyes of an outraged soul preparing to administer an electric shock. “No?” a seething challenge is whispered to assess the situation. The scenario devolves into a sacred challenge and pass ritual devoid of any context clues that may indicate the initial question posed. It is now irrelevant. Instantly stripped of all meaning the small mouth forms a puckered line below heated cheeks. “No.” it insists. A blur taints the room. In a matter of moments, the transgression is dismissed and corrected to the receptionist. Then the voice gets dragged out of the room by a terse grip on an aching shoulder. Fear fills the car on a long drive home. Fear of the consequences to come. Unbeknownst to the passenger, a new fear forms across the car, of what this new voice might mean.

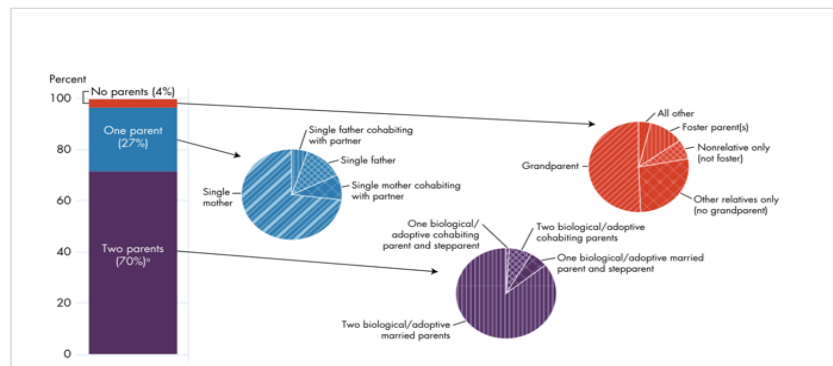
**Mom.** An island of suburbs has a disorienting effect of seeming smaller than it is. Parents on the island make phone calls. Calls to schools, calls to other parents, calls to tap into elementary school drama. A hands-off approach was innovative but isolating. Expectations are set and met again and again. Help comes upon request, but it is expected to be requested. All accomplishments belong to whomever achieves them. Failure happens, it’s a learning point. Questions go both ways. To the many outsiders, self-reliant looks a lot like uninvolved.

**Me.** Parenting is approached one era at a time. Babies cannot be too attached. There is no such thing as a spoiled newborn. At the beginning, one parental job exists—to be a source of comfort. Sharp cries and thick tears are kissed and bounced away. As learning develops, play is encouraged. The unrelenting source of reassurance is reigned in. Once soothing hands give a gentle push into the world of playground danger. Bumps after falls are kissed out of memory but the exploratory pursuits remain forever ingrained.

*I took my five-year-old niece to Hershey Park because she loves roller coasters as much as I do. I thought they would have a variety of attractions for us explore together. As the day culminated, she entered a wild state fueled by too much chocolate and frustration due to inoperable rides. She begged to go on one remaining roller coaster before we left. We had limited options due to height restrictions. Maybe it was that the last of my caffeine stores had seeped out of my pores in the summer heat, or maybe it was my own sugar crash after a fun size KitKat, but I didn’t realize that the name of the ride I agreed to was called “the looper.” We were in the second car, sailing off the first drop when I noticed that we were approaching an upside-down loop. I immediately looked over at my niece. The panic and terror in her eyes as she went from having the time of her life to completely horrified will never leave my memory. I wrapped both arms around her to brace her for the oncoming series of loops as she scream-cried for the final 60 seconds of the ride. We got off and walked to the exit. We sat down on a bench outside the ride, and she bent over trying not to throw up. As I rubbed her back, she smiled up at me and asked to go again.*

**INDICATOR FAM1.B: PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN AGES 0–17 BY PRESENCE OF PARENTS IN HOUSEHOLD, 2022**

*Presence*



(Childstats.gov, 2023)

*Stepmom.* The house is empty except for the back bedroom. Its occupant: a sedated soul. Faint breath escapes the cracks beneath the closed door. Outside of the room steps turn into tip toes to keep the crypt silent. Sounds of waking attach an iron anchor to a small heart. A hand writes a note and feet hit the pavement; lonely circles are etched into neighborhood streets by children’s sketchers. When darkness arrives, the note is discovered unread. The eeriness of twilight fixes itself on the mausoleum called home. The house looks trapped in the moments between electric illumination and night while it masquerades as unoccupied. Warmth evades its rooms. After the sun sets the threat of emergence is at its peak. Eat, drink, and prepare... the house is stirring.

*Mom.* Always too far to be near. A long-distance call must be preapproved by those who pay for it. Wait some more. Joy radiates from the blissful reunion hug. Sometimes tears are shed and quickly cast aside due to their embarrassing reminder of human fallibility. The week of togetherness plays out, desperate to slow time and absorb closeness. As time runs out the relationship has just begun to rebuild its shape. “Miss” is the most used vocabulary word of the decade. It forms the starting and closing sentence of every conversation. It haunts quality time by lurking in tomorrow. The sadness will eventually become too much, and elicit change, but for today, it permeates all light.

*Me.* Baby goes to mother; father goes to baby and mother. They stay skin to skin to skin. Oneness envelops an otherwise bleak hospital room. Welcome to the world little one. The cozy comfort of the warm dark womb has been stripped away. The only offering provided to replenish some of what was lost is a tender body and a loving soul. Nourishment comes intermittently. It’s cold, bright, and disorienting. Familiar voices soothe the harshness that surrounds. Heat is offered and taken. Milk is offered and taken. New eyes begin to work and see who is nearby.

