

## A Childhood Out of Focus

The brain is a remarkable organ. Scientists are only barely scratching the surface of its potential. This mostly gelatinous mass of grey matter can send electrical impulses that reinforce habits, instill memories, and initiate movement. Neuroplasticity is the brain's ability to wire and rewire itself, this is why the brains of young children that have experienced these traumas can rewire themselves to make, for example, sections of the brain that normally deal with language deal with balance if that area of the brain was damaged. Adults aren't so lucky because as the brain gets older its ability to rewire itself deteriorates. An additional function, and the most important role of the brain is to increase our chances of survival. Consider memory. Our memory of negative events is more lasting than positive ones. This is because the experience of a negative event most often directly affects survival. If you're one of those people that remembers every negative thing that has happened to you, you aren't alone. Your brain is simply doing its job to ensure that those negative events don't get repeated. It is simply trying to make sure that you live to see another day.

Bear with me. I took that caveat about the brain for a reason. I did so in order to explain that I have plenty of memories from my childhood, but the majority of them are negative. This will be seen as unfair by my parents but I assure you and them that

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this is not at all unusual, for any of us. Our brains are biologically wired to remember the negative things that happen to us, it's an evolutionary adaptation that greatly improved our ancestors's survival rates. The phrase, "learn from your mistakes" is only possible if you remember the mistake. The phrase: "you learn more in failure than in victory" implies that you have to comb over that failure a few times to glean the lesson.

Intellectually, I know my childhood wasn't all bad. I laughed, smiled, sang, farted, you know the usual. We were a middle class family. I didn't live in want of anything. I lived in a two parent household and both had well paying jobs. We went on family vacations, and I loved and grew up with the Disney Channel.

But it wasn't without problems.

The problem was my mother.

I know very little about her.

My mother was one of twelve or thirteen children. She was born in Bessemer, Alabama in a small house on a dirt road since

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renamed after Bo Jackson. They would eventually relocate to Cleveland, Ohio. I've been to that house in Bessemer. My Aunt Emma who lived there at the time and has since passed away was intriguing. She had snow white hair that cascaded to her waist when she took it out of the conservative bun she always wore. She was typically southern in her attitude about the younger ones, children were to be seen but not heard, sit at a different table from the adults, and eat every scrap of food placed in front of them. I learned this last lesson the hard way when she placed a plate of collard greens in front of me at the kids' table and bid me to eat. I do not eat greens, my mother does not cook greens, hell my mother doesn't cook anything, and I was at that phase in childhood often plagued with picky eating. I sat at that table for hours until finally my mother decided to rescue me from my gastronomical nightmare.

It was one of our family trips to Bessemer/Birmingham usually en route to or from Disney World in Orlando, Florida when I learned my mom used to play under the front porch with a pet rat, ate red dirt because it was flavorful, and was called Jodie by her mother for some obscure reason I never understood.

Growing up, my mother represented success. A true, "from nothing to something" story. Allegedly, the only member of her immediate

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family to graduate from high school and go on to college. She found a man, got married, and had children all in the correct order. She told me that she was involved in dance at Bowling Green University in Ohio. She did everything from choreographing dance shows, to counting maggots in an experiment as a lab technician. She had a mysterious male best friend named Spencer and met my dad on a blind date. The story goes that she was actually quite mean to him. My father must be the type of guy who's turned on by a woman's meanness because he kept pursuing her and she continued to be mean. But there was something between the two of them and they eventually married. They were married a couple years before I was born so I wasn't the underlying reason for their matrimony.

My mother was a bank teller and my father an employee at Nordson, a factory that manufactured adhesives, sealants, powder/liquid paints, and coatings. I remember being floored when I learned how much money my father made an hour. As time went on though, my father stayed in his position at the plant while my mom climbed the corporate ladder.

By middle school, Jo Ann was the manager of a branch and was making far more money than Robert. I remember someone asking my dad if it mattered to him that my mom made more money than he

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did. He said it didn't. He said it with pride, as if he could sit back send his woman out into the world and watch her bring home the bacon.

Around this time I started to realize that I had no idea who my family was on my mother's side. I knew a few people: Tamika, my heavy set cousin who braided my hair on occasion and went to church in Lorain (which is far closer to Elyria than Cleveland is), and vague memories of cousins named Dandrell and Andrea. I remember a slumber party at my family's black and white split level home on the corner of North Abbe Road and Livermore. If I reach for the corners of my brain to grasp hold of that memory I can remember Andrea the taller slimmer one of the cousins made me feel cherished and special. Maybe she was holding me, maybe she was doing my hair I don't know. It's like what Dr. Maya Angelou said, "People may forget what you said, they may forget what you did, but they will never forget how you made them feel."

