Southern Silence and Sexual Violence: A Memoir and Cultural Analysis

Alexandria K. Selman

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Amy Laura Hall
Duke Divinity School

April 2019

This project was submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Graduate Liberal Studies Program in the Graduate School of Duke University.
Abstract

Southerners can easily be picked out by their thick accents and their choice of rhetoric, such as “Hey, Ya’ll” and “Bless your heart.” My southern rhetoric is more than the reason why I stand out in most crowds, but is the foundation of who I am, how I think, and how I navigate the world around me. As a native of rural Alabama, I grew up in a world of etiquette, red dirt, and gender roles. The experiences I share are those of upper-middle-class, white sorority women in Alabama who were the product of the South’s cultural silencing. The pervasive gender differences made between boys and girls by southern culture and the education system, has helped the ideology of sacred womanhood live on. This ideology leads women to believe their task in life is to remain clean of sexual impurity and be subservient to men. This submissive stance has affected the way these women communicate sexual violence and in turn deal with its long-term effects. This is a glimpse at the balancing act that is being a southerner, a woman, and a survivor. This work, nor my journey, is complete, but rather a work in progress.
# Table of Contents

Prelude ........................................................................................................4

Chapter 1: Southern Womanhood ...............................................................6

Chapter 2: Communication is Key .............................................................9

Chapter 3: Southern Diction ..................................................................12

Chapter 4: My Dearest Darling ..............................................................15

Chapter 5: Finding Female, Forgetting Fierce .........................................18

Chapter 6: Horizontal Violence ..............................................................24

Chapter 7: Early Dating .......................................................................27

Chapter 8: Condoms are Currency .........................................................29

Chapter 9: To the Black Man .................................................................31

Chapter 10: Beau’s Girl ......................................................................34

Chapter 11: Off to College .................................................................37

Chapter 12: The First Time .................................................................40

Chapter 13: Oceans Away .................................................................43

Chapter 14: A Woman of the World ....................................................44

Chapter 15: Happy Valentine’s Day .....................................................46

Chapter 16: Barely Hanging on ..........................................................50

Chapter 17: A Birthday in Bama ..........................................................51

Chapter 18: Suicidal Summer ..............................................................54

Chapter 19: Disappointing Daddy ......................................................57

Chapter 20: Sex Sisters .................................................................61

Chapter 21: Faith, Hope, Love ...........................................................65
Prelude

Growing up on a South Alabama farm, we were never in a shortage of trees: peach, apple, long-needle pine, and satsuma. If you could think of a tree capable of growing through the heat, we had it. I grew through the heat alongside the trees, and thanks to them had the largest pressed plant collection for Coach Kelley my eighth-grade year. I can still see and feel the magical coves created by the trees. There was the path through the woods connecting my uncle’s house to one of the hayfields and the family garden. Here the trees seemed to envelop you the way they had the scrap metal and a broken-down cattle trailer left along the trail. There was also the giant oak in my parent’s yard, the yard that was once my great grandparent’s. When I was small, I asked my mother why there was a hole in the tree. She told me that it had been struck by lightning many times. How many times she did not know because the tree was older than anyone could recall. As far as any living member of our family could remember, the grand oak always had been and always would be. It stood, along with many others, through the hurricanes off the coast and the years of war.

However, the tree that stands the strongest in my mind is a singular weeping willow planted front and center in what used to be my grandparent’s yard. Apparently, my grandfather mowed the willow down as a sapling multiple times making its survival a miracle. There the willow stood weeping, separate from all the other plants on the lawn. At Easter, its knotted trunk and hanging leaves provided the perfect location for hiding eggs. As the new spring wind blew through the willow every Easter, so did I in search of the eggs.

When I was out playing, I would take my washed up, red dirt treasures which consisted of broken glass, old buttons, and screws in my little, red wagon over to the willow. There, I would clean and inspect my finds for the day. I spent many of my days sitting silently alone
under the willow, only ever accompanied by a barn cat or one of the dogs. The willow showed me shade, beauty, resilience, and safety, but there were whispers in the willow. Whispers that blew through the weeping leaves to touch me just like the wind.

When I began to pen my experiences and those of my sisters, I thought I was on a one-woman mission to bring light and a voice to southern women. I knew it would be a challenge both as a scholar and as a woman, but with a whiskey neat to my right and my laptop open in front of me, I sat at my desk and began to hammer out my story. Sometimes I cried, but sometimes I smiled, slid back in my chair, and stared at a newly written memory like it was a long-lost friend. I worked diligently through the emotional ups and downs. However, no matter how dedicated, there came a point where I felt like I had run out of words. I had put down all the bad, all the dark sides to being a southern belle I could think of. Sitting at my desk with a bad case of writer’s block and heartbreak, I remembered the words of my high school English teacher, “to write, you must read.”

In a frenzy, I began to scan through my book collection, ripping anything I thought could help off the shelves. A mound of books grew on my desk covering the scattered segments of my personal narrative. For the next few months, I bought and checked out every book I could find with even an echo of sexual assault, silence, the South, or southern womanhood. From Dorothy Allison to Tena Clark, I walked through other women’s stories and listened to them break their silence. Their words triggered memories I thought were long gone from my mind. Without their work and courage, my writing would not be possible. Like the whispers that blew through the willow of my childhood, the words of these women blew through my protections to draw me out and help me stand strong in the sun.
Chapter 1: Southern Womanhood

“To Woman, lovely woman of the Southland, as pure and chaste as this sparkling water, as cold as this gleaming ice, we lift this cup, and we pledge our hearts and our lives to the protection of her virtue and chastity.” –Carl Carmer, *Stars Fell on Alabama*

Long before the Me Too movement took hold of America, the suffrage movement shook the nation as women petitioned for the basic right to vote. However, “the suffrage movement in the South, and Alabama in particular, developed a generation later than it did in the rest of the nation…it was not until the 1890s that southern women began to organize” (Thomas, 1992). This delay was not primarily caused by the strict, separate spheres of public and private enforced in the South, but was a product of women’s rights being entangled with the emancipation of slaves and rights for African Americans. Just like suffrage, the Me Too movement has been slow to grow roots in Alabama. This is a result of both the cultural socialization of women in the South and the historical myth that sexual violence perpetrated on white women comes from exclusively the hands of black men. Not only are we groomed to not speak out, but the concept of consensual sex and realities of rape are culturally distorted.

In *Killer’s of the Dream* Lillian Smith beings to untangle this complex weaving of race relations and gender roles in the South. Smith writes, “the more trails the white man made to back-yard cabins, the higher he raised his white wife on her pedestal when he returned to the big house” (Smith, 1994). Because of the white, patriarchal sexual abuse of black women, white southern women were desexualized and domesticized in detrimental ways. From this, the concept of Sacred Womanhood was born. Southern women prescribed to Sacred Womanhood and “convinced themselves that God had ordained that they be deprived of pleasure, and meekly
stuffed their hollowness with piety, trying to believe the tightness they felt was hunger satisfied” (Smith, 1994). A large part of this sacrificial lifestyle was that “sex was pushed out through the backdoor as a shameful thing never to be mentioned” (Smith, 1994). These concepts of silence, piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, were forced into the minds of women via constant messaging from white males in their lives.

As years rocked on into the mid to late 1900s, American women gained greater sexual freedom while the South held tight to culturally enforcing the principles of Sacred/Southern Womanhood. Because of this, the self-rejuvenating virgin was born. In Southern Ladies and Gentlemen, Florence King writes,

“to recycle her pearl beyond price, certain ground rules had to be established. First, premeditation was forbidden. The self-rejuvenating virgin never planned ahead, she was always swept off her feet. If she could not make herself believe this, she engineered bizarre sexual encounters that were never quite the real thing so that the next morning she could tell herself it didn’t really happen” (King, 1975).

This is evidence of how southern women began to take on their unhealthy submissive and dismissive approach to sex.

In King’s writing, the early stages of the sexual violence and silence that exists in today’s South is explained. Southern women convincing themselves that sex “didn’t really happen” extends beyond consensual encounters and into drunken ones as well. Drunken sex would be erased in the minds of the women through their own rational or confirmation from men that nothing had occurred. King writes, “the next morning she awoke naked, next to a naked man, stared at him in horror, and then shook him awake: ‘Did anything happen? Tell me the truth.’ Southern men always knew what to say. ‘No, honey, nothin’ happened, I swear it didn’t.’” This
is an example of the mentality towards sex that was built and continued over time in the minds of both southern men and women.

In the book, All Out of Faith: Southern Women on Spirituality there is a segment from Jeanie Thompson called “Where the Spirit Moved Me.” In writing about her Alabama home and upbringing she says that “southerners carry a heavy blessing and curse—I call it ‘the duality of place.’ We love our homes but grieve the sins that stain us—racism, poverty, illiteracy, the slow acceptance of reform. Yet we always return to claim our birthright” (Reed and Horne, 2006). This birthright she mentions is not the inheritance of a fortune, an antebellum home, or the social status passed down by a good bloodline. The birthright she speaks of is one that I and other southern writers before me have boldly claimed. It is the responsibility to acknowledge both the beauty and the bad within the South so that as a culture we can change for the better.

Like the women who were put on pedestals by their sexually promiscuous husbands and the self-rejuvenating virgins, the middle to upper class, young, white women in my narrative are survivors who are living in a world where silence is the best a sacred, southern woman can do. I am claiming my birthright, my responsibility, to provide a voice for myself and other women and change the mentality surrounding both consensual and nonconsensual sex in the South.
Chapter 2: Communication is Key

Brenda J. Allen writes about diversity communication in her book *Difference Matters* and specifically addresses the topic of gender communication. She starts at the origins of difference by recognizing that, “what students learn about gender roles in schools is likely to stick with them for the rest of their lives, as well as have a deep impact on their emotional and psychological selves” (Allen, 2011). Gender roles are enforced through how teachers communicate with boys differently than girls. This can be something like the commonly recognized phrase “boys will be boys,” but can also occur through micro comments that most might not even notice such as comments that place value on boys’ actions (praise or criticism) verses girls’, who mostly receive comments about their appearance or connectedness with others. However, this gender divide is not all on the teachers. “Gender bias is evident in textbooks and other curricular materials across all levels” (Allen, 2011).

The English language and how we use it is one of patriarchy. Allen points out that there is, “a higher number of derogatory words in English for girls and women than for boys and men,” and that our “linguistic practices also reveal patriarchy” as we typically list men before women: husband and wife, boys and girls, he or she (Allen, 2011). Women are placed as second class citizen’s in our linguistic choices and held down by our everyday language.

This foundational learning and our language follows children into adulthood and shapes how women rhetorically navigate the world. “Women tend to use powerless language more frequently than men” and often end statements with questioning for approval (Allen, 2011). These submissive tendencies are not present in most men because of the positive reinforcement they have always received to speak out. This automatically places women in a somewhat compliant position when interacting with men.
It is easy to see how young girls can be pigeonholed into silence and submissive behavior, but what are the long-term effects of withholding information from others, of not speaking out? According to Spitzberg and Cupach, “confronting and discussing stressful or traumatic life events typically leads to less anxiety and stress than does avoiding discussions of such events” (Spitzberg and Cupach, 2011). They go onto list that people who conceal typically have less life satisfaction and lower self-esteem than those who do not. Secrets are typically kept because the acknowledgment of the secret makes the individual uncomfortable in some way. However, Spitzberg and Cupach reference the 1987 “white bear” experiment where people were told not to think of the phrase “white bear.” As a result, it was discovered that, “the attempt to suppress one’s thoughts produced a preoccupation with the very thing that was to be suppressed” (Spitzberg and Cupach, 2011). This suppression can increase the trauma that comes with certain events such as rape and assault.

Knowing that southern culture encourages silence among women and secrets among everyone on superficial grounds of what is and is not appropriate to be discussed, I wanted information on how hiding secrets of rape and assault can change how the survivor recovers. The research article “Proximal relationships between social support and PTSD symptom severity: A daily diary of sexual assault survivors” from July 2017 finds that, “people with generally higher levels of social support tend to have lower PTSD symptoms on any given day” (Dworkin, Ullman, Stappenbeck, Brill, and Kaysen, 2017). If a rape or assault survivor is not speaking out to friends and instead internalizing their secret, they are essentially delaying their recovery process.

The way we are taught to communicated has a chain effect on our lives that can shape every moment and decision to come. As a southern woman, how I have been communicated
with, and how I have been taught to communicate with others is a result of my culture. In my narrative, the silence encouraged by figures of authority, and the rhetorical responses of those figures to different events, correlates strongly with my personal lack of response to sexual assault and rape. Even though our current ways of communication promote patriarchal patterns of the past, these can be changed to foster progress in how women navigate the world around them and how they respond to sexual violence.
Chapter 3: Southern Diction

Calling my momma for advice means that after she walks me through my problems, she reminds me that I am a lady and there are certain things ladies do. She says that no matter what my troubles are, my head must remain high, my grace intact, and my rhetoric firm yet delicate. These words of wisdom are followed by hometown gossip about the “good ole boys,” the local quarterback club, and the detestable people of the county. Between all these good, bad, lady, and gentleman labels, I am supposed to derive some significant meaning that if you ask my momma is plain as day. The words good and bad are opposites that govern our entire lives. What is good and what is bad decides what clothes we wear, who we date, what music becomes popular, and anything else you can imagine. Most importantly, good and bad creates an in group and an out group that influences how we treat people and the rights those people have. Before diving into my experiences that were riddled with rhetoric that promoted silence among women, I want to look at the origins of four words used frequently in my writing that have shaped and continue to control southern culture: good, bad, lady, and gentleman.

What is good? According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), “good” is most commonly used as an adjective that means “to be desired or approved of.” This is followed by its use as a noun which usually means “that which is morally right; righteousness.” It is easy to see in these definitions how southern people characterize who is good and what is good. According to southerners, good is what does not rock the boat. Good is the one who gives his neighbor the shirt off his back. Good is a life spent between the church pew, country club, and PTA. Good is not so much about following one’s own interpretation of the words in red, but following the words the preacher said.
What is bad? The OED says that bad is usually an adjective that means “of poor quality or a low standard.” The origin of bad resonates a little deeper for me than that of good. Bad comes from, “Middle English: perhaps from Old English bǣddel ‘hermaphrodite, womanish man’.” Historically, the term bad not only means that someone is lesser than, but it directly correlates to someone not performing their gender correctly. These roots in gender normativity link directly to southern ideas about who a bad person is. A bad person in the South is typically someone who is not acting like a lady or gentlemen. A bad woman would smoke while walking, have sex before marriage, speak out, or show too much cleavage. A bad man would be a sloppy drunk, a business failure, publically rude to women and elders, or let his wife run the house. They would be performing their gender in a lesser than fashion.

What is a lady? The OED says the historical definition of a lady is, “a woman to whom a man, especially a knight, is chivalrously devoted.” Therefore, a woman cannot be a lady without the devotion of a man. This means that the entire worth of a female is dependent upon approval from men. With the historical dependency on male approval in place, the use of the word “lady” in the South begins to make more sense, considering that most all the elements that make someone a southern lady are things that do not intimidate men and conform to gender norms.