*You became a part of me at conception. Looking back, I believe I felt it the moment you existed. I remember that oxytocin brought tears of joy to my eyes. I somehow knew forever that you’d be a part of me, even if I hadn’t seen the two pale lines yet. I cried again when I saw your tiny body on the black and white screen. A stick covered in cold jelly probed my womb and I saw your little body for the first time. A slow cascade of tears trickled out of my left eye only, the one furthest from everyone in the room. I kept my emotion hidden from the doctor and your dad. Those feelings were just for you. Again, I cried upon feeling your movements, and again with your growth. I cannot fathom the rush I’ll feel when I meet and hold you for the first time. You are forever a part of me, daughter, and I you.*

## Love

*“The common cultural conception of maternal love is that of a gendered biological force called maternal instinct, or bonding. For many mothers, this rings true as their maternal feelings are strongly present from the first moments, they lay eyes on their newborn. These feelings emerge as an intense and unique form of love. But there are also mothers who describe that their maternal affection developed slowly as they got to know the baby. And for a few mothers these feelings do not come at all... Rigid expectations coupled with birth complications, loss of agency and negative self-attribution lead to alienation and hinder the development of a maternal embodied emotional connection.” (Røseth, 2018)*

*Stepmom.* Rain in combination with the right mood leads to spontaneous days at the dollar movie theater, where the seats smell like stale cigarettes and popcorn. Before heading home, a jaunt across the parking lot and a treat from a mix-in ice cream shop. Midnight wakeup calls bestow a different gift. One of unknown chaos and adrenaline spikes. A perfect reaction and response by a sock puppet daughter can gain the approval of the puppeteer. One misstep and the puppet plummets off the makeshift stage, torn apart by the hand inside.

*Mom.* Long-distance love is difficult to receive regardless of its purity. It feels sparse, interrupted, and unavailable. Authentic delight to be nearby is cut short by airport departures. Hot tears are hidden from flight attendant guides. Strength develops after a wound scabs over six times a year. Shallow phone conversations stem from paranoia over listening ears. Long-distance fees limit talk time; states of space limit closeness. Eggshells scattered about on the floor are only cleaned up when the tongue is a barrier between heart and mind. Child and mother remain divided.

*Me.* The absence of love in a life slowly leeches the color from days without the viewer’s awareness. Gradually, a dulling of sensation occurs until one loses the memory of it altogether. When the search stops, love will reemerge, hesitant at first and then fierce as the sunrise before a coastal storm. Tiny hands are the outcome of years of unencumbered love. Life borne from that kind of love begets more of the same. Love without conditions, love that speaks loudly, love that engulfs everyone in its vicinity with adoration and understanding. A child who breathes in that kind of love is a treasure. She will bask in its warmth and never know the rarity she holds.

*My love for you has already exceeded all expectations of my own emotional capacity. Before you have entered this world, I know that I feel no conditions anchored to this affection. My eyes are beginning to open. When I interact with others, I am starting to see the strings of their attachments and familial love glistening around them. I can sense if a burden has been tied to their back against their will based on unwanted expectations, coercions and love only given with lists attached. I offer you no lists. I am not perfect. I will make many mistakes. But I assure you, I will give you a steady supply of love, only meant for you and free for the taking.*

## *Interlude from the Notes App*

### ***New Parent Google Searches:***

- Baby poop tracker: Timing, color, consistency.
- Feeding Log- attempt 1.
- Immediate necessities that we didn't know we needed until right now but now we need them right now.
- Feeding Log- attempt 2.
- Feeding Log- attempt 3.
- Feeding Log- attempt 4.
- Questions, videos, and photos for the pediatrician
- Future necessities that we will need immediately at a time upon which the newborn decides we need them because whatever we were using to solve that problem before that is now obsolete and we must have that future item right then.
- Questions for the pediatrician such as is my baby breathing normally? How about now? How about now? Is she breathing normally now? Watch this video... is this normal?
- Financial spreadsheet depicting that having a child will deplete both our earning and savings potential for the next 21 years but replace it with love- which doesn't buy groceries.
- Moments, she made us smile, in an attempt to freeze time because we need to "enjoy this fleeting newborn phase it will be gone before you know it" and through our exhaustion it sometimes feels impossible to enjoy the moment so we will log it to enjoy at a later less sleep deprived time.

# ***Shattered Moments***

## **Postpartum**

Oh baby. Oh my little love. Oh my heart. I thought I would feel emotion, but I had no clue it would be *like this!* My heart dances and explodes at your toothless smile. I hear your cries and am compelled to run to you. An invisible string pulls me to you, I would leap across the house and land next to your bassinet. I see your squishy face and imagine a thousand futures. My eyes and breasts leak uncontrollably because they belong to you. We went for a walk around the garden center and a kind older soul called you a spring flower. I left shortly after; you are *my* spring flower. You are so fresh I do not wish to share you; not even in open air. I stare at your face for hours. What an honor it is to be your mother.

## **Animal Instincts**

My consciousness had vanished. It felt as if the very act of producing life was so strenuous, so primal, so biologically necessary that my body took control and instructed my mind to halt its chatter. There was breathing. There was movement. There was pain—so much pain. All thought ceased. I was certain I was merely a mammal being propelled by others who were fully in control. Many days during pregnancy were just uncomfortable enough to divert my mind elsewhere. Then, over the course of a day, I was forcefully drawn back into my physical body. I began to moan and shake uncontrollably. My eyes closed, and I could do nothing but feel. In that agony and physical presence, I grasped the essence of humanity. We owe all life to mothers. Our bodies create life; we are merely passengers along for the journey.

## **I Can Drink This Whole Bottle**

In my profession, death was inevitable. The call came on a Saturday afternoon, just as I had begun my shift and settled into my office to tackle some paperwork. It was for an unresponsive male, possibly deceased, at the barracks where my Marines resided. Stomach acid rose in my throat as I grabbed my radio and reported myself en route. "Dispatch, this is Charger six, show me on scene," I announced, feeling like mere seconds had passed as I pulled into the barracks' parking lot.

I made sure my Marines had arrived first. They deserved the opportunity to handle the situation before I intervened, but not too much time. This was delicate, after all. As I walked upstairs and glanced into the room, I cursed inwardly. "That's a dead Marine," I thought.

