

A Survivor's Story

MERLYN JANET MAGNER



Come into the Water



SOUTH DAKOTA

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Friday, June 9, 1972

Rapid City, South Dakota

At approximately 10:25 P.M., I drowned.


Heavy rain and flooding burst through and filled the canyon walls surrounding my family home. My mother, my father, and my brother would drown that night, too. I was swept away and landed on a rooftop, the only survivor.

This is my story.



1 The Pretender

Beverly Hills, California, February 2005



I was peeled back, exposed, raw, and vulnerable. I hurt inside and out. Newly returned from my second trip to Brazil within six months, I was planning to go back as soon as I could arrange it. Brazil was my last hope, my last resort. And this was no vacation.

I needed a miracle. I was running out of fuel. I was running out of time. I was running scared. Pain was a raging fire in my body. It scorched every breath I took. I was a wounded animal, my flesh gripped in an inhumane trap. I felt like road kill, like a wild animal now helpless, diminishing into the asphalt with the treads of tire after tire, each one of them another loss.

What had happened? How had I come to stand on this precipice, looking over the edge, wondering which was worse: a seeming illusion of solid ground beneath my feet or the free fall? When I became sick, it was as if God had thrown me a chair and ordered, “Sit down.” I lived my life at warp speed. Maybe a head-on collision was inevitable.

I didn’t know how surrender would feel. It was so easy for others to say, “Just let go.” It sounded glib and trite to me. My life was on the line. I’d peered into the Pandora’s box of my pain on countless levels in a never-ending pursuit of the truth behind it all. I’d spent my life seeking solutions and asking for understanding. I’d been on a dangerous recognizance mission only to return with no findings, no insight, nothing to show the world or myself who I’d become or where I’d gone. I’d exhausted the limitations of western medicine and every other kind of healing for that matter. It was a moot point. I turned towards heaven. There was only silence.

I am a chronic pain sufferer. I suffer from a trilogy of words that make people raise their eyebrows, a condition that makes them suspect a mental defect lies beneath pain that may or may not be real. But I am not unsound. I am a deeply flawed human being, but I have all my marbles. I am mentally strong and balanced. Box checked.

No, I am talking about physical, acute, bone-crunching, unrelenting, in-your-face, your-worst-nightmare, will-this-never-end, I'm-gonna-kick-your-ass pain. It has become my closest companion, my deepest confidant, the keeper of the lie.

I have lived a parallel life for seven years, with one foot firmly planted in this reality and the other just this side of hell. For over a decade I have lived on the edge of all reason, tested beyond the boundaries of my own endurance, flirting with death in an excruciatingly slow dance, always looking for a way to escape the misery of the step, a way off the floor and into what appeared to be a normal life.

And through it all, I've also been able to hear a hint of the sweetest music wafting through the ethers in the background . . . melodic, serene.

Around Thanksgiving in 1997, I was admitted to the emergency room with an irregular heartbeat, raging fever, and pounding headache. I hadn't been able to sleep for days because every time my head hit the pillow my heart fluttered a mile a minute.

A knowing friend asked if I was frightened. I was firm, emphatic. No. This was not a panic attack. It was physical. I was sick. My upper torso and head felt as if they were in a vice, as if all of my muscles had clamped themselves down hard around my nerve endings. My body suit felt like it didn't fit properly, like it was two sizes too small. I was off balance and hurt everywhere with pain that was as cruel as it was relentless.

After an exhaustive battery of tests, the verdict rolled in, a diagnosis, if you can call it that. I had an unnamed virus that enflamed my thyroid—my body's barometer—and in turn attacked my heart, which manifested in an irregular heartbeat. My whole body had kicked into overdrive. I perspired, feeling my heart pound, beating like a frightened sparrow, the organ

stuck in overdrive, an unending high idle that kept me wide awake at night.

They put me on propranolol, a beta blocker, to regulate my heartbeat and told me to go home and rest. The doctor looked at me and said, “You’re lucky it isn’t Grave’s disease.” Whoa, sounded pretty grim.