I have zero memories from when my family was a party of three. But I distinctly remember the arrival of my little sister. My whole world changed then and honestly not for the better.

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Because I am voluntarily estranged from my immediate family for reasons that will begin to unfold before you I cannot say with confidence that the memories I have surrounding the birth of my sister are true. I have read many articles on false memory and how they help shape the psyche. I'm not above sharing that this may be one of the latter. Nonetheless this memory helps frame the foundation of my life in my family.

I was two and a half when my sister was born in March. I had been staying with my Godmother and sister, Sandra and Candice respectively, during the labor. When we got word that the baby had been born the three of us, Sandra, Candice, and I packed into the car and drove to Elyria Memorial Hospital. My father met us at the entrance to the maternity ward. I reached for him and he took me into his arms. He looked tired but happy, and was dressed strangely. Together we entered a room where he took my small hands in his and began to wash them.

"What are we doing daddy?"

"We have to wash our hands so that we don't make the new baby sick"

"Oh"

"Let me get under your nails"

"Ok"

"You ready to meet your little sister?"

"Yes" People had been asking me this question for months. Their excitement thick as humidity on a summer day. I couldn't help but be excited too. I couldn't help but dance around asking questions about my new sister, when she'd be here, when we could play together, etc. If everyone else was so excited that meant I should be excited too.

We entered the sterile room where my mother and new baby were. Still in my father's arms I craned my neck to see the new addition. I don't remember my mother's face or seeing her at all. The next thing I remember is being seated in a chair and having my father place the baby carefully in my lap maintaining a stabilizing hand on her head. She was weird looking, slightly discolored, but also cute in a big eyed sort of way. I was mesmerized by the small package. I didn't think she was a toy, she seemed fragile but I was intrigued by the newness of her. My father took the baby away and either placed her back in the

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bassinet or on my mother's chest and I reached out to him to be picked up again. His attention was elsewhere, with the new baby and my mother. I left my arms outstretched reaching for him to no avail. I felt as though he could no longer see me. That I had become invisible to him. Seemingly appearing from nowhere Sandra and Candice were simultaneously admiring the baby, congratulating my parents and shooing me out of the room.

"WAIT!" I yelled.

"What?"

"We forgot the baby!"

"No, the baby stays here with mom and dad"

"Why?"

There was no answer to this last question as I was strapped into my car seat. But I remember feeling a deep misery, one that made clear to me that I was wrong to be excited about a little sister, that in all of this excitement I was forgotten. Shooed into the back of a car, ignored by my parents, and sentenced to spend more nights away from home. It wasn't [REDACTED]'s fault

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but she was born into an uphill battle with me. I didn't like her, and I didn't like the way my parents ceased their cherishing of me when she came along.

I have shared a version of this story with my husband as the basis for my reasoning to 1) not have children at all or 2) if we did get ██████████ to stop at one child. And if we truly wanted a second child to wait until the first child was 5 or 6 years old and well situated in school with activities and friends so as not to feel as if their life has ended and its parents stolen with the arrival of the new addition.

In movies parents ask their children, "how would you like a little sister or brother?" and the kids answer in varying ways but what I never see is any real detailed discussion is how life will change for the child. If someone would have been honest and said "from here on out kiddo you're not as important as the baby because you're not as needy," or "everything you thought belongs to you actually must be shared, but anything that belongs to the baby strictly belongs to the baby, what's yours is hers, and what's hers is hers" I would have stamped my two year old foot and said, "No. Daddy. I want more time with you." For years I did not have a birthday party that didn't feature an present opening ceremony for my little sister as well. She could count

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on having two birthday parties with presents every year whereas I just had to understand that the same did not apply for me. I believe Children's intelligence is underestimated. I can't help but feel that if my parents truly cared about me, and felt me an important part of the family they would have talked to me, explained to me what a new addition meant instead of blindsiding me with reality between the hospital and the housing projects where my God-family lived. I may have only been two and a half years old but I remember. I may not remember the event specifically or exactly but what stands out most to me and the feeling that never left me even in my adult life was that I was no longer important.