His caramel-colored skin looked so youthful; he could have been mistaken for a high school student. His face lay frozen, with vomit splattered down the sides of his cheek. He wasn't one of my Marines; he was new to the unit, having transferred from somewhere else only a few weeks ago and had just begun training. As EMS wheeled their stretcher in to take over, I summoned my senior Marine on scene.

"Who have you spoken to?" I inquired.

"Ma'am, we got a brief statement from his roommate and..." he hesitated, glancing at me, as if unsure whether to continue.

"What?" I pressed.

"Ma'am, it was Jordan and Smith who put him back in his room last night. They were on duty when he came in drunk."

Panic surged in my throat as I fought to maintain composure. My Marines were now implicated in this, possibly the last ones to see him alive. They were involved, and explaining this would be difficult if they had neglected to seek medical attention for him when he needed it. Not to mention the burden they would carry.

"Okay, pull in the roommate, Jordan, and Smith, and put them in the lounge, separated. I'll call higher and get NCIS on scene. Utilize the rest of the MPs available to cordon the area. Residents don't need to leave their rooms but must remain there or be escorted by us to move on or off this floor. Send Jenkins to knock on every door and convey the message. Offer no specifics when they inquire about the situation."

"Aye, Ma'am," was his sole response.

As I made calls, medical wheeled the young man from his room down the hallway. One of the smaller EMTs straddled the stretcher and administered chest compressions while another used a ventilator to expand his chest. He was already a corpse at that point. I had never witnessed such efforts to revive someone in such a dire state. His face, so young and still, almost appeared angelic. Yet, something was absent. There was no life behind those frozen eyes, just a hollow emptiness.

## **Frozen**

I was taken aback, completely shocked, when the midwife said it was time. I asked her what that meant, and what the plan was. She explained that I would lie on my back, grab my legs, and with each contraction, clench my stomach while relaxing my pelvic floor. I hadn't imagined giving birth on my back, but I got an epidural, so my options were limited. I simply stared at her while processing her instructions. She remarked, "You look skeptical." I'll never forget those words. My expression must have conveyed a mixture of disbelief at the prospect of pushing on my back, coupled with the realization that at the end of this ordeal, there would be a baby—my baby—and there would be no turning back from that. In that room, in that bed I would soon hold my precious little girl. It was unfathomable. So, no... I wasn't skeptical. I was terrified, nervous, elated and simply caught in the unreality of it all.

## **Stains**

Who cleans up the concrete? That's what the unit wanted to know. After a Marine ended his life in a gruesome and violent fall. The aftermath was messy. The situation devolved quickly into tense phone calls between units and angry rank hierarchical email chains because no one had an answer. This issue could easily have been hired out in the United States to contractors in protective hazmat gear. We were not in the United States and the process for bringing local contractors on base was not a simple one. I think we eventually requested staff from the hospital to come out and they did clean it up. But a permanent dark splotch remained on the concrete for as long as I worked there.

## **Afterbirth**

After hours with my eyes tightly shut, refusing to confront the chaos of life, I finally took her in my arms. She promptly pooped all over me as she was moved up to my chest.

"Careful!" the midwife warned as I pulled her in close. "She's still attached."

Through tear-filled eyes, I focused on the beautiful blue baby I was being introduced to.

I held her close, and my husband held me, and together we cried and smiled.

"Do you want to see the placenta?" the midwife interrupted our momentary bliss.

I looked over. "Why not?" I shrugged.

She held it up like a trophy, giving me a brief explanation of where my water broke and where it was attached to me. It looked weighty. In that moment, I realized I had grown an entire organ in addition to the human being lying on my chest. The spiritual significance surrounding the placenta suddenly made sense. What a miraculous thing discarded as medical waste; its purpose complete.

## **Scare Tactics**

I vividly recall the details of the revolver. Its pearl handgrip and silver body were etched into my memory. It held five rounds in the cylinder and was as tiny as my hand. Hers wrapped around it as she led me outside. She insisted I needed to understand what a gun sounded and felt like. She let me hold it briefly before reclaiming it and firing into the hillside beside our home. My ears rang for minutes afterward. I never searched for it in the drawer of her sewing desk. I was not drawn to that kind of destructive power. I had no desire to explore the dangers of such a weapon. I held a healthy fear of it.

Years later, she clutched that pearl grip, her hands shaking as she cried to the heavens. I stood terrified, unable to bring myself to approach her and intervene. I couldn't relieve her of that burden and help her to safety. She taught me fear, and I listened.

## **Holding on**

They tell you to relinquish control. If I surrender to the pain, I can manage each wave of agony as it intensifies and crests deep inside. Surrendering control to the abyss is something I've never excelled at. At midnight, when my exhaustion was so profound that my soul felt weary, the crescendo of pain overwhelmed me. The steady drip of synthetic hormones into my arm pushed me to my breaking point. Time and I both fractured.

All I could do was hold onto him. I had anticipated a gradual escalation, but instead, I went from mild discomfort to barely a minute's respite in under an hour. My expectations and reality did not align. Yet, I clung to him. He pressed on my hips with every painful arch, stood by me when it was time to move, and spoke for me when I was unable to find my voice. He was my everything.

When it came time to push, and I needed to concentrate, his touch and voice guided me. My momentary existence was completely relinquished, and he caught it, and held on tight.

## **Umbilical Cord**

A friend said to me "I know what kind of mom you'll be." I assumed she meant attached, available, and present. Yet, her tone, coupled with my own insecurities, led me to believe she meant these things in a negative light. Perhaps writing about my daughter and expressing my love for her before she was even born could be seen as presumptuous. But I've witnessed the immense pain caused by detachment, unavailability, and absence. I've seen the devastating consequences when a child has no one to turn to.

## **The Note**

At the end of it, all he left was a single page. A detailed outline of everyone he believed despised him. It was a manifesto detailing the animosity he felt from those in his immediate surroundings—his colleagues, acquaintances, and the world of his waking life. He named those who had labeled him as worthless, sending a wish out into the universe that they would forever be haunted by thoughts of him before they went to sleep at night. There were no apologies, no mentions of family, exes, or friends. One page, and he was gone. It stood as a testament to the destructive power of abused social structures.