What is a gentleman? The OED origin of the word means, “a man of a good family” and the most popular definition is, “a chivalrous, courteous, or honourable man.” This definition puts men in control of their own destiny, unlike women. No outside approval from a panel of the opposite sex is needed, but rather simply conforming to the standards of the day can place any man in the category of gentlemen. The origin is not to be ignored either. Plenty of southern men commit atrocious actions and still are referred to as gentlemen due to their old money and family’s reputation.
The words that have such meaning to us, that we use to determine so much in the South, mean little at all. The words, good, bad, lady, and gentleman are simply washed up terms of opinion from a patriarchal past. They show little about the person the term is being bestowed upon and everything about the character of the individual laying down labels.
Chapter 4: My Dearest Darling

My young life was an opening scene to a modern day Gone with The Wind. I was a darling blonde belle who awoke every morning in my white cast iron bed that had once been my great grandmother’s. My Alabama home was on a humble cattle farm that was ran by my uncle. He lived just up the dirt road on the same property as us that had been passed down for well over a hundred years. I wore bows in my hair and socks with lace trim, and I gave my best smile when the old ladies told my mother I would be the heartbreak of every boy in town. Who the boys were, I did not know, and how looks could break a heart I had yet to figure out. These anatomy lessons were not taught by my Leap Pad Learning Book, one of my many early learning tools bought by my parents. I was not quite sure what a good complexion was either, but I knew from the look on my mom’s face and the fact that I would “barely need a stitch of makeup,” it must be a good thing.

For the South, my household was unconventional. Other than the praise from the ladies of the town, I had no clue what made myself different from any other child, and I do not think I knew I was a girl. I just knew I was Alexandria, the only child of two busy parents. My mother and father both worked demanding jobs and tag teamed household and child duties. My father always did the grocery shopping and often cooked dinner. My mother spent long hours in her office clicking away on her calculator, but always made time to braid my hair. In my earliest memories gender norms do not exist. Rather, mother, father, and I all acted as independent entities that shared a home and moments within our agendas.

In those shared moments, it was never made clear that I was a little girl or that dad could have possibly wanted a little boy instead. On weekends, I would proudly sit at my dad’s feet in his den eating popcorn with him and learning lessons such as why a strong defense is needed in
football, what constitutes a foul in basketball, who the greatest homerun hitters in baseball were, and why we should always pull for Hendricks Motor sports drivers such as #8 Dale Earnhardt Jr. I spent most of my time during the day with dad to give mom the space to tend to business in her office. This I did not mind, because the way dad made me laugh and how valued he made me feel was priceless.

Come bed time though, mother would give me my bath, and we would play a game I called “beauty shop hair lady.” This took place during the time mom was lathering my head with tear free children’s shampoo from a fish shaped bottle. During the game, I would pretend to be a princess and rant to my mother about the prince I was trying to date or the wedding I had to plan. She would tolerate my rambling for the duration of the bath, but bath time was never extended for play. When the bath was done so was the game. She would then tuck me in bed and read me a story of my choosing. Typically, I would choose a tale from my large, pink book of princess stories or one of my books of animal adventures. During this nightly story time, she would begin to teach me letters, sounds, and then words. I suppose this is where my love for learning started.

During weekdays, I was left in the care of my stay-at-home Aunt Cindy. She took care of me, worried constantly about her own long grown daughters, and tended to Uncle Wendell, as he was in and out of the house working the farm. Aunt Cindy was the face of southern womanhood, gracefully strong and perfectly managed. To this day, there is not a voice with a sweeter “come on in ya’ll” to be heard in the county. From her I learned how to shell peas, say please, and make countless recipes. We would spend our day tending to chores around the home, only taking a break for lunch followed by afternoon soap operas and a nap.

This housewife monotony would be broken by my 6’5’ uncle busting into the house to take me on the afternoon feeding. He would swoop me up in his big arms and carry me out of the
house. Off the wrap around porch we would go, down through the yard to his rumbling blue diesel loaded down with sweet feed and hay. He would plop me down on the worn passenger side of the bench seat and then climb on in. With the windows down, we would bump down the dirt road to the cattle fields. Driving through the fields I would laugh and hold on tight as the truck bounced up and down the wavy landscape.

It did not seem to matter to Uncle either that I was a girl. He would swing me up onto the flat bed while we were feeding cattle and teach me how to tie up the cut rope from the hay bales. He would explain the ins and outs of why cattle needed salt blocks, sweet feed, and hay. My favorite thing he taught me though was how to ride. With the promise of a pony for my next birthday, he taught me the ins and outs of riding a horse from the back of a cow, whom I affectionately named Blackie.

I sat in the recliner and ate brown sugar and cinnamon Poptarts like my dad, and like my mother, could never hide the look of distain on my face when something did not go my way. I was a Nascar fan with my dad, a bookworm feminist with my mom, a damsel of domestication with my aunt, and a cowgirl with my uncle. I had no clue girls like that did not exist. For me, being a girl had nothing to do with my interests or likes, and had everything to do with basic anatomy. Just because I dreamed of a prince did not mean I could not take on the world one adventure after another. My family gave me a foundation that supported me as a multifaceted human being. However, when I began kindergarten, the gender roles hit hard, and I silently accepted them.
Chapter 5: Finding Female, Forgetting Fierce

My mother still has the picture from my first day of school hanging in our house. The kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Wright, had decorated a wall with ropes and images of cowboy boots where each student posed with a plastic cowboy hat on their head and gold sheriff’s star on their chest. After pictures, the parents and teacher ushered children to their assigned seats which were marked by a laminated piece of paper reading each child’s name. We had a hard time finding my spot until we realized the teacher had shortened Alexandria to Alli. Standing behind me, my mother called the teacher over and asked why my name was incorrect. The teacher only responded that, “Alexandria is too long. She will master her name much faster going by Alli.” I settled into my new desk, and name, and watched parents matriculate in and out of the classroom. Unlike most of the children, I sat there quietly and did not cry when my parents left. Seeing them go was nothing new considering I had never known a life without them leaving for work. My mom will still say that it was harder that day on my dad than me.

It did not take long for me to see a difference in myself and the other children. I can remember being overwhelmed by the noise of my classmates. I would sit in silence while the world seemed to be on fire around me. The teacher would bellow for silence in the room, reaffirming my growing belief that quiet was right. This difference became more evident during center time, a time during which the class would break into small groups and be assigned to one of the rotating play areas designated by different color shapes on a chart. These spaces all had different activities and were supposed to contribute to the hands-on learning component of school. It never failed that myself and a few other girls would seemingly always be assigned to the center associated with the yellow circle, the home center. In the home center, there were baby dolls, pretend food, a table and chairs, and a plastic kitchen set—all things I never liked to play
with. When I expressed disinterest in the domestic make believe, the girls assigned me to being the “dad,” the “boy,” or the “husband.” I remember protesting that I did not have to be a boy just because I did not want to be in the kitchen. I argued that my mother was a girl and left the cooking to my dad. It deeply upset me that my new friends had misgendered me and forced me to be a boy while sitting in a center I did not want to be in to begin with. I would sit at the small, wooden table and look over to the kids at reading center curled up flipping through books or at the boys crashing trains into each another wishing I could be there instead.

Less than a month into my K-12 education, September 11th came and the twin tours fell. I vaguely recall the other kindergarten teacher coming to get Mrs. Wright. She assigned a “name taker” for the class and stepped into the hall where the other teachers were gathered. After a few minutes, she came back in the room with a look of obvious distress on her face. Even though we were miles away in rural Alabama, our morale as Americans was shaken. The teachers never clearly told us what happened, but there was an eerie silence among all the faculty that day that the students adopted as well. When my parents and I were back home that evening, they explained to me what happened. Watching CNN that night, I remember mother saying, “this will change everything.” At the time, I had no clue how right she was.

A few months after 9/11, we were told to go home and think over what we wanted to be when we grew up. Mrs. Wright stressed the importance of thinking this through because it would be published in the local newspaper. When telling my parents about the exciting prospect of being printed in the paper, I was sure enough of myself to declare that I wanted to be the first female President of the United States. No one had ever said I could not be, and after seeing so much of George W. Bush in the news, I figured I could do the job.
When the day came to line up and tell the newspaper reporter what we wanted to be when we grew up, my excitement quickly faded, and I panicked hearing all the little girls say they wanted to be teachers and nurses. Every girl in my line had said one of the two, and here I was wanting to be president. I started to listen closer to see if the boys were also saying they wanted to be teachers and nurses, but they all rattled off different jobs from firefighters and doctors to the town banker’s son who said he wanted to be a banker just like his daddy. Racking my brain, I could not figure out what to say because I felt as though I had missed something so obvious and feared getting in trouble for saying the wrong thing. As I stepped forward to the front of the line, I blurted out “I wanna be a teacher.”

The double-edge sword of being an only child is that your parents know you like the back of their hand, or at least think they do. By the end of the week, our aspirations had made the paper and my parents’ desks. Come evening at the dinner table, father asked me, “when the hell did you decide you wanted to be a teacher?” You would have thought I had secretly graduated from Harvard with a degree in elementary education.

By the time spring fever set in, our days were filled with end of the year activities and tests. From field day to award’s day, our five-year-old schedules were booked. At this age, there were only two awards given out on awards day, and they went to the most outstanding boy and girl in the class. When the teacher explained the importance of awards day and that one boy and one girl would be recognized, the notion had little effect on us. The pomp that comes with an awards system had not yet taken hold of our young minds.

When Mrs. Wright called me to her desk during nap time that day, I knew my gig was up. That whole year, I had been restless during nap time, tossing and turning, trying to pin my eyes shut to avoid getting in trouble. I could not believe that so close to Summer break, I was going to
be busted for not sleeping. Mrs. Wright slipped me a white envelope and said to put it in my backpack immediately, only adding that it was very important my parents read it. While I choked back tears, the letter slipped from her hand into mine, and I slunk off to my pink monogrammed backpack hanging at the back of the room.

I remember the bus ride home being a painful ten minutes of dread. I contemplated all my options over and over in my head. When the bus dropped me off, I could run away and start a new life with another family, but I would miss my parents and my room something dreadful. I could slip the note down into the bus seat and pretend like I never got it or maybe even chunk it out the window when no one was looking. Before a decision could be made, the bus pulled up to my stop, and I realized I would have to bite the bullet for this one.

Knowing my parents would not be home from work for hours, I trudged over to my aunt’s house. After giving indifferent answers about my day, she caught on that something was wrong. With a lot of coaching, she pushed me into telling her about the little white letter in my backpack. She examined the letter and reminded me that not all notes sent are bad, like the positive ones on assignments done right or praise left on the weekly conduct report. She managed to soothe my mind for the moment, but the second I saw my mother pull in the drive at our house, I lost it.

My palms were sweaty and my legs felt like cement blocks. I walked over to mom and into the house with her as she unlocked the door. Kicking my shoes off, I ran to my “workspace”, a boxy, brightly colored child’s desk that even had an attached lamp for those late-night work hours, and threw my backpack down. Being a family of routine, I knew what to expect as the evening’s events. As I sat there, I could hear my mother slipping off her kitten heels and letting them gently clank against the hardwood floor. She would then be sliding into a
pair of house shoes, and opening her jewelry box that would make an ever so slight creak from age. Her jewelry removal would be signified by the soft tap of the boxes closure, and the final stage of the process would be made known by the shuffling and opening of pill bottles in the bathroom. I sat there waiting to hear her rummaging through the bottles and the stream of tap water filling her cup. I knew that after she was settled, it would be time to sit down and evaluate the contents of my backpack.

Like clockwork, mother took her pills and made her way across the house to my tiny desk and chair. She pulled up a seat next to me and withdrew my folder from my backpack. From it she removed my sight words, reading book, graded assignments, and the taunting white letter. With the letter catching her attention, she asked me what it was about. To her distaste, I shrugged and said, “I don’t know, momma.” With a stern look she opened the letter and began to read. As she read her face softened, and as she continued reading, it softened to the point of tears. I can recall wrapping my little hand around her forearm with a look of panic on my face and saying, “what’s wrong, momma?” She choked back tears and told me I was the most outstanding student in my kindergarten class. To this day, I have never seen her happier.

Thinking back on my childhood, I have very little recollection of my parents’ voices. So much so that when my mother or father calls me, their voices take me by surprise. There was silence during prayers, no questions during bedtime stories, no speaking out of turn at dinner, and most importantly no loud playing while mother and father took to their leisure studies and work. I was brought up in a quiet world where I took to quiet hobbies such as reading. I sat in silence for hours and longed to be the characters living loudly within the quiet pages.

The public school I was educated at, and the post 9/11 world I live in, reaffirmed this silence to new extremes. Older people have much clearer memories of that day than I do, but the
lasting effects of 9/11 shaped my life as a young lady in America. Susan Faludi said it best in *The Terror Dream*, “…efforts to bring back the “new traditional” woman had been launched periodically since the rise of modern feminism. But 9/11 seemed to provide the best opportunity yet to bring her out of dormancy—the media’s first responders rushed to rouse Sleeping Beauty from her slumber” (Faludi, 2007). Sadly, the gender roles continued to be a normalized part of my education throughout the rest of elementary school. From mandatory ballroom dance and etiquette classes, my early years reaffirmed how I was to carry myself as a lady.

My mother still has the letter saying that I was the most outstanding kindergartner. Along with the notes from all my elementary school teachers commending my behavior. These notes contain comments such as: “Your child is an ideal student.”, “She is so quiet and respectful.”, and “I wish I had more girls like her.” I struggle with using my voice because during my fundamental years of development, I was praised for being a quiet, pretty girl. I had gendered play and behavior pushed on me in the classroom and as a result suppressed the little girl who wanted to be president. This kindergarten year was only the beginning of my up and down battle with silence, self, and southern womanhood. I suppose it hurts so much to speak out because deep down I still want my mother to smile at a note from a teacher celebrating my silence.

Mother, I am sorry, but sorry and silent is not what I want to be anymore.
Chapter 6: Horizontal Violence

Every morning during our twenty-five-minute break during junior high and high school, my friends and I would gather at our decided location accompanied by our current boyfriends and chosen guys of interests. We rotated spots based on who was in or out, who we were feuding with, and what the weather was like. Over the next few years we dragged our problems from the bleachers in front of the cafeteria, where we were too cool to sit on the intended seat and instead sat on the back with our bodies against the brick wall, to the wooden picnic tables, and gym entrance stairs. There we whispered our secrets so the boys could not hear us, and spoke sternly to them when they got too rowdy with the other guys. Game days we got annoyed with them for not keeping their khakis clean, and rolled our eyes in a motherly fashion as we tried to clean off stains. We made our plans for late night adventures such as whether to meet at the First Baptist Church or baseball field. Some of my fondest memories were made because of the scheming we did during those twenty-five minute breaks.