One could argue that this was just how I perceived things. But I saw with my own eyes the number of hugs my little sister got from my mother that I didn't. I heard with my own two ears my mother say, "If it weren't for the love of Christ I wouldn't love you" or my personal favorite, "there isn't room for the both of us in this house." Several years later in my own home my mother said the same thing to me which and I almost, I was so close to kicking her out but something stopped me. Something always stopped me. It was the little voice of rationality that whispered to me *not yet, don't burn these bridges yet you still may need them.*

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There could not have been two siblings that were more unlike than I was and still am from my younger sister. School and making good grades was effortless for me, my sister not so much. I was not much of an artist but I had incredibly neat handwriting and could read from four years old and showed signs of being a talented writer. My sister on the other hand was 100% artist, had illegible handwriting, and didn't actually try to learn how to read until well into second or third grade. I remember rolling my eyes as Disney Channel time was interrupted so that she could work her way through the "You Can Read" VHS program my parents purchased for her. One thing we did have in common was music, she could play instruments beautifully where I couldn't, but I could write songs and we both could sing. Singing is what bonded us, nothing else.

One night LeAnn Rimes was on Disney Channel and there was a call-in contest. If you dialed the number and someone answered you'd get the chance to sing a couple bars from her song "Blue" if you got that far there was a good chance you'd be entered for an even larger prize, I think it had to do with being featured on Disney or something. My sister and I were beside ourselves, we dialed the number from the basement phone repeatedly, and I watched my sister's face as each call went unanswered. I

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suddenly had the brilliant idea to start singing the song anyway. Her eyes lit up, you could just see the hope of possibility in her eyes. It was mean, but I was disappointed too. Something needed to be done to lighten the mood. When I hung up the phone she asked me what happened, and I told her nothing, nobody actually picked up, she punched me in the shoulder and I laughed and we went back to dialing the contest number over and over.

We sang together in front of the people in our church, created new melodies for tired hymns, we recorded skits on videotape, and duets on our family computer. On my iPhone I still have a recording of the two of us singing "My All" by Mariah Carey alternating verses and finishing with the practice flourish of two people who sing together often. When I ran across that recording last year it didn't make me nostalgic or sad, it was like uncovering a relic that I had no ties to. I listened, smiled when my voice cracked or the dog barked in the middle of the song, and went about my business.

I used to sleep with a radio next to my head tuned to 107.3 The Wave. It played smooth jazz twenty four hours a day seven days a week. I was lured to sleep by the voices of Bobby Caldwell, Kenny G, Sade, and Anita Baker. Still I need noise to drown out

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the persistent thoughts that ravage my brain when my body is still. Only now it's the familiar soundtrack of Hogan's Heroes instead of smooth jazz. When I'm traveling on the road it's meditation music, but every now and then I return to my jazz roots via a rarely used playlist on my iPod classic labeled "descension" for times when I need to "come down".

I have an older sister too. Her name is Adrienne and she was possibly the first person besides my father that I was crazy about. She's nine years older than I am, born to my father and his high school sweetheart Janice. Adrienne was cool and mysterious and even though she didn't have much to say to me when I was little I was totally fine with sitting in silence in her presence. But something happened, I don't know what went down but suddenly she was gone. And me and my parents were in our car driving around town looking for her. I think she left a letter, I vaguely remember my mom saying it was the only time she'd seen my father cry (the next time would be when he'd read mine over twenty years later). I was upset and worried about her. We ended up in the parking lot of Northwood Junior High School, a police officer was there, and I think Adrienne's mom was there too. After an enthusiastic discussion amongst the adults Adrienne spilled into the back seat with me where my mood instantly brightened. I said something to her and she told me to

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shut up. I didn't say another word to her. Shortly after that Adrienne moved out for good and back with her mother. We had weekly scheduled phone calls and she would talk to dad, then dad would put me on the phone and I would stand in the kitchen, between the pantry and the stove staring at a blank white wall wondering what the hell the two of us had to talk about. After a painfully awkward minute or two I'd pass the phone off and return to whatever it was that I was doing. Eventually the calls stopped altogether. I learned not to miss her.

My mother used to always say, "hindsight is 20/20" and to that I must say, Jo Ann you are got damn right. Looking back on it all, I don't know how I missed how weird everything was. I guess I couldn't see the forest for the trees. That, however, is the beautiful thing about children they can and will deal and accept whatever you dish them, they will love hard and unconditionally until you beat it out of them- and the beating doesn't have to be physical. As in my case, it can just be a relentless erosion like a gentle stream flowing over a rock that suddenly finds itself shaped differently altogether after years of being washed over, not in rough waters but in gentle persistent waters. Rough waters would have dislodged the rock, moved it onward to another place, but gentle waters, gentle waters aren't overtly disturbing and you stay put until you all but erode away.