## **The Egg**

With deaths, including suicides, it was never my job to do the full investigation. The Criminal Investigation Division handled all incidents of major physical injury or death. I did bear the burden of compiling all details that were gathered by the Military Policemen (MP) who first arrived on scene and sending it over. I had to interview every MP who went to the incident and put together a timeline of everything that happened. My work simply helped the investigator get started. My effort was immediate, it had to be carried out in the first 24 hours. The investigation itself could take months to finish.

When speaking to one of the MPs first on scene he told me he had deduced what the deceased Marine's last conversation likely was. The Marine left his barracks room in the middle of the night and walked downstairs to the main hallway of the building where another Marine sat at a desk. There was reliably someone there 24/7 due to the duty that all Marines who lived there shared on rotation. The Marine walked up to the duty. He asked him a question.

One question: "Have you read The Egg?"

The duty replied "The Egg? No."

The Marine pushed on, "It's a short story."

The duty responded, "No."

That was it: his last conversation on this earth, simple and one-sided. Usually, folks come up and chat with the duty, they'll ask them how their night is going and make

small talk. Lonely Marines and social ones alike will check-in to keep each other company. This is particularly true in units like this one where the Marines rotate night shifts, and someone is always up. In this case, such an unusual question made the duty feel uneasy. They weren't supposed to be on their phone, but they eventually googled "The egg." They would discover it was a short story focused on one theory about the meaning of life. In it a character dies and meets a version of God, who tells the protagonist that they are one with everything and will continue in the universe as something else. In the story, life and death become mixed into one so there is nothing really to fear in death itself. It is simply a new beginning. A bleak interpretation of the story's moral is that everything matters, so therefore nothing matters.

This did not sit right with the duty. The next time the Marine was seen was by some other Marines out in the courtyard behind the barracks. They were smoking and relaxing in the early hours of the morning before the sun rose. Someone noticed a figure up on the roof –limbs dangling over the side. It was dark and hard to see but they were alarmed and ran to get the duty. He fell six stories before help arrived.

The reason a duty exists is to always have someone available to keep things safe, or to report when something has gone wrong. There's no way to know what someone is about to do from one strange conversation, particularly when you don't know the person. The duty could not prevent the outcome that night. They could not have known the Marine had already left a note on his desk. They could not have known he was walking around the building looking for a way up to the roof. They could not have known

he was looking to connect one last time. But simply because their name was on a list to stand duty that night: they now carry the burden of what they could not know.

## **One Week**

I'm overjoyed to be a mom. O is my world. I feel every movement she makes, every hiccup, and every blink. My love for her knows no bounds. The emotional bond I share with her is the strongest connection I've ever experienced. When she wakes up hungry, my full breasts have already stirred me from sleep. When she snuffles, I can hear it from across the house. I want to remain calm even amidst tears, but she's communicating with me in a language only we understand. I need her to know that she's heard, she's loved, and she is safe, always with food when she needs it. My body nurtured hers, and now my body belongs to her.

## **What I picture when I'm trying not to cry**

A tiny empty apartment glared at me, wrapped in yellow police tape and cast with dark, angular shadows. When asked if I needed to go inside, I declined. There seemed no reason for me to enter. The Marine guarding the door smirked. My cheeks heated; I was sure he knew I was scared. It was my first call to a death, I did not know at the time how many more there would be.

Then his mother arrived. She had been staying with the man. He was a base employee. He passed away, perhaps from a heart attack, during the brief hour she had gone shopping. Her suitcase remained inside, and she needed her medication. But it was still a crime scene, so her entry was denied. I apologized. "I'll find the suitcase" I calmed her.

"Three pill bottles," I reminded myself. "Find the suitcase, retrieve the medication, and return to her."

With each step, I hesitated. I entered the apartment, and there he was in the kitchen right next to the suitcase. I took in his still, lifeless form crumpled on the floor, a spilled saltshaker nearby. His pale chalky skin and blank eyes seemed like a Hollywood prop. He seemed to be the absence of something in human form.

With care, I navigated around his motionless limbs, unzipped the suitcase, and retrieved the three bottles. I retreated the way I came, stepping over his limbs in reverse. The room seemed filled with the stark absence of life.

## **Porcelain**

I can't help but marvel at your skin. It's flawless, soft, like a perfect fuzzy peach. My own skin, in contrast, bears the marks of time. Despite feeling not far removed from my 16-year-old self, scrutinizing every blemish in the mirror at my mother's house, my skin has weathered years of wear and tear. It has regenerated countless times, aging with lines, spots, and indentations that tell the story of my experiences, like the cover of a well-read book.

But you, you are so fresh, so radiant, and once again, I find myself saying—perfect. Because what other word could describe skin as beautiful as yours? None, my dear, you are simply perfection. I will always be here to remind you, even when you frown at the mirror over some minor imperfection in my house. I created you, and so I will always love you. Unconditionally. Forever. That includes every inch of your bouncy, pink, perfect skin.

## **Hospital Gray**

I kept the lights off for four days. Other than the three hours where the midwife made us turn them on, the darkness enclosed our experience into a muddled gray blur of hours passed. The off-white equipment, and gray-white bed create a boring ambiance of sterility. The plastic buttons on the nearby monitor are the only pop of color, a navy-blue mark to adjust the settings. I put up electric candles in golden candle holders. They cast a fiery glow throughout the space and flickered to create a feeling of warmth upon the cold gray surroundings.

## **Tan Interior**

The texture of the tan plastic paneling on the inside of her purple Z28 Camaro reaches out to me from across decades. It was smooth as sandpaper. The smooth plastic was pocked, a strange design choice. Or maybe I remember it that way because most of the space was taken up by a circular speaker, its frame like netting to project as much classic rock as possible directly into my eardrums. The ringing still erupts from my eardrums today. Although I'll never know if it was Lynyrd Skynyrd or the gunshots that caused me to hear a constant dull buzz.