As wonderful as some of the memories are, there are a lot of memories I wish I had never made. There were many hours spent actively putting other girls down. Whether it was intentionally laughing as certain girls walked by, going out of our way to not speak to someone, or passing notes critiquing every girl’s appearance, we continuously put the women around us down. We would pry on other girls for everything from the way their makeup was applied to how wide their hips were. If a girl put on a few pounds, we would rattle off speculations about whether she was pregnant. A girl with greasy hair was assumed to be poor, to which we responded that she should really try to take better care of herself. A girl who seemed to be unaffected by superficial comments on her appearance would have to be taken down by stronger means such as a rumor she was sleeping with the truant officer for the school.
Our critiques of others were mere outward expressions of the insecurities we felt about ourselves. Not only did we hurt others with our words, we physically and mentally hurt ourselves. We would starve ourselves to be far smaller than the girl we called fat and made pregnancy rumors about. I cannot recall us ever eating lunch at school. There are some days I know I did not eat at all. Most evenings I took sleeping pills to knock myself out rather than stay awake and risk eating. At the worst, I dropped fifty pounds in eight weeks. I only temporarily stopped the insane dieting because my uncle found me passed out in the road from running and not eating.

Rather than getting the sleep we needed, we would wake up hours before school started to plan outfits and put on a full face of makeup. From the age of thirteen to eighteen, there was only one a day I went to school without makeup on. It was second semester senior year, and I wore sweats with a t-shirt to school without makeup. During first period, I was called to the counselor’s office so they could make sure I was okay. They were worried about my wellbeing since I had not presented myself as I typically do, and they took thirty minutes of my day rattling off questions about my home life, boys, and mental health.

We were so caught up in abusing ourselves and others that we were not there for other girls when they needed us most. There were rumors among the cheerleaders about what had happened between an upperclassmen cheerleader Heather and her boyfriend, Jon-Jon. Heather was the Homecoming Queen that year and Jon-Jon was the charming star quarterback. While painting signs in the cheer room and discussing the ins and outs of why Heather was sitting out the rest of the season, it came out that Jon-Jon had raped her. However, at the time we did not use the word rape. It was simply said that “he made her have sex with him, and she was not happy about it.” Mrs. Edson, the cheer coach, came in later and told us that Heather was going
through some personal issues. She said that we should be discussing none of it, that things would be back to normal if we all acted like it. That was all that was said about what happened. Jon-Jon and Heather both stayed at the school and graduated that spring.

Looking back, we believed we had dominance over the boys. We controlled the plans, we kept other girls in their place, and we had the puppy dog eyes to get a boy’s jacket on a cold day. The only thing we did with our segregated seating arrangements and pointed words was create horizontal violence among the female students, which to little of our knowing, gave more power to the boys. The effects of horizontal violence among young girls lasts a life time. There is not a day that goes by where I am not mentally tracking everything I eat or comparing myself to other women.
Chapter 7: Early Dating

Being from a rural, 1A school, you know everything about everyone from the time you are small. I think that knowing so much about everyone else made friendship even harder. Three of my closest and only friends all dated boys two to four years their senior. My friends pranced around in their boyfriends’ oversized Carhart jackets, a sign you had been claimed, and shared wild stories of what it was like being with an older guy. Sitting in the back of Mr. McGlaun’s 7th grade world history class, Morgan gathered us together one day to talk about her new boyfriend, Tyler.

Tyler was two years older and charming, even though he was arguably rough around the edges. They had been going steady for about two months, and the universe agreed there could not be a better pair. We could tell Morgan was serious about this talk and in a hushed tone asked, “I know he will want to have sex. What do I do?” We all glanced at one another and began to chew over the options with our friend. There was the stance of “if he loves you, he won’t mind waiting” followed by the big question of whether men can really tell so easily if you are not a virgin. We talked over this the whole class period and into the next. Ultimately, we decided that she would just have to see how he went about it and that no one had to know if she did.

There were perks to always being the single, ever indecisive friend of the group. I had my fair share of boys who would flirt with me in a style that was somewhere between the adolescent technique of pulling your pig tails on the playground and courting like a southern gentleman, but no one seemed to catch my interest. I always felt like I had a greater pull on my life than Joel Kervin in his lifted truck or Tristan and his curve ball that would take us to state. Because I was often a witness to all the boys and dates, it struck me that we never once stopped to question what we wanted, what we were comfortable with as young girls.
Little did we know, we were already suffering from “burnt toast syndrome”. Stephanie Golden wrote a book called *Slaying the Mermaid: Women and the Culture of Sacrifice* that talks about this “syndrome” as the compulsive need women have to serve others even when it comes at a cost to them. Examples of this would be a mother taking off work to take a child to the doctor rather than the father, regardless of how important her workload might be. Another common way this behavior is displayed is through the inability of women to say no to those who request something from them. These sacrifices made in women’s daily lives are subconsciously a result of attempting to be a “good woman”. For the women I grew up with, dating was not about making yourself happy, but doing everything possible to please the man you were with. If you pleased him enough, you would get the house, the kids, and a Tahoe to cart the family around in. When a relationship failed, the question was always what did she do wrong, never sharing the blame with the male.

This burnt toast syndrome has stuck with me from early dating years on. I was twenty-one before a friend ever told me that I could say no, that I could do what made me happy, that I did not have to continue dating someone just because I knew they were interested in me. I wish I had this mentality before developing toxic dating habits, and I wish more young girls were told their happiness matters.
Chapter 8: Condoms are Currency

Fall of eighth grade year, the time had come for us to sit in a sex education class. The boys were separated from the girls each respectively being put in rooms with the male and female physical education coaches. What all we discussed is foggy, but I remember best everyone whispering about the “talk” we were about to get. For the girls, it almost seemed like a coming of age moment. As if we had earned a type of honor, respect, or induction into womanhood. We all buzzed in our desks with blushed faces and comments about what boyfriends had told us and how far we had each gone with a guy. We were about to be recognized as sexual beings, as young ladies who had something to give, as women with power.

How we walked out of the room feeling ten feet taller after, I do not know. The content of the lecture was close to nothing. There was a brief spill on our body’s changes and development followed by the dangers of having unprotected sex such as babies and STDs. The term birth control pill was mumbled as an option that was not the best choice. In the end, the instructor had encouraged us to wait to have sex and there were red, abstinence cards passed around. We all took and dutifully signed these cards, pledging our purity to our future husbands. With our cards in hand, we left the room to head to gym.

I can clearly recall the first words said to us by our male classmates as myself and friends walked into the gym. “I know how to tell if a girl is a virgin,” Levi blurted out. The boys dropped the basketball game and walked over to us. Sydney, one of the snappier of us four, coughed back, “Oh, really? Well then, am I?” Levi looked at Sydney and said, “No, you’re not. There is a gap between your thighs just below your pussy.” We all knew Sydney was not a virgin, but we were hesitant to believe the truth could be told by a simple glance of the eye. However, impurity getting out was too great of a risk so we all instantly began to stand a little
straighter and clinch our thighs together. We told the boys about our little red cards, but they just rolled their eyes and made remarks about “getting some” whenever they could. Rather than abstinence cards, the boys had been given condoms. Each of which now lived in their wallets.

During sex education, the men had been given the key to sex, the right to pursue it, the power, and the females were told to stay pure then thrown to the dogs. It was not until I moved to North Carolina almost a decade later as a graduate student that I discovered what female condoms were or began to explore my birth control options. Who can say how different my life would have been if at an early age, I was not taught that men were the ones to pursue and control sex.
Chapter 9: To the Black Man

I am sorry people stare so loudly at you when you walk into a store. I am sorry women still clutch their purses and pull their children near when you walk by. I am sorry that people think of you as a pair of cleats or basketball shoes before they think of you as a brain. I am sorry that people assume when you are a father that you are an absent one. I am sorry that you have been gunned down, lynched, and stabbed to death by men who were often too cowardly to show their faces. Most of all, I am sorry that you are feared and wrongly accused because we have created the narrative that you are a sexually charged, violent man.

While there are people of all colors in this world who have committed acts of sexual violence, southern black men have been given the notorious reputation of chasing and lusting after white women. The narrative was spun that black men would stop at nothing to get to the white women, that rape of the always virtuous white lady was their goal. However, this tale was one weaved out of the desperation to cover the white slave holder’s rape and abuse of African American women. After the Antebellum South was abolished, plantation novels laced with airy words celebrating the “good ole days” lived on, and Jim Crow laws were enforced as a hail-Mary attempt at the South’s resurrection. Lynching was a common occurrence in this separate but equal era, and “the number one justification offered was rape of white women.” However, “less than 25 percent of lynching victims had actually been accused of rape or attempted rape,” note this 25 percent is laced with false claims that reduce the percentage even further (Faludi, 2007). Long after slavery and even Jim Crow ended, the imagery behind rape created by works such as Birth of a Nation by D.W Griffith kept the narrative alive. The belief that rape is predominantly black men jumping out of bushes, snatching women up in parking lots, and posing a threat to
every white lady in town could not be further from the truth. This urban myth of nighttime horrors was used to create a fallacy of rape, of what sexual violence is.

The reality is many southern white women would get in their car in the dark grocery store parking lot, drive down the lonesome road, and enter a home where their own husband would violently beat and rape them. According to the National Institute of Justice, “about 85 to 90 percent of sexual assaults reported by college women are perpetrated by someone known to the victim; about half occur on a date” (NIJ, 2008). The data breaks down the false narrative, but until white men are ready to put the truth out, southern women will continue to believe their purity is at risk every time a black man rounds the corner.

The first time I heard of anyone being formally accused of and charged with rape was my tenth-grade year in high school. Three new girls had joined us from out of state that school year. A set of twins with a wild streak a mile long and another girl named Kirstin from Georgia. The twins were a little odd, the big city type. The girls were edgy, did not hide their drinking, and openly sassed the teachers. They were ticking time bombs and no other females on campus could stand them. With their colored hair, skimpy clothing, and voices that did not have a trace of rural raising, we began to hate how obnoxiously themselves they were. Kirstin found common ground in the shared newness with them and upped the twin’s duo to a trio.

These three girls were constantly hanging out with the older, black boys on the football team, drinking, staying out late, getting into trouble. Everyone knew they were up to no good and that their families had no control over them. What impressed us the most though was how they were so openly hugging and kissing the black boys even though they were white. We knew girls who had dated black guys, but to do so publically would have gotten them skinned by their momma.
A few weeks into the semester, the three girls quit showing up to school. Rumors flew and come to find out, Kirstin’s mother had caught the three girls with the black boys, and Kirstin was charging the star football player, Tevin, with rape. The students began to cry out in solidarity with Tevin both vocally and by arranging days to wear all black to school. Knowing both Tevin and Kirstin, it was hard to imagine such a fun-loving guy committing such an atrocious act or her turning down advances from the guy she was typically affectionate toward. Our protest fell on deaf ears as the teachers encouraged us, especially the females, to keep our noses clean of such trouble.

Tevin was removed from school and later sent to a juvenile incarceration center. Kirstin returned to school, but the shunning she received was so bad she made the choice to be homeschooled. Whether there was validity in her claims, I cannot say, but I do know deep down that a black man was accused and short changed by the justice system. His life was ruined by a white woman who had been caught and needed a way out.

Yes, there are black men who have committed acts of sexual violence, but they are not the only ones and should no longer be the scapegoat face of rape. I hope my narrative to come contributes to the reality of what sexual violence is in the South and aids in the creation of a larger narrative where the black man is no longer the poster child for crime.
Growing up on the state line, my aging soul wandered from the thick pines of lower Alabama to the dry, salt air of the Florida coast. The older I got, the stronger the pull became and the more frequent the ventures occurred. At sixteen in my champagne beige Cadillac, I would embark though the forest alone and arrive in a paradise that was all mine. My drive through the Conecuh National Forest to the water became second nature to me; I was escaping every chance I got. Just as the scenery transformed along the drive, so did I. From the smart girl no one understood, but had a world of expectations for, into the witty smartass who wanted to change the world.

My escapes were not always to a destination of solitude though. I quickly made friends with young men stationed at Eglin Air Force Base and the Naval Air Station. All two to three years my senior, the guys quickly took to me. They took to me not in the sexually perverse ways one would assume, but more as protectors, supporters, and lovers in multiple senses of the word.

One man’s trash is another man’s treasure; maybe this applies to men? I was drawn to those the world had rejected. The boys in the military were no good, low class, and dangerous in the eyes of the world. Their jobs, personalities, and futures reeked of instability and pain. They came from coast to coast and all washed into my life in the same Gulf waves. Broken homes, troubled pasts, dissatisfaction with the world, missed opportunities, scenarios as unique as they were brought them to me. I seemed to have the same allure as a New Orleans voodoo queen. The group I drew the closest to was a group of men in an Army training program. They spent their weeks in high stress EOD (explosive ordinance disposal) training, and their weekends loudly themselves. The world hated them. They made crude jokes and were too rambunctious in restaurants. They were unabashedly themselves, and I adored them. My superman was everyone
else’s worst nightmare. My knight in shining armor was an enlisted soldier carrying a copy of *Mein Kampf* and a bad attitude.

That Summer before college was spent from dawn to dusk on the white sand beaches of the gulf. We camped out in the sand all day only retreating to town for dinner. It was me and Beau Kylock, the young, unknowing lovers who were too young to know how to put emotions into words or how to speak words without emotion. He saw through me the way every cliché novel says a young man does his summer love. But we were nowhere close to the traditional romance I am sure my mother would have wanted for her up-and-coming daughter. Simply reading this today would make my southern momma blush and offer a hushed scold.

When alone, we would sit in the sand and stare at each other for hours, half trying to read the other’s mind, half trying to understand how another person so pure and wonderful could exist. Eventually, the silence would be broken by a jab in the back presenting a counterpoint in a discussion. Discussions were ongoing with us, always trying to solve the problems all the old, white males before us had not. I would smirk every time I was victorious, nothing felt better than a win against someone I thought hung the moon. After a few moments of silence, he would never fail to look down at his sand clad legs and say something along the lines of, “You know you’re a special girl, Alli. Don’t ever lose that.” Not wanting to think about a moment beyond that one, a moment that was such a gratifying one with him by my side, I would change the subject to that evening’s plans or something I had been wanting to do.

When we were not alone, we were surrounded by his army friends and the occasional wife. With their coolers of beer and liquor, they would take to the beach beside us. They were loud and sometimes crude, but they were gentlemen to me. Their caution and respect of me could go toe-to-toe with any southern boy from a decent pedigree. I seemed to be surrounded by true
gentlemen. Men who respected me and respected Beau enough to give him a hard time about work, but not pressure him into making any moves on me.

The emotions were always high. That Summer I laughed harder and deeper than I ever had. For the first time in my life, I felt my heart beating in my chest. I was seventeen and falling, falling for a boy I knew could not catch me. I remember the rain beating hard on the outside of my Cadillac in the Blackwater Church of God parking lot. It was mid-Summer and after some intense kissing we decided to crawl in the back of the car. I remember him saying, “we don’t have to” and telling him that I knew. To the world it was a gross, typical teenage scene. I can think back on it now and see how it fit my life so well. Losing my virginity in a church parking lot, in a car my parents money bought. If that is not a big “F you” to all southern society, I will pay for it.