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I went to Windsor Elementary School. I loved that school, so much so that I wouldn't mind being one of those alumni that donates thousands of dollars in order to ensure that other students love it as much as I did. Windsor was across the street from our house but was located in such a way that it took nearly as long to drive there as it did to walk. My mother walked me to kindergarten (hey, a positive memory!) I remember the dress I was wearing (mostly because I've seen a picture) and the barrettes I wore in my hair (they usually did not make it home). I didn't suffer from separation anxiety I was happy to go to school. My teacher's name was Mrs. Brown she was a big-breasted woman who wore high waisted slacks so it looked as if her belt were actually holding up her boobs. She created an amazing environment for us in her classroom. She took Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung's theories about play in regards to human development to a whole new level. On one side of the classroom there was a playhouse. It was probably only thirty six square feet but it featured a kitchen and a dining room, if you were kindergarten height you could walk through its front door otherwise you'd just look in over the top because it was roofless. The rest of the room was colorful and the desks bunched in groups of four. I was in the afternoon kindergarten session, all day kindergarten was still controversial at the time, there were plenty of people

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that thought being in school all day was cruel and unusual punishment for children our age. I would not have minded it. Not at all. Class started out pretty much the same way everyday. We shouted the date, we discussed the weather, we counted, we recited the alphabet song, and learned the pledge of allegiance. From the moment my butt touched the carpet square I was assigned to I knew we were going to have some problems. First, I wasn't learning anything new. I have no recollection at all of this but my mom must have been doing an excellent job preparing me for school, I went into kindergarten knowing how to count, knowing the alphabet, knowing how to read, and could write in legible handwriting.

*Really quick, thanks mom for not forcing me to be right handed. You may have forced a lot of other things on me but thank you for leaving me that. I'll give you kudos for that Jo Ann, you had my brain primed and ready.*

That backfired on us though before long. I didn't understand how to communicate that the curriculum was beneath me. That I was super annoyed with how my classmates struggled with tracing letters of all things. Flabbergasted, I would often get up and go into the playhouse and entertain myself until it was time to move on to something else. After a few episodes of this a

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parent/teacher/principle conference was called and Mrs. Brown informed both the principle and my mother that she was recommending I be put on Ritalin as I clearly was displaying symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or ADHD.

"Excuse me?" This is the phrase my mother says when she's heard you but is also daring you to repeat yourself if you have the balls to.

"Mrs. Madison your daughter is not paying attention, she gets up in the middle of a lesson and plays in the playhouse. She is disruptive to the class."

"Have you asked her why?"

"I'm not sure I know what you mean?"

"What are you learning in class right now?" At this point Mrs. Brown rattles off themes, shows off worksheets with tracing exercises or numbers where you have to glue the corresponding amount of paper coins in the box.

"Tianna can do all of these things already. Did you not notice that she can read?"

"She can read?"

"Well, I think we have just uncovered the true problem here, the absence of an attentive teacher. My child is nothing more than bored in your class."

"I see."

That was pretty much the end of that meeting and not too long after that I began to split time between my kindergarten class and Mrs. Williams first grade class. I knew what was going on, I knew my mom was there to stand up for me and it was the best feeling. I was proud of her and proud of myself.

When it came to school, my mother did not hesitate to go to bat for me. I didn't find out why she was such a crusader until I was in the fourth or fifth grade. I was in a math class taught by a grumpy old woman whom I'll call Mrs. P. Frankly she scared the shit out of me. She taught lessons with such ferocity you were afraid to raise your hand and ask a question for fear that an interruption would put you in grave danger of a personal attack. I never raised my hand in that class and as my husband would say I was "in the weeds" during every lesson so distracted

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by fear I couldn't comprehend what was being taught. Eventually my paralysis translated into poor grades and it all finally came to a head when Mrs. P decided to print progress reports. If you were passing the class you could read your report and toss it. If you weren't a parental signature was required and you had to return the progress report the following day otherwise Mrs. P would follow up with a phone call home. I was trapped, I thought about forging my mom's signature the looping "J" of her first name was easy enough to duplicate but I had already done that once that year and had been found out after forgetting my permission slip to take a field trip to the I-X Center in Cleveland. That time I had scrawled my mom's signature onto the form and slipped it into my backpack. My guilty conscious kept me from turning it in to the teacher by the stated date, instead I asked if I could bring it the following day. What I didn't foresee was my mom finding the forged slip in my backpack, it didn't even matter to her that I didn't try to pass it off in the end. She was livid. I could not understand her anger. Especially since I had already proved I was a good human being by NOT using the fraudulent form. When it was all worked out and my mostly silent father (when it comes to spats like this) helped my mother see reason she wrote out her permission on a sheet of my wide ruled notebook paper, signed and dated the form and I was able to go. All was right with the world. Remembering