## **Beeps and Whirs**

The noise of the dark room was nearly impossible to forget. Serene ethereal spa music with forest nature sounds played at a steady volume out of a black Bose speaker in the corner. Just as it was time for action, the lights came on and the music stopped. The three-hour YouTube loop had timed out. I was too busy to ask anyone to turn it back on so instead I honed into the other sounds. Her heartbeat sounded from the monitor next to the bed. It was steady and strong, pulsing away until she got too low to measure. The hiss of the blood pressure cuff as it automatically collected my vitals every ten minutes. The pulse oximeter beeped away every so often adding to the symphony of machines. Through it all, my husband counted. His strong, clear voice kept me focused and drowned out the noise.

## Rev of the Engine

The road was always loud in that sports car. It sat low to the ground, and we would glide along. I could sense my feet lay barely a foot away from the rough pavement of the street. But that day, the steady sound of the transmission surged. My eyes were looking past the tan interior and out of the window. A sea of green bright green stalks covered the open fields enveloping us. The deep husky *vroom* of the engine pierced my heart. That continuing crescendo of sound roared in my ears, like a defibrillator waking me up to the world, my pulse responded. My blood thrummed through my veins, my heartbeat competing for attention with the revving engine.

## **Poked and Prodded**

A blood pressure cuff, an IV, another IV, Three IVs, Ten needles, a finger prick, a fetal monitor, a contraction monitor, belly bands, a temperature check, an ultrasound. A balloon catheter inside my cervix and vagina. The nonstop touching caused my body to feel it did not belong to me. They told me to get comfortable, which meant wheeling an IV around the room to the toilet, the mats and the tub. I knew that if I became tangled in a web of wires my plan for an unmedicated birth would go out the window. It can't be unmedicated if icy medications have been pumped into your arm for the past six hours. The cervical exam finally did me in. Latex gloves and a hand forcefully used as a measuring tool, all while in the middle of a wave of agony caused by your body opening itself from the inside. If I was to be in pain, I needed to be free and that was impossible while trapped in the mess of cuffs and wires.

## **Gravitational Force**

The bucket seats were always tricky. They only had a few inches of cushion and were so low in the backseat that you felt the force of every turn. I had been riding in those seats since I was 6. Now only a few years older I hadn't gained much resistance to the gravity that seemed to exist in its own universe back there. But this was different. The speedometer was pushing past its limits on a backcountry road and I felt every second of it. It felt like the UFO rides at the carnival. I could barely lift my head to beg her to tell me what was going on. My skin seemed to crawl away from my skull, back towards the seat behind me. My jaw locked in place refusing to open. I felt ten pounds of force pushing me back. I couldn't yell, I couldn't lift my arm to ask her to stop. Bile began to build up in my stomach as I recognized the situation for what it was. For the first time in my life, I became aware that I was mortal.

## **Existential Leap**

I don't believe it's fair to judge anyone, especially a woman, based on who they were before becoming a parent. The experience of childbirth is so profound and life-altering that it's impossible to predict who you will be on the other side. Labor, delivery, and the birth of a child systematically shatter everything a person knew and was before. While fragments of their former selves may remain, they are fundamentally transformed.

Some may find and reassemble those pieces, creating a new version of themselves with familiar traits, but they'll never be quite the same. Part of their essence is forever changed by the experience of bringing a child into the world. Their soul is cracked open, and a piece of it is placed in their arms, an external manifestation of their life now existing outside of them.

# ***Firewatch***

## ***A Poetics Statement on Fragmentary Mother***

My experiences in the military prepared me for motherhood in countless ways. This may come as a surprise to those on the outside of either experience. In the Marine Corps, in the field and in training we stood Firewatch. We woke up at all hours of the night to stand guard, sometimes I'd skip entire nights of sleep for duty, travel, or emergencies; ultimately, I learned to function on infinitesimal amounts of sleep. This skill transfers seamlessly to the newborn phase of parenting when cries interrupt your rest and require immediate attention. As a leader, I was taught that if everything was important, nothing was important. Through years of incident management, I harnessed the ability to prioritize. I now live with a constant checklist running through my mind: I need clean bottles, a refill on water, to change a diaper, and so on. I can effortlessly rank the importance of each and determine in what order to approach it all. Lastly, and in my belief most importantly, I learned to put others before self. In the Marine Corps, we believe that leaders eat last. Initially, I took that at face value. While it is a very literal tradition that the most junior Marines are served food first and the most senior Marine must be the very last to get food (sometimes leaving nothing available but rice and bread), the concept goes deeper than that. As a leader, it meant I stayed latest in the office. If a subordinate needed something from me, helping them came before my personal task list. I always showed up for extra training or duties my Marines were required to be at. Now as a mom, I am always prioritizing my daughter's needs. I make sure to feed her before I get to eat. As I type this, she is in a carrier, and I am standing stepping side to side to soothe her to sleep. I was up at 4am and would love to sit down.

I also learned that others before self, meant showing up to deal with the difficult moments for my Marines when no one else was around. I was there when they woke up in the hospital after a night of drinking turned bad, not to punish them (yet) but to let them know they are cared for in a moment of need. That was a priority for me as a leader and still is as a mother. These lessons are not all relevant at once and I imagine they will unfold as the days to turn years and my baby grows up.

One form of selflessness that I was not always successful at in the military was the ability to keep my emotions and thoughts filtered out to best support the Marines when they needed me. I recall one experience, where a Marine's entire world shattered over the course of a workday, and for one afternoon, I was the keeper of knowledge in her tragedy.

Like all names I use in this manuscript, I will change hers to protect the Marine's identity. Like many situations where I stepped in as a pseudo-parental figure for my Marines, the only reason I had to do so was location. We were all stationed in Japan, across the world from our families and most of us had no one nearby to help when things went wrong. Lance Corporal Smith was on her way to a day on the range for routine training. She stopped at the store on base to get some snacks to take with her. While inside she received a call from her husband. Her husband recently finished his service in the Marine Corps and moved back to the States. They met in Japan and married 3 months before he separated from the service. They had been figuring things out long distance for several months and I had been helping LCpl Smith with paperwork to bring her husband back to Japan as her dependent.