My heart rhythm leveled out after many months of medication, but my head continued to pound. I was worried. Other than treating this disturbing and alarming symptom, this vague diagnosis was all the doctors could offer. The origin was unknown and would remain a mystery, along with the life I was dissecting. The 24/7 headaches never went away. As time went on, they became so severe that they took over my life. Since then I have been on a quest for answers and relief.

My quest took me down countless meandering roads. I sought out doctors of every degree, crisscrossing western and eastern traditions. I’ve done my time on the couch—you name it, I gave it my all, my best shot, overturned every proverbial stone. Freud, Jung, Reich. I spent infinite hours researching all medical modalities and then onto alternative medicines, exploring trauma and the way energy becomes trapped in the body. Early on there was no such thing as PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). That came only after studying vets who began returning from Vietnam.

I knew about cellular memory, immobility response, and stress disorders. I practiced intense forms of yoga religiously for many years. I chanted, practiced breathing techniques, and meditated. I looked for and listened for God. He remained silent. I remained defiant.

I cleaned up my diet and my colon too. I practiced my prayer ritual. I studied all I could find on alchemy. Maybe I could somehow transmute this lead in my head to pure gold in my heart. I had psychic readings and past life regressions, boiled nasty brown herbs into cold dark tea, got stuck like a pincushion with the needles of numerous acupuncturists, and worked with my favorite chiropractor, all to no avail. It . . . I . . . was a huge question mark. My life and health were eroding, and I was helpless to stop it. The pain permeated every corner of my life, dog-

ging me daily, pushing me, taunting me, and daunting me. It chipped away at my self-esteem, my fierce independence, and the easy confidence I'd always taken for granted. I was ashamed. I couldn't fix myself and neither could anyone else. I'd gone in with both barrels blazing. And here I was, firing rubber bands into thin air.

And on the other side of all this, I knew I possessed an innate, great capacity for joy, like the proverbial carrot that I could not reach. I searched and searched for the key. Chopra's *Quantum Healing*, Myss's *Anatomy of the Spirit*, Bradshaw's "wounded child." I read *The Bhagavad Gita*. I checked out where Buddha and the Dalai Lama weighed in on suffering and all the rest. I thought about karma, the mother lode of cause and effect. My apartment resembled a flea market, with piles of volumes stacked on the floor. No one I knew, including those I paid, had been here before.


All the while I pretended all was well. I avoided telling my friends about it, knowing that none of them wanted to hear me say, "I don't want to be in my body anymore. It's unimaginable." Pain can clear a room, silence the loudest person in no time flat. It makes others extremely uncomfortable, and who can blame them. No one wants to go there. It's a bore and a downer.

And this is where the lie begins. You are pretending now. Nobody wants to sit with it, spend time with it, least of all you. So you suck it up and move on, allowing everyone to remain comfortable, untouched and clean, off the hook.

The experts weigh in and scratch their collective heads. Friends throw up their hands. You're doomed, alone, weary, and looking for the white flag. Stranded in a land where no one speaks the language, and you can't read the signs. You're exhausted in a place that you don't know how to navigate out of.

Surrender . . . I didn't know what it looked like. So I kept on pretending.

2 Heartsick



My mother, Norma Elizabeth Anderson, was raised in Sturgis, a once quiet enclave in the southwestern corner of South Dakota. It has only become renowned of late because of the motorcycle races that are annually held there the first week in August. When my mother was growing up, it was simply a small hamlet on the fringes of the Black Hills, an outpost of larger Rapid City. The region was initially settled with the discovery and promise of gold.