I vividly remember holding Beau. One night we had been asked to house sit for a friend of his, which was as much as a favor to us as to them. It was the first night we could sleep in a bed together. My parents thought I was safe and sound at a friend’s house. In reality, I was curled up on a sofa watching the movie “Frozen” with Beau. With him being stationed at Eglin and in training, I was not allowed in the barracks which meant we never had an intimate, private space to share. That night, we crawled into a full-sized guest bed and curled up. Laying there holding on to him, he fell asleep first. As I lay there sleepless, I stared at his closed eyes trying to memorize every cell of his body. I knew I would lose him soon, that it was all so temporary. I must have done a decent job taking in the moment because I can still see him there, I can still feel him there. It was the closest we ever were or would be to normal.
Chapter 11: Off to College

Momma’s answer to everything hard I ever went through was, “this too shall pass.” Just like the bad, the good passes too. Leaving for college was not easy. My skin missed the whip of the wind and the wash of the waves. My lungs missed the salty sea breeze filling them. My fingers and toes missed the fine grains of blistering hot, white sand. My mind was throbbing with the memories, and my heart was off beat from longing. My whole body needed the ocean. I was learning how to lead a different life now though, the life of a lady, the life of consequences.

As any good southern girl knows, recruitment or “rush” week is the next most important week to that of your wedding and your first born’s birth. While I was running with Beau all summer, my parents were pulling connections to get me recommendation letters to every sorority at The University of Alabama. I carefully selected my dresses for each of the seven days, of course saving the most flattering for days when I was visiting my top sorority choices. Beau had felt strongly about me not becoming an “airheaded sorority girl”, but I knew going Greek was the socially acceptable thing for me to do, and the opportunities and connections made through being in a sorority were too advantageous for my overachieving, teen self to turn down. Most do not want to admit it, but Greek life is sometimes a mass mixer where young adults from similar socioeconomic backgrounds can find their match made in heaven. From pairing with fraternities for philanthropy and homecoming events to the weekly swaps where pledges are sent to a party in the basement and told to socialize, there are always opportunities created for a young woman to find the man of her dreams.

By the final night of recruitment known as preference night, I was torn between two sororities, Alpha Gamma Delta (Alpha Gam) and Kappa Alpha Theta (Theta). Sitting in my hard, plastic chair in front of a computer, it felt like I was taking my first college exam, even
though college would not start for two weeks to come. Deep down I felt as though this would be the most important decision of my life. I had been updating my parents daily with the houses I had visited, liked, and been given a chance to come back to. We were all in this, everyone except Beau that is. I knew most girls from the wiregrass region of Alabama went Alpha Gam, but something was pulling me to Theta-the house of vibrant, diverse, courageous women.

The next morning, I woke up and opened my bid to Theta in Bryant Denny Stadium. I ran to the house screaming and smiling with my new sisters. At the house, I found my kite sister, an older girl in the sorority who had chosen to welcome me home, and my mother. Both embraced me in a hug that made me feel like I had conquered the world. In reality, I had only been accepted into a sorority. After the formalities over fried chicken and potatoes, the parent-free party consisted of booze and boys. In front of the girls who would become my “big” and “grand big”, I pulled from a bottle of Jack Daniel’s that was half grass. I had found my home for the next three to four years, and my drink of choice for the rest of my life. Sometimes I wonder if Beau saved me by subconsciously deterring me from joining Alpha Gam. Whether he would agree, Theta was a lot closer to his style of thinking than any other sorority on campus.

Even though Kappa Alpha Theta is known for creating leading women, the southern sorority culture of Alabama permeated those feminist walls of women’s empowerment. Among the leading women, there were party girls who were struggling with the idea of not attempting to be the “hottest” and best sorority on campus. Secretly, we all as women were battling with the inner conflict of life or love.

In our first week as “baby Thetas,” we started swap season. The theme was the ‘70s, and I had worn a pricey, long peach dress and gold headband. After spending hours grooming and critiquing outfits with two of my sisters, it was well known how important it was to leave a good
impression on these boys, on this fraternity. That night groups of freshman sorority girls stumbled drunk in costumes to fraternity houses. Hundreds of us covered the sidewalks and streets swinging bottles of Gatorade and vodka. I think we were all shocked when we passed the campus police, and he stood there and watched us go by. At the house, I was led backwards into a dark basement along with the rest of my new sisters. There fraternity pledges grabbed us one-by-one. That night I had beer dumped all over me by a pledge who was almost too drunk to stand. He bent me over the bar, ran his hand into my dress and kissed me violently. An elder sister pulled him off me and helped me home. I do not even know his name, but I remember what he did. At the time, I did not think what the pledge had done was sexual assault. I just thought he was being a boy, and I was the chosen girl. After all, what else did I put on lipstick for?

As an eager freshman, I began applying to student organizations and smiling at every powerful face on campus. Somehow my long blonde hair and naturally perfect smile attracted older fraternity men quickly. I charmed my way into organizations with wit and beauty, all my momma had raised me to be. I was on a mission to conquer the world with the memory of Beau burning deep in my soul. I made connections that not only gained me positions, but got me dates to fraternity and sorority parties. There was never a party I did not have a dashing date to. I remember how jealous all my sisters were of Chad, the dark and handsome Delta Sig that was incredibly willing to escort me to every event. In my mind, I was thriving. I had what seemed like the whole world open to me and the pedigree, smarts, and smile to conquer it.
Chapter 12: The First Time

My fingers are frozen stiff on the keyboard. I imagine this is what being paralyzed is like—you know how to move, you know what to move, but you cannot move. A choking feeling radiates from my buzzing head into my throat and down into the tips of my fingers. Somehow, a series of letters creating a chain of words opens a portal from which a monster will emerge. This monster is unknown. It is just assumed to be dangerous because the unknown is the scariest demon of all. We go through great lengths to diminish the unknown’s existence through social constructs, especially God figures. But here I am frozen, about to unleash the unknown into the world with a few quick clicks from my devilishly cold finger tips.

My name is Alexandria.

I was raped.

The unknown is known. Is it the monster your mind imagined?

I remember how excited I was, and how excited all my sorority sisters were when he asked. He was a 6’2’, handsome Sig Ep pledge with the darkest brown eyes. Born and raised in upstate New York, he liked my blonde hair and southern drawl. He probably thought I was a part of the complete Alabama experience. I had adored him since we began our first term as Student Government Representatives, but every girl adored “pledge Peter”. First chance he got, he asked me to be his date; honored was an understatement. I suppose my mom’s logic took over and Beau went out the window, I was here to have a future after all.

I squealed with my sisters for days as we shared pictures of possible outfits, makeup techniques, and hair styles for this ‘80s themed bash. By the time the night rolled around, I had more hairspray and gel in my hair than Elvis. Via hair products, I had attempted to make messy, full curls out of my chronically flat hair; I secretly hoped Peter would not try to touch it for fear
his hand might get stuck. I wore cheetah print tights, with a black shirt and blue neon eyeshadow to top it off. It was the big night, I got the chance to show a boy that I was not only smart and charming, but fun as hell. Staring at my ensemble in the mirror, I could see the future crystal clear. Peter and Alli, the most charming power couple at Alabama. Years of socials together and climbing the campus political ladder. We would graduate, get engaged, return as prestigious alumnae, and live happily ever after as long as Alabama had a winning football season.

Peter came to my dormitory where I met him, his sweatbands, and his tube socks downstairs. We walked over to his fraternity house where we were welcomed by the loud booms of his brothers’ voices. A few of the older boys greeted him and seemed to like him which was important for a pledge. I remember how excited I was sending my dad the pictures of us with the text “he is a Sig Ep just like you, Daddy!”:

He told me to follow him, that he had a surprise for me. He took me upstairs in the fraternity house where he popped into one of the older guy’s rooms. He reemerged with a brown paper sack and said, “I didn’t know what you like, but the guys said this would be a good choice.” I opened the bag, and it was a glossy, white bottle of Malibu. Drinking straight from the bottle at the fraternity house, I do not remember anything after that. Apparently, I went to the date party, and we had a good time until I could not stop throwing up in the bathroom. Peter got me home and carried me up the stairs to my room. Somewhere between the Malibu and vomit, he got the greenlight to have sex with me. I woke up the next morning with no memory of the night before, an ache between my legs, and a condom in the trashcan under my desk. I shot Peter a text asking what happened last night and if we had sex. He proceeded to tell me the series of events I listed above, and that yes, we had sex. He said I seemed fine after throwing up. I
apologized for getting sick and invited him to lunch that day at my sorority, trying in any way to push away how uncomfortable I felt about what had happened.

After lunch that day, Peter headed out to class and I confessed to my friends what had happened. Some of them expressed the same confused discomfort as myself, others were adamant that what he had did was wrong. Either way, I let it go, carried on, and avoided Peter in every meeting and social gathering. A year later, word got back to me that Peter had done the same thing to another member of my sorority. I could have said something. I could have prevented that. I could have acknowledged that what he did was rape.
Chapter 13: Oceans Away

Shortly after the first rape, Beau was sent to Germany. I spent more nights crying over his leaving the United States than I did when I had first left him for college. The texts turned into messages on internet apps, and the boy who had brought out the best in me was oceans away. The rape only made that distance more real. I felt that in some way, I had disappointed Beau. I had become the opposite of the girl he knew, and somehow, I was still growing further from that original girl every day. Many might assume it was a feeling of betrayal, disloyalty, a sense of infidelity, but it was something much deeper that shook the core of my being. I completely lost myself. I had become such a bad girl. I never dared speak a word of what had happened to Beau. I could not break his heart all over again, this time from 4,785 miles away.

He messaged me every day. Even though we were in totally different worlds, in different time zones with no promise of a future, he was still there. We had small conversations here and there. I remember his shock and disbelief when I told him I pledged a sorority. “That was never you. I didn’t think you were going to become one of those girls who was like the rest, but whatever makes you happy,” he said. My heart sank at his slightest disapproval, and my soul cringed at the even bigger secret it was housing. Sometimes we talked about class, making fun of the self-absorbed people I was surrounded by. I would hear encouraging words from him that I was “nothing like them” that I “had a gift”. I would smile at these words, but deep down I knew it was all worth as much as a lie now. Maybe if he could touch me, maybe if we could be back in our ocean land, maybe if the water could wash us into one, I would be okay again.
Chapter 14: A Woman of the World

In *Jesus Land*, Julia Sheeres shares her compelling story of growing up in a religious home with a sexually abusive, adopted bother, Jerome. After years of being abused and keeping silent she tells of her first boyfriend Scott. Sheeres says that she found that something good could come from Scott. He might not have made her orgasm, but “he serves one purpose: he blots out Jerome” (Sheeres, 2012). After my first rape, my self-esteem was at an all-time-low. I felt like nothing more than a sexual object. Ritualistically, I would stand in front of my tiny dorm room mirror to put my makeup on and style my hair with a drink in hand. I made sure that by the time I had to go into the world, I was drunk enough to think it a wonderful place.

Out in the dark basements of the fraternity houses, I was at the mercy of men. The floors were slick from alcohol and probably vomit, the room reeked of smoke, weed, and beer, and the boys were sweaty, drunk, and ready to fuck. I have very vivid memories of young men dancing with me, groping me, and doing everything they could to get their dick in me. However dangerous I knew it was, being sexualized by these young men made me believe that behind their drunken stare and slurred words they cared for me, that I meant something to them. These men who lacked substance and care is what I thought I deserved, not someone as amazing as Beau. Night after night, I would go out, and morning after morning, I would wake up in empty regret.

Sheeres’ theme of silence throughout her memoir can be summed up in the quote, “things are done to you and you can’t do anything back. And so you play dead. Because if you don’t acknowledge something, it isn’t real. It doesn’t happen” (Sheeres, 2012). The silence both her and her brother fell victim to is common among those not in a position of power. This defeatist position is the one I took. Silence can be an overwhelming burden to carry. The
unshared builds up in a person’s throat making things as natural as breathing a strain. Like Julia Sheeres, I thought what happened to me had to remain a secret, but I wanted someone to confide in, someone to right the wrongs. After a night of drinking, Julia tells her lover Scott about the sexual abuse from her older brother. Her logic is that, “it’s no longer a dirty little secret; someone else knows. Maybe Scott will know what to do.” In response to her confession he says the same words I have heard after every nose dive into love, “it doesn’t matter. Everything’s fine. I’m right here” (Sheeres, 2012).

The first person I sought comfort in was Leanna. We had met during a fraternity party and made going out together a regular thing. Going to bars and parties became overwhelming some point after the rape. One night while out with her and friends, I had a meltdown. I was drunkenly anxious to go home and paranoid of the world, the white men, around me. After she stormed off, upset from my less than partygirl demeanor, a friend of mine named Madeline, who also happened to be the founder of the sexual assault awareness organization on campus, commenced to tell her a little about my history with assault. The next morning, I awoke to Leanna asking me why I did not tell her. She essentially offered to fulfill a protector role as she took me in her arms and swore off all evil. Three weeks later, she hit me in the face behind my sorority house for not smiling.

After that, I began to believe that continuing to hide my secret from significant others and the rest of the world was the best choice. Putting my prolonged silence simply, “there was no 1-800 number to report emotional injury” (Sheeres, 2012). Yes, I had been physically beaten and my vagina was a scarred mess, but I kept the real damage unseen. There was nowhere to call that would believe an eighteen-year-old sorority girl when she said she was raped. I was silent and in denial adorning myself with party clothes and drowning my body in booze.
Chapter 15: Happy Valentine’s Day

As fate would have it, a brown eyed pitcher named Andrew walked into my life second semester of freshman year. It was during a preseason baseball game between LSU and Alabama that he caught my eye. In typical Alli fashion, he played for LSU, not Alabama. I kept my eyes locked on him during the game pitch after pitch, hit after hit. I watch him round the bases with ease and bit my lip in silent anticipation as he slid into home base. I knew LSU would be in town three days for the tournament, and I made it my mission to get his attention.

After the game, my friends and I headed to the bars where we assumed the players would be. After all, since it was still off season the boys could get by with a little fun. Getting ready we chatted about how cute certain baseball players were and ran over talking points in case we cornered one. Half freezing and half drunk, we headed out to the bars in our ankle breaking wedges. As fate would have it, we ran into part of the team just as the night was getting going. The groups ended up being an almost even split with only one extra guy to girls. As we caught eyes, approached, and paired off, I ended up with Andrew as planned.

That night at the bar Andrew and I laughed, danced, and kissed a little too much on the dance floor like the average college student will do. I got his number and for the rest of that weekend our group and theirs went out after games. During that weekend, he started calling me lonely eyes, maybe he could see through me better than I thought. Before he left, Andrew invited me to New Orleans Mardi Gras in two weeks. Of course, I accepted. Who could turn down a beautiful boy from LSU.

The two weeks sped by as I made travel plans and repacked outfits until the very last minute. All the girls in my dorm hall could not believe how lucky I had gotten, a weekend getaway with a stunning LSU baseball player? As they called it, Alli power. Eventually the day
to leave came. I got up halfway through my astronomy class and walked out because I was too full of anticipation to hold off on my drive down. I grabbed my bags and headed down to Louisiana ready for a weekend of Mardi Gras and Valentine’s Day magic.