When she answered the phone, LCpl Smith knew something was wrong. Her husband's voice sounded scared. He apologized to her repeatedly and when she asked what was going on, he said he was using drugs with another girl, and he attacked her. He finished with "I love you. I'm sorry." Foregoing all military customs and decorum, LCpl Smith walked out of the store and sat down on the concrete curb in distress. Her peers, who were also in the store with her knew something was wrong. Still on the phone, LCpl Smith heard police sirens, she heard yelling, she heard the phone drop to the pavement, then she heard gunshots. That was the end of the call. She got into a taxi and headed back to her barracks room ignoring her duties to attend training.

I was on my way to training when I got a call from a Marine who witnessed the phone call. Everyone was flustered that LCpl Smith left and abandoned her duties, she had a reputation for melodrama and this scenario seemed no different. My second-in-command was capable and could lead the training at the range without me. I shifted my focus to LCpl Smith. I managed to intercept her and brought her to my office to discuss what happened.

Back in the office, I gathered the details from LCpl Smith directly and ended up on the phone with the police precinct local to her husband. When I called, the Desk Sergeant put the phone down and failed to put me on mute. He confirmed with his Lieutenant that there had been a police officer involved shooting. He told me they couldn't release any details but to "keep my Marine close for the rest of the day."

I spent the day pushing information up to my higher command while LCpl Smith called her parents back home and tried to contact her husband's family as well. At some point, the Chaplain, who acts as religious and mental health support for the unit, came

in to sit with us. I brought LCpl Smith a smoothie to get her to eat something. All the while, in my heart I knew the outcome but did not want to tell LCpl Smith what I had overheard on the phone until it was confirmed. With the agony that awaited her, it was no use to speculate even if I was sure.

In the late afternoon, LCpl Smith's dad called our office. I stepped out front to take the call while LCpl Smith sat with the Chaplain. Her dad and I spent ten minutes on the phone. I updated him on how she was doing and told him what I had heard with the local Police. He said he'd been on the phone all day and convinced them to tell him what happened. He told me her husband was dead. That morning, her husband experienced an emotional breakdown, attacked a female companion with a hammer and then ran out of a car and into a nearby stranger's home. There he stole a kitchen knife and started chasing the family inside the home with it. As the police arrived on scene, he called LCpl Smith to say goodbye then charged the officers with the kitchen knife and was killed.

Her dad asked me not to tell her any of this. He requested that we put her on suicide watch; I was already keeping her in my office for informal supervision. LCpl Smith's mom would soon receive formal notification from the police and would call to deliver the news. My heart broke for her, but in that moment my heart also broke for me. I was supposed to sit in a room with this young woman for hours, hiding the knowledge that her husband had passed? It seemed incredibly wrong. I called my higher-ups to inform them and things only got more complicated. My higher command added formal notification processes to the already complex situation. They told me I was legally obligated to inform her in a certain way, due to Marine Corps procedures. This turned

out not to be true, because her husband was no longer active duty, but it took far too long to figure that out.

My heart broke in the four hours I was holding onto that tragic information. LCpl Smith begged me to let her go to her room, which I was not allowed to do as she was unofficially on suicide watch. She begged me to tell her what I knew, and I assured her I knew nothing. She went stir crazy in my office and we walked around the building and outside. I called and got her best friend in the unit to come over and stay with her as soon as she was done working. They sat together in a quiet corner until at last she got the call. I tried to give her space as she threw herself in the dirt sobbing.

In that moment, I hated my unit and myself for making me keep this information from her. I hated that she was 20 years old, and I recently turned 25 and all this responsibility sat on my shoulders to stay strong and not show vulnerability while watching someone's world shatter around them. I hated the connection I felt to her experience because my husband and I were also recently married. I couldn't help but think how much I loved my husband and how misunderstood I felt when people downplayed our marriage because it was new, and we were young. I hated that she would receive the same mischaracterization, but she would never get the opportunity to grow past that because her husband was dead. I wanted to hug her and tell her it was going to be okay, but as an Officer I could not offer physical affection and as a human, I knew it was not going to be okay at all.

As I held onto my tears, keeping them locked away until it was time for release, I stayed focused. Over the next several days, my world would collide with hers and I had to stay just as strong. The unit booked her a flight back home the for the next day. Per

the request of her father, I accompanied her. I guided her through the maze of international airports, customs at O'Hare where a naive young woman told sobbing LCpl Smith to cheer up and I had some less than kind words in response, and finally after 36 hours of travel, I walked her out to her family. After three days of constant adrenaline and emotional control, I collapsed in a dark Holiday Inn room and cried myself to sleep.

I finally understood how taxing it was to exert a constant emotional filter on yourself for the sake of others. I had been doing it my whole career, but this was extreme. It was the ultimate endurance game. No one except my direct superior knew that my husband had flown out to Japan for his job, and we had planned to spend the week together. He was stationed in Hawaii at the time, and this was the first time I had seen him in months. In an instant my plans were cancelled, I honestly didn't feel like my plans mattered in that moment. Could someone else have taken her back? Sure... but she wasn't their Marine, she was mine. Her emotional burden was my responsibility, and my emotional burden could never be hers.

There is no happy ending to a story like that. When she returned, LCpl Smith was reassigned to another section where she would have a lighter workload. Other than the occasional conversation in the hallway, I distanced myself for my own mental health. I allowed her emotions to not be my responsibility anymore.