Not one to let any grass grow under his feet, my great grandfather, H. O. Anderson, soon saw a business opportunity, not in the form of common prospecting and “striking it rich,” but in commerce instead. He traveled to Yankton, on the opposite end of Dakota Territory, by wagon and proceeded to buy windows, doors, and all manner of building materials and began a mill-work plant. He bought the existing J. G. Wenke Hardware Store and expanded numerous times. By 1890, the H. O. Anderson & Son Hardware was thriving, along with a furniture store, and by 1905 and 1907, he had added a tin shop and mortuary. His son, Earl H. Anderson, my grandfather and my mother’s father, carried on the family businesses, expanded, bought a cattle ranch, and speculated in the stock market, where he made his own fortune.

My mother’s upbringing was comfortable; however, I cannot say with certainty how life progressed for her growing up. I always sensed a “haunting” surrounding her demure demeanor, and only years later did I begin to put the pieces of the puzzle that was her childhood together. From the few pictures that remain, one adolescent photo stands out. She had huge dilated pools for eyes, a symmetrically perfect oval face, chiseled Roman nose, translucent skin, and thick, pouty lips. But her eyes reflect an

unfathomable melancholy. When I hold this image, I feel like a voyeur staring into the bottom of her soul. It is sobering. She is too beautiful.

When I later married and moved to Seattle, this single black-and-white photograph disappeared in transport. It was my most precious possession, and I never quite got over losing it. I would come to learn over and over again in life that the most important things can indeed be carried in one's own arms.

My mother didn't care for her given name of Norma and preferred Elizabeth, her middle name, not Betty or Beth or Liz, but it never stuck. When she married my father, he called her simply NEM, for Norma Elizabeth Magner. She responded to my father's endearment from behind eyes of deep, abiding love. This affection rippled out, touching us all. She looked so delicate yet ardent. But she never spoke of her past. That was a foreign dialect that even she couldn't speak.

I never knew the depth of her anguish. I only detected it just beneath the surface, where it remained unexplored. She was an exquisite canvas, with no hint of the agony that went into its creation. No one spoke about their inner landscape in those days, much less shared it with their children. With regards to my mother, I simply didn't know then what I suspect now.

After spending her formative years in Sturgis, Norma went on to Saint Martin's Academy, a Catholic girl's school near Rapid City. She spent her final year of high school in Lincoln, Nebraska. The reason for this move mystifies me to this day, but I can take an educated guess. From there, she went on to pledge the Theta sorority at the University of South Dakota in Vermillion. I am not sure of her chosen major, but she eventually settled in Rapid City and began her career at KOTA, the local television station where her fate awaited her.

Dad graduated from the University of Minnesota and went off to serve in the Air Force during World War II. When he returned, he went to work as an anchorman for Channel 5 in Minneapolis. Later, opportunity knocked at Rapid City's KOTA, a smaller market, where I imagine him passing my mother in the dark corridor and their eyes meeting for the first time. Norma was a copywriter and worked in continuity. She possessed an effort-

less, elegant beauty that captivated my father immediately. He was dapper, her Cary Grant to his Veronica Lake. He loved her from the moment he laid eyes on her, but Mom was still carrying a torch for a soldier who came back from the war shell-shocked. He was never the same. For a time, she waited for him to really “come home,” but he never did. The damage was done. He’d survived the battlefield, but he was gone.

Dad liked to tell the story of how he threatened to move to Australia and never return if she didn’t make up her mind and marry him. Do they make them like that anymore? I ate it up with a spoon. My father didn’t waste time.

Dad also ran sports commentary on the local news every night. Sometimes as a kid, I would go up to the television station with him for company, a special event because it was way after my bedtime. I was awestruck watching him carefully place tissue paper around his white shirt collar and powder his entire face to get camera-ready. It was oddly paradoxical to see him perform such a feminine act, for he exuded the ultimate masculine charisma.

He was untouchable, other worldly . . . that same indefinable quality I saw in my grandfather Ralph Wagner and my mother. Dad smelled of Old Spice or Bay Rum, and I thought he walked on water. I used to sneak into the family room at 10:25 P.M. sharp to catch him on the late news broadcast. Having the TV on at the 10 o’clock hour was a Wagner family ritual. We didn’t see him much growing up, so stealing that glimpse of our dad on TV was cherished. When he wasn’t at the studio, he was hitting the streets selling television and radio advertising. He sold “time,” they called it. How ironic as there was so little left.