The first night in New Orleans seemed like a dream. We danced and spun in and out of bars making new friends and taking photographs along the way. The drinks were strong and so was my smile. At the end of the night, we made our way passed Jackson Square and down to the edge of town where the mighty Mississippi meets the city. We sat on a bench laughing, talking and listening to the water and the occasional hum of a boat. Enveloped in darkness with the sin city of the South raging behind us, I was lost in the night, happy to be by the water again. I had found a peace, even if just for a moment, even if I wished it was Beau there.

I woke up early the next morning to do some sightseeing only a history lover like myself would appreciate. I put on a flowy peach colored romper and wedges that could easily transition into a bar outfit and set out to see as much as possible before the others wanted to start drinking. It was Valentine’s Day and the sun was beaming down brightly. The town was alive with Jazz music and laughter from Canal Street all the way down Bourbon. As I walked past hotels in the French Corridor, a young man handed me a red rose and wished me a happy Valentine’s Day. I took this as a positive omen for the day.

When I met up with everyone that evening, I knew we were in for a night of heavy drinking. We all got far more intoxicated than should have been, and somewhere in the night, I was separated from the rest of the group. I began to walk through the crowded streets, in the general direction I thought the hotel was in. While fighting through the drunk people flailing their arms for beads, a man named Eric stopped me and asked where I was headed alone. I told
him I was separated from everyone else and unable to get in contact with the guy I was there with. I can still hear him say, “a pretty girl like you shouldn’t be alone on Valentine’s day.”

Angry at Andrew for not looking out for me and letting his phone die, I got drinks with my new Valentine’s date. As we walked the streets he told me that he was in the Army and had just gotten back from deployment. He was nice, kind of funny, but mostly he was company. Being intoxicated only made my poor navigation skills worse. As the night crept on, I took him up on his offer to help me get back to my hotel.

We walked for what seemed like ages and ended up in a part of town I was not familiar with. He said we were going to stop by and make sure his friends made it back safely. In a vacant area behind a scummy motel and an RV lot, he grabbed me and forced me down to the ground. Confused that something like this was happening to me I was too shocked to do anything other than what his forceful hands guided me to. He unzipped his pants and forced his dick in my mouth. I looked up at him sobbing and choking on his dick. I could barely get any air. From there it was just snot, tears, and vomit until he pushed me the rest of the way to the ground.

Now on top of me, he pulled my romper to the side and began to rape me. It felt as if it went on forever. It was barely lit in this part of town and quiet compared to the rest of the city. Here the stars were bright in the dark sky and there was the sound of crickets. I stared into the stars, tears streaming down my face, but not uttering a word. I knew that Beau and my family were all under the same stars, and there this did not really happen.

In the same book, Jesus Land, Scheeres recalls a morning after being raped by her oldest adopted brother and says, “I thrust myself into my Sunday dress, trying not to think about it” (Scheeres, 2012). I hazily remember the act of gathering myself after the rape. As the bitter wind of the Valentine’s night in New Orleans cut through my already shivering skin, I slid my romper
back straight over my body. I stood wobbling in my tan wedges while my eyes burned from tears. Purse in hand, I never broke my stare on the taxi as I approached it. My rapist grabbed me for a kiss as I stood by the door of the taxi. Internally I was screaming because I was so close to being free, but on the outside I did not blink, move, or mumble in refute. After this kiss, he leaned in and paid the taxi driver which I suppose was his way of thanking me for my service.
Second semester of my freshman year ended in triumph and defeat. After New Orleans, I barely got out of bed. I would sometimes leave my private dorm to walk across the street to my sorority house where I would get food, but I would always bring it back across the street to be ate in the privacy of my room. I did not want to be social. I did not want to deal with the world. My grades suffered, even in the classes I had once loved. I refused to get out of bed, and I did not have the physical energy to do assignments. I slept all day and drank all night. I felt alone. I hated my life. I lost my voice.

Even during this dark time, I knew I had too much to live up to, to just give up. I would drink enough to make it comfortable to be at organization meetings. I even drank enough to run a Student Government Association Campaign and win. Between my pink blazer, big smile, and motivational speeches no one had a clue I was half alive and half drunk.
Chapter 17: A Birthday in Bama

Hours after my nineteenth birthday, I was gang rapped by three Phi Delta Theta pledges. During a hot summer night in July the young pledges were using drugs and drinking in their Embassy Suite hotel room downtown; I was simply told there was a hotel party. Once I found the hotel room, I realized it was only me and three boys there. They said others were coming soon. One fixed me a drink and after that another and another. Countless drinks were poured which made taking a bathroom break inevitable. While I was in the bathroom one of the boys came in. He bent me over the sink and ran his hands up and down my body. He pushed me through the opposite door of the bathroom into the bedroom. Here, a king size bed was waiting.

These memories come in flashes, flashes that radiate a sense of shame and pain throughout my body. Slipping in and out of consciousness on the bed, all three boys took turns coming into the bedroom and raping me. I was paralyzed on the bed from too many drinks and drug use. However, one young boy does stick out in my mind. When it came his turn, he could not do it. After a failed attempt at groping my naked body, he lay down next to me. His face was close enough to mine that I could see the obvious distress. He said, “I can’t do it. They have all already had sex with you. I just can’t. Please don’t tell them I couldn’t do it.” Thinking back on these words, I am not sure why I saw them as a sign of remorse when they were really him saying I was not pure enough for him. His friends later came back into the room with him and watched him rape me.

I had my clothes thrown at me while I came in and out of consciousness on the king size bed. “Put on your clothes. It’s time to go.” That is all the boy said. I quickly tried to gain movement in my stiff body and jerked on my clothes while trying to recall and fathom what had happened. I put on my bra and panties and then my holey denim shorts and tank-top. I slid on my
sneakers and was out the hotel door without so much as a glance toward the boys. I found my way out of the hotel that had become even more of a maze in my impaired state. I remember bursting from the cool air of the hotel into the unforgiving heat of the Alabama night. The drugs in my system made it difficult to even find my way out of the hotel parking lot and onto the sidewalk. I called one of my closest college friends, a young man named Kyle who was more of a protector and brother than friend, and I left a voicemail telling him I had been raped. I walked over two miles at three in the morning back to my apartment.

Somehow, I was physically able find the power to put on a bra, panties, shirt, pants, and shoes, collect my things, and get myself home. There was something about being presentable that did not leave me, even in the worst of times. Rather than running into the streets naked like a cartoon character whose house has caught fire, I picked myself up and put myself together. I silently continued to present as I was trained to do.

Word got from Kyle to my friend Alia what had happened, and she showed up at my apartment that morning. I was curled up on the sofa staring at a wall when she barged in. She told me that I needed to have a rape kit done, that what happened was not okay. After she persistently urged me to go to the hospital, I did.

Arriving at the hospital, I went through security to get into the emergency room. The security guard asked me what brought me in today. I assume it was an attempt to make small talk, but when I responded that I was raped, he made an annoyed face and a loud hmmmphhh. I had not had the rape kit done, and I already knew this was a waste of time. The nurses at the desk got me back into the room where I waited for the doctor to examine me. I laid on the cold table in a hospital gown with my feet dangling off the edge until the doctor came in. He propped my legs up and began to examine me without a word. The only noise was the scratch of his pen on
paper. After he lowered my legs back down he explained the damage he had noted on the
diagram and how the rape kit would be run. A police officer came in the room at this time to take
my statement.

Alia and I went back to my apartment where we sat in silence smoking and drinking. The
silence would only be broken by a comment about how “life’s not fair, man.” I had been told I
would hear from the police department in a few days, but that if I did not to call them. I called
the police department several times to no avail. They had no idea what case I was talking about.
Chapter 18: Suicidal Summer

When I look back on life, it appears as a foggy trail of memories filled with a series of people who have come and gone along the way. The fog is only lifted in moments of awakening, moments where I feel myself and the world around me so deeply I am overwhelmed with emotion and realization. Being awake goes one of two ways. I am either filled with ecstasy at the raw beauty of life or desperate to not live the life I have been given. The moments of happiness came mostly with Beau and have been present sparingly thereafter. The darkest moments are much more frequent and seemingly, last extensively longer.

The Summer of 2015 was a time where the darkness seemed ever present no matter how long the sun hung in the sky. After the gang rape on July 3rd, my drinking and misery reached new heights. I was registered for classes that Summer and living in a dingy apartment I was subleasing on the outskirts of campus. Every morning, I would make the trek to class through the Publix parking lot and across the street to Ten Hoor Hall. I would sit absent mindedly in class, only present because Summer classes are practically pass or fail based on attendance. Sometimes I wonder what I would have learned in those classes if I had been more present, but what has passed has passed. After classes ended around noon, I would make the walk back, passing the same young black man eating a dollar loaf of French bread and dipping it into a cheap jar of spaghetti sauce. Sometimes I would stop to grab groceries, but most of the time I was eager to end my walk home.

Unlocking the door to the apartment, I would enter an empty home of beige walls and tan sofas. I would throw my backpack down by the sofa and make my way to the kitchen. The kitchen was not filled with food but rather liquor on top of the fridge and boxes of wine inside. I would pour my first drink around 12:20 and plant myself on the sofa where I would remain until
I passed out that evening. This process was daily, only interrupted by the occasional friend who would come over to drink with me or wanted to run to dinner.

The good days were the ones where I would quietly pass out until the next morning, but the good days were far and few between. Drinking and being drunk is a circle. You have something that will not get off your mind so you drink to forget it. While you are drinking to forget, your problem is simply waiting for you to 360 back around where it has been quietly building a padlocked room. Eventually, the forgetting gives way to an engulfing awareness of whatever it is you began this binge to outrun. You have come full circle, and now you are trapped. Trapped in every heartbeat, every memory, and every feeling. You hold yourself wanting to stop the exposure to reality that is pummeling you. Like a child who was just disciplined, you sit there rocking, knees bent, with your arms wrapped tightly around yourself. You are a grown woman drunk and incapable of handling the world around her.

There were a few drunk episodes that were exceptionally worse than the rest. The evening that stands most clearly in my mind began like any other. I started my drinking at lunch time and continued till the sun had sank out of the sky. As always, I made the full journey from forgetting to remembering and was overtaken with emotion. Experiencing such heavy emotion only left me capable of crying out wishes and wants for anything other than what I was feeling, primarily death. This was not my first time lost in thoughts of suicide that Summer, but it was the first time I picked up the butcher knife from the kitchen. Knife in hand, I walked through the already empty house and locked myself in the bathroom.

I can still see the plain walls, cream tile floor, and sterile white shower in front of me. I can feel the knife in my hand and the tears on my face as my back slides down the bathroom door. I still feel myself sitting knees to chest on the cheap flooring, and see the bathroom through
burning, blurred vision. I suppose part of my mind will always be locked in that room. I recall throwing my legs out in front of me and looking down in a prayer for relief. I did not know what to do so I began running the knife over myself again and again cutting into my right thigh. The blood began to pour. It was like looking at the beginning of death. It was seeing the potential to have what I had cried for. The blood reassured me that yes, this is what I wanted. I grabbed my phone from the floor next to me and shot a text to Kyle saying, “I want to die tonight.”

After reading my text, Kyle and Patrick drove an hour back to Tuscaloosa from a conference in Birmingham. When they got to the apartment they found me on the bathroom floor holding the knife to my stomach sobbing. Kyle sat down on the floor with me and talked me into releasing the knife from my hands while Patrick began to clean and bandage my leg. They kept watch over me for the weeks to come and the rest of my time at Alabama. It was men that put me into the darkness and men that met me there to save me.
Chapter 19: Disappointing Daddy

It is a bleak evening at the beach. The waves are crashing hard against the sand, and the sky is a soft gray. Most people have abandoned it for the day, but a few, who are devoted to the ocean or possibly their children’s enjoyment, stay. There is a light mist in the air, part slat spray and part rain, wetting my skin. Looking over there is a little girl curled up alone. Who knows what her future might hold, the potential or almost inevitable heartbreak, pain, and disgrace. I suppose little girls like her are why I am writing this. The little girl is in her “Dora the Explorer” swimsuit and blue towel staring wide-eyed at the water. In her swimsuit she has no cares, her blue towel protects her from the world, and her pink sand bucket is all the fun she can imagine.

Suddenly, the young girl cries out “Popi, Popi” and runs smiling vigorously along the shoreline. It takes me a minute to spot her father who is a few yards out in the ocean, but to her he was crystal clear. She continues to do this through the remainder of time he is in the water. Randomly breaking her silence to yell “Popi,” nothing more, nothing less.

I remember my mother was always behind the lens when I was growing up. Quietly capturing memories for my future while my father brought moments to life. This dynamic might seem one sided or odd, but to know my parents is to understand why this worked perfectly. My mother has always been a reserved woman. Her heart full of worry, her head full of brains, and her mouth full of coffee. To this day, I cannot encounter the scent or taste of coffee without feeling my mother surround me. My father and I would come into her office for our “lunch dates,” a quiet place where he and I often sat in silence as she sat finishing her work. This silence was only broken by the ringing of the telephone or the sharp clicks from her keyboard. My father and I would jokingly make faces at each other to make fun of my mother’s seriousness.
Do not think that it was my father and I who were one-in-the-same against my mother. I am more of her than I would ever like to admit. My obsessive concern over grades, unwavering devotion to others, even down to my silly obsession with coffee and office supplies are all trademarks of hers. No doubt, the third grader carrying a planner in her pink L.L. Bean backpack was a product of both parents.

Caught in the camera flash forever is my father and me. My father holding me on the carrousel with our matching “Bama” hats. My father laying on the floor with me after my first birthday as I have my eyes dialed in on a book I am holding upside-down. Photos of us at football games, graduation, and just about any occasion imaginable. Most of our moments take place in the water though. From the pool to the ocean and lakes, I would have my Barbie fishing pole right alongside him or he would be holding me in my pink, ruffle swimsuit.

My mother did a wonderful job capturing the moments, but living the moments with my father created a closeness that could not be matched. From piano and softball lessons to doctor’s appointments, my father was always the one with me. He is the reason Journey will always be my favorite band, and why I will never forget the words to “Free Bird”. After our jam session during the ride to wherever I needed to be, I would always hop out, and he would sit in his truck reading the newspaper until I was done. Upon my arrival back at the truck, the silence would be broken by a faded tune from his years as a fraternity brother. These songs from his past were creating memories for my future.

There are two memories that stand out strong when I think of my father. One I have held on to fondly through the years, the other I did not remember until a quote from a book jogged my memory. The first memory is from age twelve. After attempts to correct my scoliosis with therapy and a hard, plastic body brace, the curves in my spine were rapidly worsening and
surgery was the only option left on the table. We scheduled the surgery and spent the months prior in and out of doctor’s offices squaring away details for the big day. The surgery itself lasted several hours, but the surgeon was successful in straighten my spine and fusing it in place with bone graph, rods, and screws. The procedure is intense and takes its toll on any body. One of your most vital structures is moved, realigning you, and nerves and muscle are damaged in the process. The recovery is long and painful.