I think about emotional burdens and LCpl Smith's story now as I watch my own child grow every day. The military demands of its leader's rigorous emotional filtration. When people depend on you, it requires you to push yourself to put your feelings on the backburner. I imagine that's what a lot of motherhood will be like. I'm not suggesting that my daughter will never know how I'm feeling or life is impacting me. I believe in

emotional honesty, but my feelings will never be her responsibility, and that is both critical and challenging. I'm not referring to her saying or doing something that hurts me, of course I'll teach her the consequence of her actions, but if I'm sad, or stressed, or depressed, it's not on her to bear the weight of that. Childhood needs to be protected.

In the military, my peers told me I cared too much. I suppose you never need to put up a wall on your emotions if you do not feel the emotions in the first place. But that is not me. My empathy makes me who I am.

My thesis, *Fragmentary Mother*, is a collection of essays and experimental creative nonfiction that explores my transition from Marine to mother. Composed during my pregnancy and following the birth of my child, these experimental essays confront past traumas that have influenced me, while also reckoning with the way I am reshaped in this new phase of my life. Ultimately, this is both a documentation of a healing process rooted in love and an acknowledgement of empathy for oneself in response to trauma. In that way, this collection signals a shift in my state of being. I am moving away from grappling with my past and towards shaping my daughter's future. Through my writing (and of course therapy) I'm able to move forward into a fresh beginning. I do not hold back some of the raw detail of my memory in these works. I allow it to be heavy on the reader as it was heavy for me. I allow it to be misrepresented, or even a little cloudy and inaccurate—is that not what memory is? These essays are my truth, not necessarily facts, though they are entirely how I remember it.

## **Overview**

The process of writing personal narrative nonfiction paralleled my experience of giving birth. Ignoring the physical pain aspect, which trust me none of us who have given birth will ever do, the experiences share similarities. The work starts as an idea, once you begin to write it's often much more challenging than you ever anticipated. Bringing up the past is decidedly difficult, occasionally nausea inducing, but also beautiful. As you write, you realize that life creates life. By sharing my stories in my own way, I offer an umbilical connection to the reader. It is both beautiful and painstaking to push the story out of your head and into concrete words. When complete, it leaves you unsure how the wound will heal afterwards.

*Fragmentary Mother* is my attempt to share a piece of a major transition and identity shift that took place in my life over the course of the year I wrote it. When I began my thesis, I knew I wanted to work with nonfiction and deal with elements of identity. The summer before I began, I became pregnant with my little one. As a first-time mom, my entire reality started to shift around me as I made room for a new life. It became clear in my writing practice that little O wanted to be part of this piece.

This work began as an exploration of the liminality around identity changes and manifested into a creative documentation of a major life transition as it occurred. I wrote much of this work while in the anticipatory state of pregnancy, I invite the reader to join me as I explore the interconnection of past experiences and future expectations. I hope that the reader will think on their own life, transitional periods, and how their life events are interconnected. I invite anyone reading to link their various identities to one another in a way that shapes the core of who they truly are at a moment in time.

The work focuses on three distinct ideas that shape my understanding of motherhood: (1) childhood and my direct experiences with mother figures, (2) my experiences as a leader in the Military, specifically the Marine Corps and (3) the present state of pregnancy and motherhood as I transition through it. Reoccurring themes of medicine's impact on shaping my life as well as webs of interconnection are reflected in each piece. I feel grateful for the unique and beautiful experience of capturing a delicate state of change for a mom. I may become pregnant again in the future, but I will never be pregnant for the first time again. Through these words, my thoughts and experiences are given a life of their own.

### **Childhood and Motherhood**

I spent a large portion of my life believing I would never have children. Even when I met my husband and fell deeply in love, I believed children were not a part of our future. I felt saddened by the thought that he would never be a dad because I knew he would make an amazing father and any child would be lucky to have him. Despite all of that, I believed that my own childhood experiences had rendered me incapable of motherhood. I thought that I simply did not have the mental or emotional capacity to be there in a way that children need their mothers. In my late twenties, I spent time working on my past and accepting everything I could not change. Then miraculously after my thirtieth birthday I began to feel a deep and overwhelming sense that I wanted to be a mom.

I share this anecdote because I feel it is becoming a more common experience for women around my age. I believe that the more we understand ourselves, the more

we know our capabilities and it can seem irresponsible to have a baby if we are not perfect. But there is more to existence than our imperfections, and our flaws do not render us incapable of mothering.

In “The Waiting Room”, I share memories from my past where I was left feeling emotionally abandoned and confused. These are feelings I do not wish to experience now and certainly do not want to put on my daughter. By revisiting the medical scenarios of childhood that give me anxiety in adulthood, I seek to repurpose and reframe these memories. I have no control over the past and I do not seek sympathy from the reader but just ask them to simply take the journey with me. By walking along the trail of experiences the reader can join me as I rediscover and understand my own medical anxieties and work to meet my own needs as I bring my daughter into this world. By describing each experience, I intend to show the reader that through understanding and searching, one can find the right spaces to exist in.

In “Inside a Translucent Trap”, I again focus on an experience with my stepmother and a medical facility. This time, I frame the piece around spiders to draw a connection between the manipulation by a parental figure and a sticky web. I personally learned to navigate within the minefield of manipulation, but it did not leave me unscathed. This piece lands first in the collection to give the reader a powerful narrative connection to place them into the world of my childhood as well as to give warning that no gruesome detail will be withheld. It may be an emotional experience for some readers and that is the intention.

Finally, in “Mothering: A Methodology” as well as “Shattered Moments” I draw a direct connection to my own dissection of childhood mothering experiences and how I

plan to use that to raise my daughter. In “Mothering: A Methodology” I use passive present voice for the three mother descriptions so that the reader focuses on the actions for comparison rather than the subject navigating those actions.

For these works, I largely drew on some of my favorite memoirs by children of mothers with mental health issues. I reread *Running with Scissors* by Augusten Burroughs, whose experiences with his bi-polar mom parallel a lot of my own. I also reread *White Oleander* by Janet Fitch, this book is also a movie which I ironically first watched with my stepmom when I was a child. She believed the neglectful mother character to be an anti-hero rather than the antagonist of the plot.