He held dominion over our family, at the helm of the Wagner ship, rock solid and steady. He commanded respect and our valued trust. We gladly gave it to him. His life’s purpose was making sure we had the best of everything to the best of his ability. We won the lottery with our parents, but we had no idea how blessed we were at the time.

When my mother married my father after meeting him there in the newsroom in Rapid City, they moved for a time to Flint, Michigan, where my father found other work. My two older

brothers, Bill and Jeff, and I were born there in succession, and a family was made.

I came into the world last, behind them all. I was tiny and born with a heart murmur, but the long waited-for and wanted daughter just the same. I think my mother and I looked into each other's eyes knowingly, mutually and silently agreed, "It's good to see you again." We were old comrades.

Harry Truman was president. It was the year Albert Schweitzer won the Nobel Peace Prize, Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl* was published in the United States, Dick Clark hosted the first American Bandstand, and MAD magazine was founded. It was 1952.

I grew up a half-pint and scrawny but filled with enough brawn to fight off bronchial pneumonia after I came out of the womb, with double-belted-steel resolve and enough energy to keep up with my older brothers most of the time. They were my personal guardians, and I came to count on their protection, along with the merciless teasing I endured. Fair enough.

Flint was a foreign country to me. I lived within the safe confines of my immediate neighborhood, where I played in the middle of the street with the boys until we had to move out of the way for the odd car to pass. I would walk over to my best-friend Nora's house and, instead of ringing the doorbell or knocking, stand in front, calling her name to come out and play in the abundant lilac hedges and rhubarb patches, to roller skate or, chalk in hand, hopscotch down the sidewalk.

Just before sundown on Saturday nights in the summer, we skipped to the end of the street, gathering friends along the way like flowers, to attend the outdoor free movies. Blankets and pillows tucked under our arms to tuck us under the stars on the slope of the deserted lot behind the old Shell gas station, where we watched Hopalong Cassidy and the Lone Ranger with his sidekick Tonto save the day.

The absolute best time was when we piled into Dad's Ford station wagon for a trip to the drive-in movies. We'd make that same bed of comfort in the back with the seats turned down, squirming around, inducing mayhem, throwing popcorn at each other, and finally falling fast asleep in the middle of *The Ten*

Commandments, way before Moses got the chosen ones across that Red Sea.

I always wondered if that sea really was red and why? Always wondering . . . were we chosen, not chosen? Why? And what about all those Acts of God, miracles? It was big stuff for a kid with a wild imagination and a belief that anything was possible. I wanted more. I always wanted more—more life, more answers, more magic. Could one simply command it and make it so? Could I?

Of course, there was the building of a fort in the backyard with old sheets and our own secret codes, staving off sleep by swapping ghost stories with the boogie man in attendance or the ever present man in the moon. The primary goal was to be under the endless canopy of night sky, looking up. My brothers nicknamed me Moon Baby, or Moon. My father called me Merlenska, or Lenska for short, sometimes Moulon. Go figure.

Dad and I liked big dogs, and over the years we had a menagerie of Great Danes, German shepherds, boxers, but inevitably Mom would end up taking care of them, so they shrank over the years until, at the end, there were only two nervous miniature poodles.

We rode our bikes like bandits down steep, cracked, and gravel roads. I had a need for speed even then, and life was fine until I hit a rock and careened over the handlebars one day, escaping serious injury as I was wont to do. This episode produced my second head wound and first black eye. My mom's father had dropped me on a brick floor when I was an infant. My head must have been made of iron ore to go along with all the other metal inside. I just defied my body.