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how pissed she'd gotten about that made me sick to my stomach as I looked at my progress report full of D's and F's. In my defense though, pop quizzes are bullshit, and should feature more than four questions because a). it's not fair to punish a student for not knowing something if you can't teach it well and b) on a four question quiz missing one question already puts you at a C, miss 2 and it's over! My throat was in my stomach and my stomach was in my ass for the rest of the day.

I waited until right before bed to breach the subject. I tried to pass it off on my father who would do or allow just about anything you asked while he was in one of his semi-conscious states on the couch in the family room. I know this because I've asked him countless things while he was in this state and have gotten them. I've asked to cut my own hair, I've asked to use hair grease in my baby doll's hair, I've asked for extra Twizzlers, extra fig newtons, and the list goes on. That night he takes the progress report in his hand, eyeballs the pen I've also thrust into his face and asks,

"now what do you need me to do?"

"I just need you to sign it. Right there on that line"

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"Hmmp" this was a usual emanation from my father. My heart rate increased, I was so close to success, so close to mom never needing to find out about it. He takes the pen, thinks again and says, "go ask your mother." Had I known the "F" word then it would have been the bomb heard 'round the world.

I walked the seven steps to the next level to talk to my mom. Her back was to me at the kitchen table that was pushed flush into the front wall of the house. All four of us could sit there without needing the other side of the table and it gave us more room to walk through the kitchen we only pulled it out if we had guests. Tonight mom was sitting in one of the chairs me or my sister would occupy with her back to me cranking away on her adding machine doing the household budget and paying bills. She who makes the money controls the money.

I approached her meekly.

"Can you sign this please?"

"What is it?"

"It's a progress report, the teacher wants everyone to get them signed and bring them back that way she knows you saw it" This

was a lie, only the stupid kids needed to show proof that their parents were aware of how stupid their kids were.

"Let me see it" She turns and reaches for the half sheet of paper. It was like handing charges to a judge, I couldn't let go of it. She bore very stern eyes into my skull and my hand dropped to my side as she took full possession of my death warrant.

"What. Is. This." She half asked in staccato for emphasis. She knew what it was but she wanted to know if I had the balls to confess to my shortcomings, or displace blame, she wanted to see how I'd play it.

"I am failing math." I played it straight down the middle. She's like a dog, she can smell fear and bullshit. There was no point in lying.

"How?"

"I don't understand what we are supposed to be learning"

"Don't you ask questions?"

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"No."

"Why not?"

I shifted my weight from one foot to another stalling for time. My mother grew impatient quickly and her body language said "speak now or get snatched up and forced to speak." So I told her the truth. I told her I was afraid of my teacher. The fire in her eyes died a little but not much, and she pivoted in her chair to face me fully.

"Look, Tianna. Getting good grades is important. School is important. You see this world out there, it isn't set up for you. You are behind the eight ball for two reasons 1) you are a female and 2) you are black. For these reasons you have to do better and be better than everyone else because at the end of the day no one can take away your education. Do. You. Understand."

"Yes." She signed my progress report and handed it back to me without making eye contact in a "now get out of my sight" gesture. I walked away triumphant. I didn't get yelled at, and I didn't get punished. I didn't really understand what being black and female had to do with it but I was just happy to get away

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unscathed. I'd never forget the conversation though, there was a sadness and a heaviness to it that told me it was serious and if she'd had a similar one with my little sister at any point it didn't take.