I also read two nonfiction works on family relations and navigating racial identities that contributed to my discussion of identity in the collection. *Crying in H-Mart* by Michelle Zauner details the author’s feelings of disconnection as a mixed-race daughter to her Korean mother and how she dealt with those feelings through her mother’s cancer diagnosis and subsequent death. My daughter is mixed white, and Vietnamese and I found a lot the themes to be impactful. The last piece I will mention is *We Were Meant to be a Gentle People* by Dao Strom. This profound work discusses themes of the author’s relationship to her family and her Vietnamese identity. It reframed my understanding of my daughter’s future and opened my perspective to an aspect of my daughter’s life that will be uniquely her own.

Ultimately, childhood shapes all of us for better or worse. I hope that through my collection of essays the reader takes away an understanding that we can reframe our own narratives. I choose to let my past make me into the best mother I can be.

## **Military Mom**

Though some may still be skeptical, I firmly believe that military leadership helped prepare me for motherhood. This sentiment would not be universal to all who experience it, but by exercising empathetic leadership I gained a tremendous amount of perspective on showing up when it matters. In three pieces, I discuss these experiences: “Inside a Translucent Trap”, “Resocialization”, and “Shattered Moments.” In “Inside a Translucent Trap”, I share a memory of walking on a patrol in the woods with my squad mates in training. Though not explicitly stated, this was a memory I highlighted as it shows applying empathy and delicacy despite being in uniform and carrying a weapon. It shows tenderness to a creature who some may deem unworthy of such care. I found that to be a reoccurring theme in my military career; always feeling the need to show empathy even if others found it weak. Often those on the receiving end were incredibly grateful.

“Resocialization” is a look at communication between me and a subordinate during a time he was in need. It is intended to be the first of many stories like it that highlight moments where Marines break through their resocialization and become themselves again. Often these moments are of great tragedy, embarrassment, distress, or fear. The shock of the emotion and situation breaks the person out of their shell of Marine. As a Military Police Officer, I encountered a lot of moments like these. Despite all of the impressive training we underwent as Marines, these terrible experiences shocked many back into themselves.

Lastly, in “Shattered Moments” I revisited moments where I had come close to the travesty of death, either as policing calls and incidents while in the military, or as a

child dealing with a mentally unstable caregiver. I paired these deeply dark but formative moments with my musings on the experience of creating life. I invite the reader to look at the dichotomy and consider their own experiences. To me, birth was a tremendously emotional and beautiful experience. I felt shell shocked afterward. When I got home from the hospital and thought on why the experience impacted me so much, I realized it was because I had spent so long thinking about death. I saw young people die, well before their time in the Marine Corps despite never going to combat. Life always felt fragile, and death felt dark and terribly tragic. But I had never considered birth as majorly significant until I experienced it myself. Just as death takes lives from us in an instant, birth gives us life in an instant. It was the single most beautiful experience of my life. I think the only way the uninitiated can understand is to highlight and frame the experience by contrasting the light with the dark.

### **First Time Mother**

Doing anything for the first time can be a stressful experience. Growing, birthing, and raising a child in the age of the internet can escalate anxiety to an entirely new level. On the rare occasion you get ten minutes to think and don't immediately fall asleep in the fetal position, fear charges in to make you think you're doing everything wrong. But with all that fear and concern, there is a love so powerful that it threatens to rip your heart open with one glance from your beautiful baby.

"The Waiting Room" highlights the fear and anxiety surrounding prenatal checkups. Motherhood, particularly first-time motherhood, is an exercise in concern. I believe all new parents find that experience to be universal. It also explores the love a

mother can feel for her child in utero and the special bond of feeling the baby kick or move inside of your own body.

The connective tissue of the collection is a series of short hermit crab pieces titled “Interlude from the notes app.” These are intended to be a humorous and satirical look into the mind of a mom. By using the form of a list, it highlights the countless lists moms keep for their own sanity and pushes the reader to extend their understanding of what a new mom deals with and keeps track of.

During the writing process, I read an extensive list of books that dealt with motherhood. I read books focused on a creative reflection in motherhood and books in the purely informative category of baby care and birth. *Expecting Better* by Emily Oster was the source of inspiration for the data points in: “Mothering: A Methodology.” Franscesca Capone published a piece titled “A Mother’s Discourse” where she uses textile design to showcase a collection of books on motherhood. This was a source I pulled from to explore the various ways motherhood is discussed and how it fits in with my work.

## **Form and Style**

In this collection, I set the intention to work with a multitude of essay forms. Each essay is written in a unique form that I decided on based on subject matter and placement. I took inspiration from works like *Bright Archive* by Sarah Minor and *We Were Meant to be a Gentle People* by Dao Strom. Both challenged me as a nonfiction writer to look at the shape of my words on the page and consider how their composition told a story.

Inside a “Translucent Trap” is a braided essay, it interweaves historical context of the spider in culture and folklore with personal narrative sections. “Resocialization” is a straightforward personal narrative; this is certainly the most direct in the collection—a style that mimics the stiff nature of the military as its subject matter. “The Waiting Room” is a fragmented, non-linear essay that reflects on moments of waiting throughout my life. “Mothering: a Methodology” is both visual and a collage essay. “Shattered Moments” is a series of micro memoir pieces collected over an expanse of time and edited to take shape in one work. Lastly, “Interlude from the Notes App” is a series of short essays in the hermit crab form. The intention was to use hermit crab as a dark humor reprieve from the emotional challenges for both writer and reader of personal nonfiction.

## **Conclusion**

These works share dark, sad, and beautiful moments in my life with the reader. This collection outlines the creative imprint of pregnancy on my life, and the arduous process of reconciliation with the past. I hope that above all else the reader and I can connect in a shared reality. Perhaps the reader knows the feeling of raw love for another, the confusion of a difficult childhood, or simply what it is like to transition into a new identity. Somewhere in this work the reader and I can reach through the pages and connect to one another’s experience.

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