By the time I turned seven, we had packed the family into the dusty sky-blue Ford station wagon with the wood panels, along with our cat Cleo and George our dachshund, and moved back to South Dakota. Dad felt that Flint was expanding too quickly and the neighborhood along with it. I think my mother probably filled his head with visions of small-town life in the safer environs where she had grown up and convinced Dad that we ought to get out while the getting was good. And after all, they had met in South Dakota, and Dad liked the idea of being a big

fish in a smaller pond, I think, but this idea is mere conjecture on my part. I am sure there were many conversations behind closed doors making plans for our future. But once the issue was decided, Dad was welcomed back into television broadcasting in the familiar fold of mid-America where a growing family could thrive and flourish. We lived in Sturgis for a time with my mother's parents, and Dad commuted to work at the TV station, until we could get on our own feet.

My grandmother Helen, "Mamba" to me, was a gentle woman. She could always be found in her kitchen. She taught me how to bake and gave me my first cookbook. I can see the pink rose-petal and green-leaf patterns embroidered on her cotton apron and smell the peanut-butter cookies and German chocolate cake coming out of her oven, while hot tapioca came to a boil on the stove.

Her home was spotless, the wood floors and dark mahogany furniture gleaming with polish and a hint of fresh lemons. She was quite immaculate, from the confines of her home to the precision with which she would ensconce herself in the first pew at Blessed Sacrament Church every Sunday with rosary beads in hand, a white lace doily on her head, silently mouthing prayers to the Virgin Mary. What were behind those whispered pleas inside her faith I wondered? From the look in her eyes, I knew she wasn't just reciting words.

And even though I also remember her emptying the thick glass ashtray that she managed to fill every night, I saw nothing out of the ordinary, nothing to suggest that a river of misery ran just beneath the façade of genteel perfection and permeated the lovely house she kept along with those clandestine worlds I knew nothing of.

My grandfather Earl, "Gopa" Anderson to me, was another story . . . an imposing brute of a man, tall—well over six feet—with thick short-cropped silver hair and clean starched shirts. He smelled like fresh soap and bubble gum, a brand of chewing tobacco he favored.

He was also a handful, a raging alcoholic. I never questioned why he would chase me around the living room letting his false teeth clack and fall onto his tongue with glee. I was terrified

and with good reason. He could be a real scary human being, an unpredictable giant who might swallow me whole with a simple backward glance. When he cackled and wheezed with that glazed expression on his face, I would run in the opposite direction, screaming for my life.

He was a bear of a man with blank, bloodshot eyes. He drove a big beige Buick that seemed like a tank to me, a vehicle made more for warfare than mere traveling. I never felt safe around him, and I don't think my mother did either.

As I was growing up, the telephone often rang in the dead of night. Then my father would go to pick up his father-in-law from some nameless bar and deposit him back home before dawn to sleep it off. My mother, mortified, suffered in silence behind closed doors. I can only imagine the horror and torment he subjected her to when she was a defenseless child and he in a booze-drenched rage was entertaining his ever-present demons.

The air was dense with deception and disappointment. Why didn't Mom want him near us, I mused? Why did Mamba look so sad and Mom so mad? Family portraits usually resemble an innocuous Norman Rockwell painting from the outside; a balanced composition, careful brush strokes, and evenly distributed color. We all know that underneath the surface, there can often be a far more complex reality. Ours was no exception.

My mother's older sister, Mildred, was not around when I was growing up. She married Brigadier General Raymond Dunn in the Air Force, and he was posted overseas. The regular packages of socks and pajamas she would faithfully send early every Christmas always marked the beginning of the season, along with the unveiling of the Nativity scene.

I gleefully unwrapped the set and assembled it near the tree. I thoughtfully moved the figures around the manger ever so gently until baby Jesus was placed just so. Then I would stare into that serene infant's face, searching for the answer to something. The figures were meaningful to me, and I was especially spellbound by the Wise Men bearing gifts.

What knowledge did they possess that I didn't, I innocently wondered? And how did they find it in the stars? How did things line up so that they knew "the moment" of such a significant

event had arrived and it was time to show up? I wanted to know more, but all that astronomy, astrology, and intrigue could wait. There was an enormous white-flocked tree to trim, other gifts to behold, and songs to be sung. When we raised our voices, it was in unison and praise.