Two days later the principle came into my math class and called my name. Immediately other students oohed and stared wondering what kind of trouble I had gotten into. I was wondering too. When I got into the hall he or she (we had high turnover with principles in my early years) explained that I had been moved to a different class. This class was across the hall taught by a young teacher whom I'll call Ms. K. It was Honors Geometry. I stood in the hall like an idiot thinking, "I'm failing regular math, and you're putting me in honors geometry?" But I went quietly. I didn't need to be introduced to the class as we've all been together since kindergarten but the teacher introduced herself to me and I immediately liked her. When she reached the end of the lesson she looked around the classroom and said, "capisce?" and the entire class with the exception of myself responded, "capisce." I couldn't respond because I didn't yet know what the word "capisce" meant. I looked it up when I got home and the very next day my first true test came, again Ms. K looked around the room and said, "capisce" and while the rest of the class responded in kind I said, "no." Ms. K's face lit into

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a megawatt smile. She asked me where I was having trouble and I told her, she proceeded to explain it to me again, and I could tell by the expression on some of my classmates' faces they were grateful someone had the balls to say, "no, I do not understand." I aced the class. My performance in Honors Geometry put me back on the radar of the school counselor who already knew I could read at a high level but was unsure about my math skills. I was put into the Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) Program and would remain in honors classes throughout college. GATE absolutely changed my life for the better and I owe my mom for this one too. She never mentioned it but she must have called and raised some sort of hell to get my class changed so abruptly. The school's administration had had about enough of her.

Unlike me, my little sister switched schools a lot. She went from public to private schools and back. From uniforms to a relaxed dress code. I stayed at the same school for seven years and during that time [REDACTED] went to at least three different ones. I got the feeling that mom was searching for a school that "fit" my sister. Almost as if she needed to be catered to. I would not be surprised if this was the case. [REDACTED] was the type of child that everyone fawned over. She was a big eyed baby with a lot of hair, I used to tease her for how hairy she was

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and when we would act out our favorite movies she was relegated to animal parts, like Abu and Raja in Aladdin. Our Korean baby sitter Susie didn't even try to hide the fact that [REDACTED] was her love child. My "grandfather" Fred Smith also was more concerned about [REDACTED]'s participation in sports than he was about mine. I remember standing in the living room of his house proud of my performance at a summer track meet expecting to be congratulated instead I spent the time answering questions about why [REDACTED] didn't perform well.

Parents aren't supposed to make it known that they have a favorite child. But my mom didn't hide the fact that [REDACTED] was hers. My dad treated us equally. But to my mother [REDACTED] could do no wrong. Once in the car, my mom turned to face me from the passenger seat. I had apparently forgotten to do something she asked me to do. She said, "your sister would never do that to me."

Another time, I left my sister in the house and came out to the car because we were leaving. My mom asked where my sister was, I said, "she's still in the house." My mom looked at me through the rear view mirror and said, "you don't give a damn about your sister do you." It wasn't a question and I was in shock from her use of the word "damn" because I had just been made aware a few

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days before that that was a curse word. The tiny seed of resentment for my younger sister had already been planted at her birth but these disparaging comments by my mother watered that seed and over time it began to mature and grow.

As I got older the tension between the three of us increased. Part of me wants to believe my little sister didn't know what she was doing, that she just wanted to soak up all the love she could get and just did not or could not fathom the consequences that throwing me under the bus to get it would have on me and our sibling relationship. [REDACTED] rarely cleaned her room, and my mother had a really inconsiderate habit of going into our rooms and dumping everything that was out of place or disorderly into a massive pile right in front of our beds so we couldn't miss it. This irritated me. It would look as though she took her arm and side swiped everything off the dresser, the bookshelf, any unfolded laundry, shoes, and trash right into the center of the room. I always felt violated, [REDACTED] shrugged her shoulders. I would set off immediately to organize a mess I did not make while my sister would have no problem stepping over the pile for days until she was good and ready to clean. It was during one of these "clean your room" tantrums my mom threw that she discovered an impressive collection of empty Grey Goose Vodka bottles in my sister's closet.

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██████████ was confronted by both parents, Jo Ann and silent Bob. She claimed that she had a friend who's father was an alcoholic. This friend, brought the bottles to school to keep them from her father, and ██████████ brought the bottles home. When asked why all of the bottles were empty, ██████████ answered nonplussed.

"Because we dumped them" They accepted this answer. There must have been some follow up to this barely believable story because the next time she was confronted she said, "look, I'm only trying to be like my big sister."

I nearly got whiplash from the shock of that comment. *WHAT?* I'd never even smelled alcohol, except for a hint on my father's breath once in a while, so tossing back several bottles of Grey Goose was not what I was about at all! But my mother ate this up more readily than ██████████'s original story as if to say, "yes, yes. Now it all makes sense." But it didn't and instead of ██████████ being held accountable for her own poor choices and stupid actions I was.