Before I could be discharged from the hospital, I was required to walk again. With weight baring down on our legs and our feet growing tired with every step, we rarely stop to think about the role our spine plays in our mobility. Walking post spinal fusion was one of the most difficult and humbling experience I have had, and my dad was right there for it. Holding on to me with both hands and guiding me down the hall, my dad helped support my body as I took my first steps after surgery. I can hear him gently encouraging me, and telling me that I am almost there, that it will all be okay. I imagine for him this experience was like when I was little and taking my first fumbling, hesitant steps.

The second experience I remember with my father comes years later. I was sixteen and feeling my growing pains. Still too much of a good girl to just go wild and have the whole county talking, I would commit simple acts of rebellion such as showing up a little past curfew without responding to my parents or locking myself in my room. In my parents’ eyes, even slight disobedience was the equivalent to high treason. I practically never stayed at friends’ houses or got to go on weekend trips with them. My curfew was incredibly early compared to everyone else, and my mother would not let me buy jeans with holes in them. Compared to the other kids, I did little wrong, and I could not understand why my parents wanted to ruin the best years of my life. During the middle of an argument one evening, the fire of rebellion burned deep within me,
and I blurted out, “well, I had sex.” My father stood up, walked out of the house slamming the front door behind him and yelling the word “whore.” At the time, my comment was a complete lie, but that did not matter. The damage was done and they still do not know any different.

Telling my parents was the last thing I could imagine doing after being raped. I knew that would change everything. It would wipe away the years of memories, love, and pride and replace it with the belief I was the worse daughter ever. Not only was my reputation at stake, but my parents’ as well. Everything I did, I did to make them proud. I could not let it be known I was a fraud.
Chapter 20: Sex Sisters

My cell phone ringer stays on loud during the weekends. I am a best friend and a lifeline that is only a call away from 613 miles away. It is expected for Hannah to call or send texts after a late night out on the town in her tight, black, leather skirt, crop top, and sky high heels. Her tears are usually falling, meaning she has crossed from the state of alcohol induced numbness into complete mental distress. She is always crying over the same thing—boys. Usually her tears come when a boy refuses her a ride home from the bar, one of her many beaus does not want her to come over to have sex, or some guy rejected her at the bar. This boy-induced sadness might seem superfluous to most people, but I know the depth of her heartbreak. Hannah is more than my friend and sorority sister; she is one of the few people that has been through the exact same experience as myself.

Over a month passed after the gang rape and then came Bid Day, the holiest of days to sorority women, next to initiation. Hannah, then a pledge and unknown to me, was gang raped by three Phi Delta Thetas. Weeks later at a fraternity party, I was in line for the bathroom when I struck up a conversation with Hannah. She was waiting in line too, and as girls do, we began chatting about the drinks, our shoes, and sorority life. I told her I was an upper classman in Kappa Alpha Theta, and she began to beam with excitement as she told me she was one of our pledges. Somewhere in the bathroom line conversation, a girl mentioned a party down the “row” at Phi Delta Theta also known as Phi Delt. I immediately told Hannah that whatever she does, she should not go there. Her response was “yeah, three of them gang raped me on bid day.” I only responded, “me too”. I suppose the intoxicating music and loud voices of the fraternity house muffled our hushed words enough that it was okay we were not silent about what happened to us. We have been inseparable ever since.
Hannah and I never shared the details of our stories with one another, but always found comfort in each other’s presence when something triggered an old memory. That homecoming my sorority voted to pair with Phi Delt for our Greek and university organized activities. Pairing with a top fraternity was important because reputation and winning competitions was undeniably valuable to our sorority’s future social calendar. The most competitive and time consuming part of homecoming is working on the “pomp” (a very expensive yard display made from thousands of tiny, precisely folded balls of tissue paper). This required twenty-four-hour labor for all of homecoming week from the sorority and fraternity pair to get it up in time for judging. Walking in from class one day, I saw two of my rapists in my sorority house, eating food that was in part paid for by my thousands of dollars in dues, and “pomping” on the floor with my sisters. I ran upstairs to my room where Hannah later came and had lunch with me in silence.

Just a few months ago, I got a text from Hannah saying that one of her rapists was currently serving as her waiter at Olive Garden. She said she only wanted someone to know because she could not tell the girls, her “friends,” sitting at the table with her. We have spent years silently clinging to one another, but never sharing our stories or feelings.

Though Hannah and I were both targeted by the same group of people, our coping was totally different aside from the shared silence. Francine Falk-Allen writes in her memoir, Not a Poster Child, that due to her deformed leg and limp, “there was an underlying message that I needed to be an even better person than others in order to be accepted” (Falk-Allen, 2018). Even though Hannah and I were not visibly different from other girls, we had the stain that only the blood of the lamb could wash away. Growing up in the bible belt, even those who were not avid church goers, still followed the “good book” because social order and the state government was based on its holy words. For good southern girls, men are everything. Like the holy trinity, the
father, son, and holy ghost, the earthly trinity could be considered father, husband, and son.

Devoted to the bible and in turn the men around them, it is typical of women to decide every action by what is pleasing to the male authority in their life. Being pleasing to male authority and worthy of male affection means being pure. In the hierarchy of sinful deeds, rape, especially gang rape, outranks simply not being a virgin. Forgiveness can be found for the girl who lost her virginity to a longtime boyfriend or the teen girl who gets pregnant, after all a baby is of God, right? But forgiveness does not so easily extend to those who are homosexual or those who willingly or not willingly participate in other more “deviant” acts. Like Faulk-Allen, Hannah and I now had a socially declared flaw that we needed to create an identity to hide.

Oddly enough, Hannah and I have both been down the path that Faulk-Allen initially chose for herself. She writes, “I had too many boyfriends in my very early twenties…for several reasons, one of which was a desire to prove to myself that I was attractive to men, and prove to myself and them that I was a viable life partner” (Faulk-Allen, 2018). Before the gang rape, I used men and women temporarily sexualizing me as a coping mechanism to mourn the worth I thought I had lost. Growing up in the church, I knew the gravity of losing purity. After every act of meaningless promiscuity that followed my first rape, whore was the only word in my mind. Sometimes, I still do not realize I am not a whore.

My phase of sexual exploration was temporary, unlike Hannah’s. After Hannah’s gang rape, her self-esteem tanked, and she began to seek reassurance of her worth through social media and men. Her nails are fake like the veneers on her teeth, and she never leaves the house without fake eyelashes and makeup on. She is hiding behind a mask of sexuality, embracing a Hollywood world where the sexualization of the female body is rampant. Her idols, the Kardashians, are a long way from the wholesome roots we both grew up with and the ideal
leading woman our sorority wants us to be. I know how important feeling wanted is to Hannah, and even though this is not a healthy way to cope, I have allowed her to go home with guys and even called her an Uber to go have sex. She is not satisfied with this come and go approach to men and never will be because she longs for someone to love her, for a husband and kids.

Hannah and I are still battling the memories and the emotions that come with being targets of rape and gang rape. Faulk-Allen writes that, “it’s not a bad leg. It’s a weak leg. My mother was right in a sense when she called it my “lazy” leg, but even that had a stigma. This leg is anything but lazy. I would characterize it as the leg that never gave up” (Faulk-Allen, 2018). Hannah and I might not always make what seems to be the right choices, but like so many others, we have never given up. 2 Corinthians 5:17 reads, “therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.” A man has made each of us new beings. A being that fights like hell against social anxiety and night terrors, a being that is “clothed in strength and dignity and laughs without fear of the future.” Rape is a part of my identity, never giving up is part of my identity, but realizing my identity is not flawed is the hard part.
Chapter 21: Faith, Hope, Love

Those who come from a Southern, Christian background are certainly familiar with Esther, whose story composes the seventeenth book of the old testament. She is known for her unabashed disobedience to King Ahasuerus that miraculously ended with him sparing her life and crown. This tale is typically spun as one of choosing what is right over earthly prestige. The element of womanhood is frequently overlooked by ministers and readers of the story. Beyond leaving out the feminist component of Esther’s story, the bigger loss is the forgetting of Queen Vashti, Ahasuerus’s first wife, and the connection that reaches beyond titles between Vashti and Esther.

In her book, Just A Sister Away, Renita J. Weems shares the story of Vashti and the sacrifice that cost her the crown. During a private party for the King and Queen, Weems writes that the men “began to do what intoxicated men do best: boast about women they have known,” and as a result, Ahasuerus “dispatched seven trusted eunuchs to bring the queen to him” to showcase her sexual appeal (Weems, 1988). Assumedly knowing his drunken state, Queen Vashti refused to come to the King and his men, putting his honor as a man at stake. After this act of disobedience, it was decided an example would be made of her. Her influence as a woman could lead other women to rebellion, something the King would not stand for. Vashti lost her crown and was banished from Susa for refusing to be a sexual object of her husband.

The world would not know the name Vashti if Esther had not recorded her in her own memoirs. Esther recognized the responsibility women have to care for, support, and preserve the legacy of those who set the foundation for them. Some men’s attempts to silence women is not remnants of a patriarchal past, but one we are still living in. Let us not forget Martha Mitchell, Nixon’s Attorney General’s wife, who was drugged and held hostage in 1972 because she knew
too much about what the whole country would come to know as Watergate. Or combat veteran Nichole Bowen-Crawford who was silenced through intimidating words after she was assaulted by a male superior in Iraq.

“As sisters, it is our responsibility to remember the women, both single and married, who have worked to clear and pave the way for us, at the risk of health, sanity, comfort, reputation, family, and marriage. If the truth be told, we today are who we are—if we are anybody—because some woman, somewhere, stopped down long enough that we might climb on her back and ride piggyback into the future. Ask Queen Esther” (Weems, 1988). This is Megan’s story.

After a night out in downtown Tuscaloosa, Megan was taken home by prominent Tuscaloosa resident T.J. Bunn Jr. also known as “Sweet T.” Once at his lavish mansion, Megan was raped. Fearing for her life, she climbed from the second story bedroom window and ran as fast as she could. A sister picked her up, and to her she confessed what had happened. She went to the hospital for a rape kit and spoke with investigators in the early hours of the morning. She did everything she could to right the wrong that had happened to her, but justice was not on her side.

The investigation, which consisted of detectives making jokes and talking with T.J. Bunn about everything from the family business to fishing, concluded that he had not raped Megan. They claimed it was consensual because she had not clearly fought back. When the criminal charges were dropped, a lawsuit was then filed against her by Mr. Bunn for a series of crimes she was not aware she had committed. Not only did the justice system fail Megan, but the University of Alabama failed to support her as a student. Attempting to rebuild her life, Megan visited the university counseling center where she was told by a staff therapist that she could no longer see
Megan because she personally knew the Bunn family. Shortly after this, Megan moved back to Texas, diagnosed with PTSD.

The news came on a normal, dull winter day that Megan had passed. Megan was a reliable and constantly smiling face in our chapter that had suddenly disappeared after the fall of my sophomore year. There was not much noticeable talk about her leaving other than she had transferred to a school in Texas to be closer to her family. Her social media posts seemed normal, smiling with animals and on vacations like any other twenty-one-year-old girl. As in far too many untimely deaths, to the naked eye, no one saw it coming.

Upon her passing, her pledge class seemed more stressed than most of those grieving typically do. It came out that she had taken her own life, but there was something more, an anger, a divide among my sorority that those of us who were not all that close to Megan could not understand. Living in the sorority house with many of her pledge sisters, I saw and heard the brutal conflict, conflict that was surrounding the death of someone so precious to us all. Days after this divide began, it came out that Megan had been raped during the summer before her transfer. Her rape had occurred the day before mine. This news I processed in somber silence.

I watched girls who had once been close grow bitter over whether the truth should be told about Megan, whether people should know she died as a direct result of her rape and the way it was handled. The upperclassmen were fighting in chapter meetings over how to memorialize Megan, and truthfully, how proactive the sorority should be about what had occurred. A guy once told me he has a theory that every girl deep down hates every other girl. My response to him was only that every human hates something about every other person regardless of relationship or sex. However, horizontal violence is prevalent among women, specifically young
women and adolescents. Rather than uniting as a chapter in honesty over what happened to Megan, we let the divisiveness that comes with sexual assault break us apart.

As southern sorority women, many of us were too afraid to speak the truth about sexual violence. The fall following Megan’s death, rather than dedicating our lawn decoration during homecoming to sexual assault awareness, we created a display for suicide awareness. It is simple choices that do or do not provide visibility for issues. As women, as sisters, we did not acknowledge Megan’s full story, the moments that led to her death, but rather the death alone.

In 2017, a reporter named Katie J.M. Baker from Buzzfeed wrote an article about Megan’s story. In this article, she included the text Megan had sent to a friend two days before she hanged herself. The text read, “when all is said and done, I wonder what I could’ve accomplished if one man didn’t completely rip everything away from me” (Baker, 2017).

Below my international sexual assault survivor tattoo are the words “faith, hope, love.” These words come from Corinthians 1 Chapter 13, my sorority’s moral code. Like Queen Esther it is our job as women, as sisters, to have faith in other women, to proactively hope for a better future, and to love each other unconditionally.
Chapter 22: Controlling for Clarity

The summer of 2016, I became vegan, started working out, cut my hair off, adopted a cat, ended my college social life by giving up alcohol, and cut off my connections to many people. I wanted to control my world and have something that loved me unconditionally in it. With my orange tabby Leo by my side, I began to devote myself to a strict schedule ensuring the most efficient workout of my body and brain. My social life dwindled away compared to the smiling blonde sorority girl of freshman year.

Eating disorders were nothing new for me. From junior high on I had an abusive relationship with food. Being vegetarian for years, it was easy to pass off excuses for why I went vegan, and today I maintain veganism because of health, environmental, and ethical reasons. However, the switch to veganism my last summer in Alabama was only a mask for restrictive eating, for a returning eating disorder. Looking back, I suppose my logic was that if I disguised my need for control as having a voice for the planet and its creatures, no one would know I was voiceless.

As with my eating disorders before, extreme activity followed along with it. I began working out at first two hours a day, but that number grew to spending four to six hours in the gym a day. During the middle of the night when hunger would strike, I would go for runs around campus to avoid the risk of eating more than my allotted amount for the day. I remember standing in line for dinner at my sorority house and hearing sisters make comments about my head being too big for my body or how disgusting my bony upper body was. I had experienced so much hurt, that their words could not damage me or make me see the error of my ways. I was in control of my schedule and most importantly my body. I was claiming my body as mine again.
When I was young, I refused to get my hair trimmed because as I told my mom, “I want to be a mermaid like Ariel, and mermaids have long hair.” At seven, I even went as far to ask my stylists to dye my hair red like Ariel’s when my mom was not looking. My hair did not get dyed red, but my hair was always kept long and blonde. It was one of my favorite features and one of my most commonly complimented. Looking in the mirror at my hair that stretched far down my back, I called my friend Alia on the phone and asked her to come over and cut it off. She was over in a few and seemed shocked I wanted such a drastic haircut. I insisted I wanted her to cut it off, and she promised to do the best she could. A floor full of blonde hair later, I was left with a bob. My hair was one of the natural, attractive features about me that could be easily altered, and I took advantage of that. It was all in the effort of creating a new Alli who had a life of stability.