A story about my Aunt Mildred bares the impact her life was to make upon my own. The year I turned sixteen, I got to visit my favorite cousin, Mildred's daughter Sug, in Germany. While there, we made a pilgrimage to Lourdes, France. For Catholics, this trip was akin to a trek to Mecca.

It was in Lourdes that Saint Bernadette, who had experienced unimaginable physical pain in her short life, witnessed visions of the Virgin Mary, who told her to dig in the ground until a natural spring came forth from which healing properties flowed. Bernadette herself never benefited from the spring. It would be her undeterred faith that sustained her. I'll never forget the Blessed Mother telling her, "I cannot promise you happiness in this life, only the next." I had to think about that. I had no formed beliefs surrounding my Roman Catholic upbringing. I was just a sponge. At around the age of five or six, I tried one night to get my brain around the idea of eternity; when I closed my eyes to find only darkness, it scared me silly, and I ran to my mother's bed. These thoughts were too big and I was humbled by them.

Lourdes was filled with vendors selling rosary beads, plastic bottles of Holy Water, and statuettes of the Virgin Mother. I had never seen so many wheelchairs, and most of the people who sat in them smiled, their faces reflecting the hope they held for healing their broken bodies. All those trinkets were just a front for the hope inside them. I felt the mystery of it, but I was certainly not among the sick and seeking. Instead, I reveled in the fact that I was sixteen, in the company of my gorgeous cousin, and in France. That was miracle enough for me.

Years later, after Mamba died and Gopa was grieving and drinking himself into an early grave, the local monsignor stepped in to play matchmaker and introduced my grandfather to a church worker who "cleaned his clock," and by that I mean his checkbook. That episode took the bloom off the rose between

the church and my mother. The veneer on her faith was irreparably cracked, and the fate of our religious upbringing sealed. She promptly pulled my brothers out of parochial school, and I would never get to wear the dark-green and blue-plaid uniforms of Saint Martin's Academy, nor attend their brand-new school, with the brand-new dormitories in the hills that I coveted so.

My mother's love for us was fierce, and it was from her that I knew and felt complete, unconditional love. She left me this legacy, credentials greater than any diploma from a school I never attended. She indulged and spoiled me. When I didn't feel well, she would say, "Just sleep in this morning, little one." Even if I was pretending, she would bring me beef bullion, soda crackers, and 7UP on a tray and slip me broken pieces of white almond bark from Fanny Farmer.

I think she allowed this indulgence so that we could wile away the day together, bask in one another's presence. And delightful it was, snuggled up in the safe arms of family, out of harm's way. Nothing bad could ever happen in this lovely cocoon.

She was demonstrative, affectionate, tender, and magnetic. I would naturally gravitate to her wherever she was sitting and, like a cat, curl up at her feet, my head leaning into her smooth bare summer legs, my eyes closed, content, inwardly purring. My hair was always long, and often I would fetch my brush and entice her to gently run it through my hair while we talked. She never made me feel self-conscious, awkward, or unimportant. She told me how she had waited and prayed for me, a daughter. She called me her light.

Her warmth and maternal nature were so compelling that some of my friends even took to calling her Mom, which she considered a high compliment. She was wise, lovely, and, of course, flawed. At times she could be far away and aloof, contemplating her own histories and mysteries. She could just stop in mid-sentence and leave the room, disappear. She might not come out for hours. I knew she was rare. She was one of those "who walks in this world, but is not of it." Life was an obstacle course for her. Her furrowed brow and those haunting eyes told me this. Her heart was broken in too many places, which was

not lost on me. Child that I was, I felt it all and wanted to hold her and protect her in the same way she held and protected me and all those lucky enough to enter her soft aura.

We were just kids when my best friend Deb and I attended a school dance across the street from my house. We dressed to the nines in our rick-rack-trimmed skirts and puffed sleeves, stepped off the curb in our “hood,” and traipsed into the gym for what we thought would be the best experience of our lives.