After breaking her femur during a high school long jump competition ██████████ was able to salvage her high school career enough to be offered a scholarship to Purdue University. The

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coach was banking on [REDACTED] being a lot like me. On [REDACTED]'s break from school to get the screws removed from her leg we got some shocking news. After getting the results of her blood work the doctor informed us that [REDACTED] couldn't have the procedure done because she was [REDACTED]. A family meeting was called instantly and held right there in the hospital.

[REDACTED] wasn't invited.

In one of hospital's conference rooms I sat at the head of a large oval table observing my parents in a huddle on the opposite side. My mom had hatched a plan to send her to Alabama where people wouldn't have to come face to face with a [REDACTED] [REDACTED] or her failure to raise a proper daughter. I don't know how she would have explained [REDACTED]'s reappearance with a newborn in tow though. But she probably hadn't thought that far ahead, hell the plan she came up with wasn't that well thought out either. My dad was almost paralyzed into silence he was only adamant that she finish school. He cared most about that. I wasn't sure if he was thinking about her participation in track or if he was thinking about her degree, but in situations like this a scholarship can easily disappear. I'm not even sure he realized that there was an actual baby in this equation. I could almost see his brain working through the

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difficult questions about what this would do to her track career. I sat in disbelief as my parents attempted to make a life-changing decision for their adult daughter.

Then it hit me.

The week before, [REDACTED] called and asked me what I would do if I found out I was [REDACTED]. I told her, I'd probably have the baby considering I was financially stable, I was making \$80,000 a year. I told her if I got an [REDACTED] it would be for selfish reasons and that if it meant that much to me not to get [REDACTED] I wouldn't have been so careless about lack of protection or contraceptives. She listened to my spiel and said, "I'd just have an [REDACTED]." To which I said, "that's absolutely your choice you're in college and can barely take care of yourself" and she changed the subject to something else and we ended the call.

The night of the call with my sister I had a dream that I was going to the convenient store near my apartment in Los Angeles where I lived at the time and the place got held up by gang members. They let some of the store's patrons go but I was forced to my knees and the unmistakable cold steel barrel of a gun was pressed to the base of my skull. The masked gangster

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pulled the trigger. I awoke to chaos, I couldn't find my way out of my satin sheets. I fell out of my bed, the impact rocked me. I was devastated. The dream felt too real and I was afraid. I immediately went online to delta.com and purchased an award ticket home.

Back in the hospital conference room I was seething. *Mother fucker* I thought as I watched my parents from across the table. *This bitch already knew she was [REDACTED], and was going to try to have surgery under anesthesia today?* I was so angry at myself for not seeing through her "hypothetically speaking" bullshit, and at her that I just came out with it.

"She's not going to have this [REDACTED]"

"What do you mean?"

"[REDACTED] is going to choose to have an [REDACTED]" I told them about the bullshit hypothetical conversation we had the week before. My parents quickly got up from the table and rushed back to [REDACTED]'s room.

[REDACTED] looked frightened.

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Robert and Jo Ann crowded near her head and were asking her what she wanted to do, she was staring at everything but them, maybe she had silent tears falling down her face, I couldn't be sure. I stayed in the doorway. ██████ said nothing. So I spoke up for her.

"I already told them you wanted to have an ██████, so go ahead and tell them for yourself." ██████ exhaled a sigh of immense relief and she did, she told them. And for the first time in hours she looked peaceful.

*You're welcome bitch.* I thought.

Later that night when we returned home from the hospital my parents called me into their room. I did not know what to expect. The day had already been unpredictable. They were lying in their four poster bed upright so they could watch television comfortably. I stood in the door and took one tentative step inside.

"This is your fault you know" my mom said. My first reaction was to look at my father to see if he was as shocked as I was at what she just said. He wasn't. He was being silent Bob again. I felt my knees buckle and I doubled over as if I'd been punched

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in the gut. I couldn't even muster up the words to ask how any of this could be my fault. But Jo Ann must have read my mind because she said, "you should have been a better role model." I was on my knees at this point with tears welling in my eyes. It crossed my mind that this was the same position I was in in my horrifying dream the night before. On my knees right before they killed me.

I have never had an [REDACTED].

I have never

I have never been [REDACTED].

The next morning my dad asked if I could extend my stay to ride with him to Lafayette to drop [REDACTED] back off at school. He said he couldn't bear to be in the car with her alone. I did. I returned home to LA only to fly back to Indiana a few days later, my parents had refused to pay for and transport [REDACTED] to the clinic. With my own money I bought an airline ticket, rented a car, paid for a hotel room, and covered the cost of an [REDACTED]. I sat in the waiting room wondering how, with all of the amazing things I had accomplished in my short twenty one years on this planet, I was responsible for any of this.