In her book *Pack of Two*, Caroline Knapp’s acquiring of her dog Lucille is similar to my own adoption of my cat Leo. She writes that she “thought What the hell. Maybe I’ll go to the pound and just look” and that her impulsive purchase was not something she directly linked to the complications in her life (Knapp, 1998). It can be safely said that subconsciously we all seek connection and affection. Whether Knapp realized it at the time, she was acting on her need for those things in her life. Reflecting on bringing Leo into my world, I chose him because my subconscious needed that connection.

The story of Jean, a woman with a German Shepard and a horrible fear of the world, particularly stood out in Knapp’s writing as well because I could relate to her apprehension towards men. Jean says that her dog “seemed like the perfect choice” because he was a “big, scary dog. A big *male*” (Knapp, 1998). Even though her dog had aggression issues, she saw him as protecting her from the world she so feared. He was everything that she feared in men in animal form, with the exception of her not being the target. While Leo has never expressed
aggression towards others, his being a male kitten has allowed me to jokingly refer to him as my husband, my boyfriend, and the only man I need. Leo was the good guy in my life when I believed no male human could be trusted. Leo will lovingly curl up by my feet at night or lay in my lap for morning scratches. He does not take from me like those men did, but rather gives the unconditional love they were not capable of. Like Jean, I was attempting to replace my worst nightmare with an animal that resembled it, but would be unwaveringly on my side.

My hair gained length throughout the year, but my eating disorder and dependence on Leo continued. It was my final year as an undergraduate, and I was avoiding invites to parties and locking myself in my room to study with my cat in my free time. I had no real interest in dating, and the thought of having sex repulsed me. Friends would reach out here and there to check in and say they missed me, but when they saw how strict my routine was, how much weight I was losing, and how great my grades were, they said they understood my distance and were proud of me. I stayed consumed by the idea of keeping my life as perfect as possible just to make it to graduation day.
Chapter 23: Get the Hell out of Here

I was consumed by my 23 credit hours and graduate school applications spring semester. I looked at applying everywhere and anywhere but Alabama. Alabama is the one place I knew I never wanted to be at again. If I could get out, if I could rewrite my story somewhere new everything would be better. I could be a girl with a voice again.

I kept chasing the idea of freedom and was only given a glimpse of the light at the end of the tunnel when I found out I had gotten into my top choice, Duke. My sorority made a sign announcing my accomplishment and hung it on the front of the house. I stood next to it and smiled for a picture to post on Instagram and let my graduate school decision be known to the world. After this, I started trying to make memories at a few last parties before graduation. I felt like such an achievement helped hide the shambles my life had been in since I arrived at Alabama, and that I could now be rewarded. Getting into Duke was impressive enough to make up for the disgrace of rape, my drinking problem, my eating disorder, and the mental turmoil I had been under.

Once I knew I was getting to move, I could not imagine spending a second longer in the state. I began to look for summer internships in North Carolina as an excuse to leave sooner than the fall. I found an internship at the Democrat Headquarters in Raleigh and applied. I was thrilled when they offered me a spot because that meant I had to be out of Alabama by the end of May.

Before I knew it, I woke up and it was graduation day. The day did not feel special, and I was not excited. I truly felt nothing but a slight emptiness. I sat on my bed and stared at myself in my floor length mirror. Three years of my life had come and gone, and I was alone. The same as I was when I was little and hiding under the willow. I threw the remaining boxes of stuff into my car and returned to my empty room in the sorority house. I put on my makeup and straighten my
hair one final time in the mirror while CNN played on the TV. I finished getting ready and signed my initials and pledge class year in the back of the closet. Grabbing my cap, gown, and makeup bag, I turned off CNN and walked out of the room one last time. I hopped in my car and drove to the colosseum for the graduation ceremony, not daring to look back, not daring to feel. The ceremony was long, but walking across the stage meant I was free. I walked straight from the stage to the exit door and out to my car. I stripped off my heels and gown, got in the car, and texted my parents that I would see them back at the house. I drove four hours home without saying goodbye to a soul. I was done with Alabama.

Mom hung my picture from graduation at Alabama next to the one from my first day of kindergarten. I look so happy in those pictures, maybe because you cannot see all the life in between. I thought leaving the state, leaving the only place I had ever known behind would silence my night terrors, my anxiety, and my fears. I thought I could outrun rape. Within two weeks after graduation, my parents had helped me pick out a house in Raleigh and complete my move. I was left with my cat in a three bedroom, two bath house in a state where I knew no one. Alone to a new extreme, I realized I had not outrun anything.
Chapter 24: Thank you for Sharing

Growing up, my momma always told me, “if you can’t say something nice, don’t say nothing at all.” This was a quote she stole from the movie *Bambi*. It comes from a scene where one of the main characters, “Thumper”, is reminded by his mother of his father’s message to him that morning about how to treat others. *Bambi* is a movie about woodland creatures, but from this quote it could easily be mistaken for a documentary about any southern family. No matter how old I got, I found myself reciting this quote every time I wanted to complain, fight back, or speak out.

The isolation that was brought on through my new home in North Carolina, only amplified my sadness and lack of contentment with life. I would get in my bathtub most nights and drink until I passed out in my bed. My night terrors were stronger than ever, and I was still struggling to find purpose in my academics. I had come to Duke wanting to write about the South, but I was equally drawn to a variety of topics and found myself dissatisfied with my progress. As my first semester at Duke dragged on, I began to drink more frequently and heavily every week, attempting to convince myself everything was fine.

After years of silently struggling in front of my family, I told my mother in December of 2017 that I had been sexually assaulted at Alabama. While suffering from serious anxiety during a night out drinking, I had sat down in a corner booth and texted the truth to my mom. All she said was “thank you for sharing.” We have not talked about it since, and we probably never will. My father still does not know.

I remember how defeated, how pointless I felt. I realized after telling her, I had said something that was not nice at all. I should have said nothing. I hope the day never comes when
another girl’s mother looks at her and says, “thank you for sharing” because the truth messes with her own reality too much to face.
Chapter 25: Beau’s Return

Over the years, Beau and I kept in touch. Through cellphone apps such as snapchat and forms of social media, he watched me grow up from across the globe. We would go through phases of not speaking to one another, but those always ended in giving in and running back to each other. I do not like to think we cling to each other out of weakness, but rather because of an undeniable connection our souls have. Come January 2018, the connection, strong as a static line, still pulled me into him.

I had just gotten back from class when a Facebook video chat from Beau popped up on my phone. I answered, and the first thing he said was, “seems like your accent is as thick as ever.” He was sitting alone in his nearly empty barracks drinking beer and preparing for a ceremony before catching a flight back to the states that night. We talked about my classes which was mostly making fun of other people’s opinions and touched on how he felt coming back to America. We have never been two to dwell on emotional topics, but the look on both our faces when we realized he would be home in less than twenty-four hours said more than words ever could.

We talked until his ceremony and then used snapchat to communicate for the rest of the day. We shared our final messages oceans apart while he sat in the airport waiting on his flight. He confessed, he showed his buddy pictures of me from recently and years gone by. All his buddy said was, “you better go home and marry her, Kylock.” We half laughed and let the statement hang between the two of us, neither pushing the friend’s comment. Within the hour, it was time for him to board his flight. Beau was coming home.

The phone he was too stubborn to upgrade was reactivated when the plane touched ground, and in that moment, so was I. Beau shot me a text as he waited on his connecting flight,
and I replied with an enthusiastic “hi” and a picture of myself getting ready for class. He responded, “that’s the first picture message I have received in over three years.” It felt good to have his name pop up on my phone again.

Beau made it home to North Auburn, California where he worked construction jobs until starting school the following fall at Idaho State in Boise. Neither of us fully realized that our worlds had both changed during the years that passed. We were no longer two kids who were separated by a quick drive, overseeing parents, and the U.S. Army. Even though I did not know if our paths would cross again, having him home got me reminiscing about the power I used to have and reminded me of who I really am.

One night during a drinking binge, I texted him, “I wish you could help me.” He clearly had no clue the gravity of what I meant, the scenes of rape and feelings of self-hate I was suffocated by. Confused, he responded, “I’m sorry, but I can’t.” Reading his text the following morning, it hit me that the only way I would help myself through this is to speak my truth and to speak it in a way that will benefit others around me. I started to remember the beauty in taking chances, the root of my dreams, and the power of my voice. I realized that I wanted to write about the silence the South had refused to break.
Chapter 26: Loving Leo, Loving Me

Trying not to break a sweat while putting on makeup is harder than you think. This all is as a matter of fact. I lean in close to the mirror and whisper a prayer under my breath that I will not mess my eyeliner up, even though I always do. I can see Leo’s little face staring at me in the bathroom mirror as he lays silently on my bed. I tuck and pull on my clothes attempting to make my chest present, but not too present then kill my beer as my sign of defeat to my body. Leo perches attentively on the end of the bed as I go through shoe options, trying on at least three pairs before I finalize my choice. Completely ready, I look down to Leo and say, “you love your momma, don’t you? Maybe someone else will too,” and then I glance to my reflection and think: I guess this is as good as it’s going to get.

In heels, I stumble over toys through what is supposed to be my dining room, but is instead a full time play room. I quickly toss a few toys into a container labeled “Leo’s Toy Box” and wonder how my life ended up like this at twenty-one. I grab my bottle of Jack Daniels off the counter and pour a quick shot of liquid courage, okay maybe two. Then I pose until my arms cramp trying to get the perfect “selfie” to send to my best friend 613 miles away. I press send and back in seconds is her encouraging response that inflates my ego and reassures me of my worth. It is eight o’clock sharp, and I get the “I’m here” text from a guy who is Mr. Right Now, not Mr. Forever. His number is not saved in my phone and probably never will be. Dating is a tricky world governed by the complicated relations between humans. No one ever really knows what they want, and no one ever really knows where things will go. The older I get the more I realize, with little rhyme nor reason, people just land in relationships and some do not. Depending on how the date goes, and depending on his response to Leo, I may or may not talk to him after this.
Since his adoption, Leo has become a three-year-old, fifteen pound, orange tabby cat who occupies all my heart and attention. One thing is for sure in the world of human interaction; we all have parts of our lives that must be tolerated by others before a connection can ever spark. For me, this part of my life that must be tolerated is Leo. After serially dating bad people and going through my long break from dating, my friends thought it was important I put myself out there and try dates with respectable and responsible good guys. In early February of 2018, I began trying to seriously date again.

For the dates that were decent enough to be invited into my house, Leo was there waiting with a fearful glance around the corner. The reactions to Leo and all that comes with him (my baby voice, pictures of him around the house, and his playroom) varied greatly. Some wrote me off as a crazy cat lady with questions like “you don’t want a dining room table?” or “is all this really necessary for a cat?”, but there were a handful that seemed to understand the personality, the love, and the life that an animal has or they just really wanted a shot at sleeping with me.

One of the better dates was with a young U.S. Army medic named Nicholas. After getting caught in the rain, we laughed our way out of his black Jeep and into my house. I changed out of my wet jeans into leggings and a t-shirt and took off my makeup before I walked out to find him rolling on the floor of the playroom with Leo. Suddenly, it became okay he was a little short and not Catholic. Suddenly, I thought if he could love my cat, he could love me.

I have never understood my relationship with Leo as normal until reading about Caroline Knapp’s relationship with her dog Lucille. Her pet/owner relationship is made complex by her own mental health struggles which differentiates her story from that of a more normative pet adoption, but allows me to connect to her narrative on a deeper level. Her need for connection and finding that connection in her dog proves the point that animals do have a worldview and
that there is a relationship to be fostered that does not have to be completely hierarchical. This appreciation for a pet as a life, as a being with a worldview and rights, is a next level realization that is far greater than someone who simply adores or loves animals for their furry coats and soft paws. While Nicholas loved the purrs of Leo, he still did not understand the intimate relationship that can occur between a person and their pet.

I continued going on one bad date after another, presenting the same limited version of myself each time. I showed up as the witty, Duke graduate student who had her life together. Sometimes dates would love my sense of humor and we would hit things off, only to be told later that I was a great girl, but they were not ready for anything. Often though, the date was so painful my eyes would nearly roll back in my head. I felt like no one cared to know me the way Beau had, and I was merely a potential bragging point to buddies.
Chapter 27: Tommy and Chazz

It was not until I met Tommy and Chazz that I had someone in my life who was just like me. Caroline Knapp, makes her deepest connections with people who recognize their dog’s worldview and their own dependency on the connection to the animal. While she makes connections with those who understand her relationship with Lucille, she distances herself from those, such as her long-term boyfriend, who see Lucille as just a dog. Animals are the best secret keepers in the world; they tell no one and appear to love you always. As Knapp says, they “bear witness to the most private details, the monumental shifts and incremental changes” (Knapp, 1998). To share those same scars and smiles with someone else, it is natural that they must be accepting of the other being that knows all.

When I met Tommy, he looked like everything that had ever hurt me- a privileged, white, big-brown-eyed, Sigma Chi in a Marine’s uniform. Beyond the fear, I pressed on and mentioned the dog in his pictures. My phone was flooded with pictures and videos of a charming mutt with floppy ears and a smile that could win over any heart. By the way he talked about his dog and proudly shared his hundreds of puppy pictures and videos, I knew I had met someone who had a relationship with their pet like I did Leo. Tommy continues to have a genuine love for Chazz, and he sees him as a living creature that deserves the best love and care. I knew that if Tommy had the depth to respect and care so deeply for his dog, he was not someone to fear, and he would be someone I could let in mine and Leo’s secret world without saying a word.

According to Tommy, he adopted his beloved puppy Chazz when he called a lady from Craigslist while in his hospital bed. She was selling puppies for $50, and he setup the meeting to adopt the one that was to become “Chazz Michael Michaels Fort.” While a pet is not a replacement for people, they can be a guiding hand in helping individuals regain mental stability
by the comfort they provide. As the case with Knapp, Tommy, and myself we did not know what we needed, but our help came in the form of a pet.

“So there we are: one human as a friend, child, mother, twin; one dog as dog, willing partner to them all. Put those varied combinations together, and what emerges, finally, is the most important role of all: a human as a human, a creature who’s capable of love” (Knapp, 1998). In these two sentences, she captures what it means to be healed by a pet. Without Leo, I would have possibly never healed, never been able to date again, and never been able to open myself up to the possibility of love. The human capacity for love is vital to our existence and our happiness. Part of learning true love is not only learning to love ourselves, but to love the beings, human and animal alike, that are a part of the world around us. A healthy respect made up of love and appreciation allows us to care more for one another, other living beings, and our planet. Individualistic-love is the hardest privilege to put aside, but the pure love that comes after is the greatest feeling of all.