Many years later, Deb, always painfully shy, told me that the dance was torture for her. She feigned sickness, and back across the street she trudged into our home, where she soaked up my mother’s love and understanding. Mom drew her a warm comforting bath, erasing all rejection, soothing away the blues she also kept for company.

My mother often came up behind me, wrapped her arms around me, and asked, “Do you know how much I love you, darling?”

I took it for granted. I assumed everyone’s parents loved them in this way. In my little kingdom, love was the order of the day, and I reigned supreme.

When I was twelve, something rocked my childlike world. My mother and father seemingly disappeared into thin air, and Jen, my paternal grandmother, flew in from cold Duluth, Minnesota, where Dad had grown up. She appeared like an apparition on our doorstep. It must have been winter because I can still feel the cold, smooth down of her full-length mink coat as we hugged.

She was a vision in her black hat with its black veil floating over her white powdered face and scarlet lips, the pungent smell of Estée Lauder’s eau de parfum wafting behind her as she made her way into the room, slipping off her black high-heeled rubbers, with the top black buttons open. She was prepared to take over, loving but serious.

Mom and Dad were in Rochester, Minnesota, at the Mayo Clinic. Mom was sick, we were told, but everything would be alright. But it didn’t feel alright. I reached into my protected memory and felt around. Hadn’t Mom just had an operation at the local hospital not too long ago? Bill, Jeff, and I were so cushioned and shielded from reality. She’d simply been gone

for awhile, her absence explained away well enough, and then she reappeared as if she'd been out to lunch. Mom had come back, subdued, but home. What else mattered? We had settled into life again without mention of illness or, God forbid, danger. Mom was among us again, albeit thinner, and life went back on course.

But now even I, small and cloistered twelve-year-old that I was, knew something was seriously wrong. It had to be something important to have drawn my mother away from her proper place, safe in the fold of her family. My mother had just had her second major heart attack.

When she arrived home again several weeks later and I was led into her bedroom, I was scared. The mother that I knew and loved wasn't there. In her place was a frail, pale, and tinier version. She softly whispered to me to come over to her and sit down. I was tentative and nervous, my mouth dry. I felt flushed. My heartbeat quickened, and my hands were clammy and damp.

She looked like she might break if I even moved or ventured over to her. When I did, she lightly caressed my wrist, pressed her thumb into my palm to make a point, and said, "I missed you so much." Oh, Mom. "Do you want to know what happened to me while I was gone?" I was taken aback. What could she possibly mean? I stiffened. I glanced up at my father standing next to the bed in their darkened bedroom, and he seemed doubtful too.

And then, in the softest whisper, barely audible, she said, "I don't want the children to be afraid of what they cannot see." And with that, she pulled up her nightgown and showed me the most extraordinary thing. From the tip of her collarbone, vertically, and all the way down her chest and past her belly button was a wound so deep and red and raw that it took my breath away. On either side were what looked like miniature metal suction cups evenly spaced, and from them, crisscrossed like shoelaces, thick black thread held my mother's body together.

I was stunned, speechless. What had they done to my mother? And why? Was she alright? What else was going to happen? I was dumbstruck, to put it mildly, and confused.

At this moment, I first sensed that there were no guarantees in life, and this thing we were all doing here was not permanent. The thought was too grave for a child my age. I thought it, felt its heavy weight, but could not grasp it. So, after planting an abbreviated child's kiss on her cheek, I went quickly and quietly from the room and into the sanctuary of my soft pink bedroom, where I opened up my latest Nancy Drew/Trixie Belden mystery. I began reading on exactly the same page I had left off, not missing a beat or a breath.

I used to believe that it was at this point when my chief coping skill—denial—first kicked in, but perhaps it was in place much sooner. Throughout my life, I would retreat into the world of books whenever and wherever I was; for escape, answers, comfort . . . or to simply turn the page . . . on another mystery. I never looked back.