Tommy may or may not be someone who will stick around as a friend in my life, and honestly that does not matter. What matters right now is that because of him and Chazz, I know there are good guys. Drunk or sober talking to him, I can talk without the worry of erasing my past or trying to be good enough. Without Leo, this would not be possible for me, and without Chazz, this would not be possible for Tommy. Our animals have made us better people, have healed us, and keep us going. By opening ourselves up to animals, animals have opened us up to the greatest gift of all, human connection.
Chapter 28: Drunk Nights, Sober Days

There have been few times since being raped when I have felt anything or even been sober during sex. The best way to convey my sex life now is the moments of intercourse between the handmaiden and her commander in *The Handmaid’s Tale*:

“What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he is doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven’t signed up for. There wasn’t a lot of choice, but there was some, and this is what I chose” (Atwood, 1986).

The consensual sex that I have had since the rapes have not been acts of pleasure, but rather sweaty, painful moments spent eagerly anticipating the end. It is not that I did not want to have sex, even though sometimes consent only came after an abundance of pressure from the other person involved, but simply that I have become incapable of enjoying it.

For the longest, I have been self-conscious of the damage left behind from the sexual assaults. During the assaults, there was tearing and bruising from the violent, brute force. While I know that any wound heals, I am still highly in touch with my southern instinct. In my mind, certain damage does not heal. Back home, once a girl’s worth is lost, it is gone. So, it would only make sense that my vagina would be permanently scarred. Whenever intimacy occurs, there is a moment between wanting to have sex and realizing my pants will come off that snaps me back to reality. If someone reaches their hand into my pants, I tense up and cringe at the prospect of them touching my vagina and finding something wrong with it. I have awkwardly stopped partners from performing oral sex because of the overwhelming fear of having someone look closely at my vagina. Every comment made during sex about how “tight” my vagina is throws me into a
mental spin of all my body has been through. Rape has left me terrified of my own body and has taken away the pleasure of sexual intimacy.

Beyond this insecurity of physical damage, I get great anxiety having a person on top of me. If they were to apply too much pressure on my body, I would be lost in my mind, consumed by memories of rape for the remainder of the time. Even when my partner is not guilty of doing this, the act of intimacy alone is enough to give me flashbacks that I try so desperately to fight. I have become rather good at convincing a partner I am into it because explaining rape is not something you do to someone you might want a future with. My thoughts during sex are captured perfectly by Margret Atwood when she writes, “I remember Queen Victoria’s advice to her daughter: Close your eyes and think of England. But this is not England. I wish he would hurry up” (Atwood, 1986). Much of intercourse is spent in prayer that the other person will finish so I can stop mentally coaching myself that everything is okay, and I have to hold out a little bit longer.

Sometimes the trauma is too much. The flashbacks get too strong, my chest closes, and I am locked in a distant memory. I have pushed away during sex and ran into the bathroom to lock the door, curl up on the floor, and cry. Occasionally, I can hold it together well enough to say I am going to pee. An excuse that gives me enough time to lean over the sink, talk to myself in the mirror, and wipe away tears. Once, I was so deeply lost in a flashback, that I could not move. Rather, I laid there and let single tears run from my eyes while the guy continued having sex with me.

For a while, I was seeing an accountant named Jacob. He was fresh out of his CPA exam and nice enough. The son of a minister, he knew right from wrong, and completed the other half of “what a nice couple” comments from people. I do not think we ever talked about anything
important in the world or even anything personal about one another. We were a superficial match made in a southern heaven. One night Jacob came over late to put a new bookcase together for me. He was greatly lacking in skill, but I did appreciate the effort. I knew he wanted to stay over, and to have him sleep in my bed, I had to be drinking. I sat on the sofa drinking while he built the bookcase until I reached a point where I did not mind him being there. It was always this way, and eventually had to stop. I could not take the drinking to feel anymore. Drunk nights make sober days lonely.

There has been one person that having sex with was pleasant and consensual. The only time I have been sober and completely in the moment is when Sarah and I would have sex. My mind was calm with Sarah, and I cannot say why. Maybe it was because she understood my love for Leo without asking for the full story behind why I became a “crazy cat lady” or because she willingly wanted to learn more about my vegan lifestyle. Maybe it was her green eyes that sparkled with yellow flakes, or maybe it was the way she spoke so gently of her nieces and nephews. Whatever it was about Sarah, it was something no one else had. I truly felt her there and nothing else. Having sex with her was as natural as singing in the car to my favorite song or laughing until my stomach ached.

I met Sarah through my friend Kayla who happened to be her roommate at Ft. Bragg. I knew from the first night I met her that there was something special about her. She felt like home. Months rocked by before I finally got her phone number and asked her to hangout. When the first kiss finally happened, I was overwhelmed by the feeling of contentment, that I had found what I was looking for. This feeling, this calm was something I never thought I would ever experience with a person again.
Sex is a complicated action for sexual assault survivors. Sometimes some of us chase it just to feel, only to find defeat. Other times, we shy away from it completely to protect ourselves from danger. Sex, alcohol, and the complicated emotions that come with being human can overwhelm us and become addictions designed to control each other. Finding the way past those is the key to moving forward.
Chapter 29: Let the Good Times Roll

Liberating. That is how it feels to walk drunk with your best friend down the streets of New Orleans in your favorite pair of knee high boots 3 years, 10 months, and 7 days after you were raped there. Drink after drink, bar after bar, I think to myself, maybe this year I will not hate Valentine’s Day, I have come so far, this must be what it feels like to release a mental weight so great it could sink a ship. I felt free of my past and safe as I danced with my best friend and watched my diamond engagement ring sparkle in the neon lights of the bar.

Intoxicated and tired, my friend Hannah and I headed back to the hotel at 3 am where our friends Kayla and Josh were waiting. Kayla is one of the few people that knows about my past, and the only person to ever hold me close during a night terror. Despite her being an Ole Miss Rebel and I an Alabama Alum, we fused a friendship through the years that has been inseparable through multiple moves, graduations, and even Army basic training. It was only natural that I welcomed the idea of her bringing her longtime friend and old college roommate, Josh along on the trip.

I do not remember much back in the room. I can only recall sliding out of my boots and plowing down onto the queen size bed Hannah and I were supposed to share. Kayla and Hannah talked for a minute, and then I heard them shout to me that they were going to Café Du Monde to get more of the famous beignets. I told them I was calling it a night and rolled over in the bed.

How much time passed, I do not know. It could have been seconds, minutes, or hours, but that does not matter because what happened will stay with me for the rest of my life. With eyes that could barely open, I woke up to Josh reaching into my underwear with one hand and leaning onto my shoulder with the weight of his body. I was screaming in my head no, that I did not want this, but I was too fucking up to move from the bed. Glued and groggy, I began to push my body
over, rolling as far away from him and pushing my hips hard downward into the mattress. The last conscious thought I had was “God, let me or him fall asleep.”

The next morning, I woke up to see him a few inches from me in the bed and my engagement ring shining on my hand. I reached for my phone and saw text notifications from Tommy and Sarah both on my phone. “lol that’s the best text stream ever,” “I hope you didn’t get into too much trouble,” Tommy wrote. My eyes shut as if to lock myself away in the sincerity and innocence of my friend’s enjoyment of my rowdiness. I stumbled into the bathroom to wash my face, put on my makeup, and start a new day.

I cannot tell you why I decided to tell Tommy, maybe because I knew telling my fiancé was the last thing I could do. I briefly shot a text back to him saying that something bad happened, that I would explain in a minute. While waiting for everyone else to finish getting ready, I sat down on the hotel bed and texted Tommy what had happened. He did not get mad or so it seemed. He did not threaten to kill the guy. He always says so little, but somehow still makes it known that his focus is on me. He and I have not talked about it since.

Once I told Tommy, I did not think I would tell anyone else. After tip toeing around Josh in the suddenly small hotel room and picking at my hash browns across the table from him at breakfast, I knew by the look on Hannah’s face she could tell something was up. I sent a text under the table saying, “I have something to tell you after breakfast” and got the typical quick response from her of “okay, dude.”

After the longest breakfast of my life, we parted ways outside the café. Kayla gave me the biggest hug, and I held on a little bit tighter, maybe attempting to squeeze out the secret that was now separating us and always would be. Turning our backs and parting ways, Hannah and I locked our eyes forward and headed toward the plans we had made for the day. Without ever
making eye contact, Hannah said “what did you want to tell me?”. I answered, “I’m sorry for acting weird so far today, but I’m just bothered because last night Josh was trying to put his fingers in me.” Still looking ahead, she said “I’m sorry. We should have never left you alone with him in the room. Did you tell Kayla?”. I told her that I had not and did not plan to which she agreed was for the best. We did not say anything about it for the rest of day, but rather drifted in and out of shops.

We stopped by Madame Marie Laveaux’s voodoo shop on St. Ann St., a traditional stop for Hannah and me, to say silent prayers and place an offering at her shrine. Laveaux was the Queen of the New Orleans voodoo world until her death in 1881. People of all socioeconomic statuses, races, and genders would come to her for healing, blessings, and insight into their futures. Whatever she said was believed. Her words were feared and revered for miles around. It is truly something to admire a woman who had so much control over her life and others. A power, a voice, Hannah and I would kill for.
Chapter 30: Broken Promises, Shattered Dreams

On the drive back from New Orleans, it was hard to focus on the road from staring at my engagement ring. All the diamonds a girl could want set in rose gold, but it felt so heavy on my finger. When Sarah had proposed a month before, the first thing I remember saying is “I don’t deserve this.” I said it over and over as I cried and she took me in her arms. I do not think she really understood what I meant when I said I did not deserve it. It was not that it was too nice, but rather that she and what this ring signified were far too good for someone like me.

I arrived back at my parent’s home in Alabama and spent Christmas with my family. I distanced myself from Sarah and when I did communicate with her, I was yelling at her over superficial things. Part of me was trying to push her away, make her see that I was not the person she thought I was, that I was not good. My parents noticed I had quit wearing my engagement ring most of the time and asked where it was. I brushed my internal turmoil off, saying that I did not see a need to wear it around the house or that I was afraid I would lose it since it was loose on my finger. The truth was, I could not handle how much of a joke my life was. I had been sexually assaulted with the ring she gave me on my hand. I was not good enough to wear it.

The nights at home following the assault were all spent fighting off Josh in my sleep. The first night back, I was screaming in my sleep when my dad came in and woke me. I lied and said I had no clue why I would be screaming, that I was sorry. The next night, I fell off my bed trying to get away from Josh who in my mind had laid down next to me. I began to stay up watching videos and listening to music on my phone attempting to fight off sleep and the night terrors. It never failed that sleep would eventually catch me and so would my nightmares.

Quickly, it came time to head back to North Carolina, where Sarah and I had planned to celebrate Christmas with Leo and our dog, Ranger. Every second of the drive was painful. My
world of protection, distance, and avoidance that I had tried to create in Raleigh existed no more. I dreaded seeing Sarah; I could not look her in the eyes. I made sure to start drinking before our family Christmas, which was scheduled for when she got back to the house from visiting her family in Oklahoma.

When she got back, I tried to make things as normal as possible, but I could not do it. Throughout our whole relationship, there had been drunk moments where she got glimpses of the trauma I had been through, but I kept the significance of my issues hidden from her. Our relationship had previously had its ups and downs, all of which I am at fault for. I saw a future with Sarah. I saw all the little things I had ever wanted, but never believed I would have. But I also constantly felt a horrible guilt for not sharing my full life with her, and I felt a self-hate so deep that I would find any and every reason to push her away. My mind and heart were at odds, and I concluded that I could not live a lie, that I was not deserving of this engagement, that I was born to be hurt, not loved. I feel like I am everyone’s favorite memory from yesterday, some guy’s brief tomorrow, and no one’s forever.

“In the fine tradition of suffering as service, her function is to absorb the sins of others, which she then expiates by her death” (Golden, 1998). I absorbed the sins of Josh and all the men who had hurt me, and sacrificed my own life and happiness by breaking off the engagement in conflicting sentences of rejection. I broke her heart and handed back the ring that had made me feel so happy, hopeful, and whole. She deserved better than me, and even if it meant making her hate me, I had to do it for her.
Chapter 31: The Greatest of All is Love

At the beach today, I often see girls with enlisted soldiers. It is funny because I used to be that girl. If I close my eyes and soak in the waves, I still am. His smile looks like a million dollars, but it is just a million heartbreaks. You are not paying attention, but you should be. He is opening-up to you, and you are just staring at your phone. His stories about his friends that seem so loud and dysfunctional are worth so much. Just wait until they absorb you in their beautiful madness. You are both at fault because you will both fall apart. Just love him through the pain, the tattoos, the smile, and log the happy memories while you can.

Beau taught me that true gentlemen are not made by money, but made through facing a world of toxic masculinity and choosing to be themselves. At Alabama, the fraternity men I was taught to love left me empty and broken. Starting with Peter, they slowly took away the fire within me until not even an ember was left. I was angry, sad, and desperate to redeem myself. I wanted badly to go back to the simple days with Beau or the childhood playtime spent under the willow tree. In the willow tree, the whispers of the world might touch me, but my mighty fortress of weeping limbs was there to comfort me.

Beau was my ocean. You could see through his seafoam green soul straight to the bottom. The bottom-where the sand danced with the water, revealing new discoveries with every pull of the tide. His warm embrace was the same as the current wrapping me in waves, knocking me breathless. No matter how hard you try to be one with the ocean, it rejects you or drowns you. Your fragile lungs and feeble limbs were not made to free you into the sea. No matter how you try it cannot be. There will be moments of oneness, mystical experiences of ecstasy and divine joy. Those moments are fleeting and only leave you wanting more. He was my ocean.

Some moments of your life you dream about, wanting to relive. At every turn, you hope
to stumble upon the same happiness you once felt, but every swim in the ocean is a unique experience of bliss. Water is forever cycling from the earth to the clouds with a million stops that are never the same along the way. Maybe when I am stuck in the Raleigh rain, some of the drops soaking my skin are the same water molecules from that ocean of my past, miles and memories away, that once tried to wash us into one. He was my ocean.

Beau was the only person who got the real Alli. He helped me find my voice and taught an unbroken girl how to spread her wings. By never telling Beau this story, I am keeping a part of myself, my innocence, alive. The best of me lives on in his heart and mind. Life has changed me, and even though parts of that girl still exist, new, conflicting parts have formed through my experiences and the way I have remained silent about them. I do believe there is an equilibrium though. I cannot deny who I am, nor do I want to. Somewhere deep in my heart, I still believe in love. Sarah got a version of me that was too busy pretending as if I was not broken. If I had been honest with her, I would still be engaged to the love of my life today.

Southerners, we must raise our daughters to communicate their opinions, their goals, and their experiences. They must be brought up knowing there is power in their words, and a support system of women who are there to believe in them, not tear them down. We must stop sexualizing and demonizing the black male to cover up the true culture of rape and sexual assault. Women must begin to communicate their trauma with those they love and trust to begin healing. Most importantly, it is our job as survivors to make this change in communication. It is our job to break the southern silence.
Bibliography


   Nashville, TN: Holman Bible.

Corinthians 1 Chapter 13 and 2 Corinthians 5:17