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My sister and I were "close" in the sense that we were only two and a half years apart and that we were the only kids at our church. "Church" was held in a nondescript building with a small sign hanging in front that said, "Church in Elyria" and a banner on the side of the building with 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 printed on it. Inside there was a basement that could have doubled as a dungeon, the main level was where chairs were set up in various configurations but most often into a semi circle and they faced a white dry erase board. The next level up was an apartment, and the top-fourth level was a large finished attic which we used to play and for monthly banquets we called "love feasts." I was born into this setup so I didn't think anything was strange about it, at first.

We had our own translation of the bible called "The Lord's Recovery" Version. It was published by a company called Living Stream out of Anaheim, California. This company published a lot of literature, gospel tracts, and books all of them written by the same person; a Chinese man who called himself Witness Lee. Some of the older writings were by Watchman Nee but we didn't come across those often.

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Periodically, there would be conferences held in Anaheim and people all over the world would come to hear Witness Lee speak. If you were located elsewhere the Church in Anaheim would produce videotapes of the conference and we could watch them later. These conferences were a big deal and sometimes we went to the Church in Cleveland where there were hundreds of church members, or sometimes we invited churches from neighboring cities, Lorain, North Ridgeville, etc. to come to our meeting hall and we'd watch the tapes together.

The television would be set up in front of the white board. There were name tags, assigned seats, and reading materials. This was serious business. I was always excited around this time because it usually meant we got to see other people which also meant that there could be other children. I never paid attention to what the barely understandable ancient looking Chinese man was saying.

When there weren't conferences taking place you were expected to read and digest the Morning Revival, a daily devotional also scribed by Witness Lee. In the "Lord's Table Meeting" (or communion service for other churchgoers) on Sunday, you had the opportunity to share your insights, or testimony, with everyone else. It was believed that everyone had a testimony and

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therefore there were no ministers or preachers. The closet we had to clergy was a group of "elders" who helped keep everything in order. My dad was one of them.

The Church in Anaheim is what we considered the headquarters of this "Lord's Recovery" movement. The principle idea was that the Lord was out to "recovery" what had been lost since the fall of man. Churches in other cities are referred to as local churches and can only take the name of that city. No other name is allowed. Denominations were considered divisive and against the heart of Jesus in his words to Peter to "build his church"

Additionally, in Anaheim they hold what known as a Full-Time Training, it's where people who feel called to go to be "fully trained" into what the Lord's Recovery means and how to live that life. You study the word of God, but you also studied Witness Lee's interpretation of the world of God. After you "graduate" from the full-time training you are sent out to serve. You become a "serving one" in a local church and you begin the process of actively "recovering" people to the Lord.

From the Full Time Training in Anaheim Website:

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The Full-time Training in Anaheim (FTTA), a two year post-graduate program, draws Christians from diverse nationalities and backgrounds to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Designed upon the four pillars of truth, life, gospel, and service, the FTTA recognizes that Christians require training to experience and enjoy the Lord's riches in full. This Training provides a unique atmosphere for producing vital, functioning, and overcoming members of the Body of Christ for the fulfillment of God's eternal purpose.

For the most part I enjoyed my church family in Elyria. There was a lovely woman named Sister Sarah who lived in the apartment on the third level who embraced me with a love that I thought was only reserved for women and their biological offspring. Sister Sarah allowed me to drive her car in parking lots, sitting on her lap steering while she pressed the pedals. While babysitting my sister, cousin, and I she gave us the "Talk" Looking back, we were probably too young for that conversation but I think Sister Sarah knew that our cousin was "fast" and needed this talk to happen and soon. The book was titled, "It's Perfectly Normal" and what I remember most were the imperfect bodies of the cartoon characters depicting sexual organs, and positions. My cousin Jasmine asked before the lesson was over what happens if you were to fart during sex. After hysterical

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laughter for what seemed like several minutes Sister Sarah cleared her throat shrugged her shoulders and said, "it happens." Years later I would reflect on her candid way of speaking to us as equals and wish I could have that with my own mother.

Homer and Lillian Chambers were the oldest couple in attendance at the Church in Elyria. They never hesitated to make that known either. Honestly, at the time they were only in their 60s and they carried on as if death was waiting for them in the parking lot. Lillian utilized an oxygen tank perhaps for COPD but her husband Homer was in good shape. They had a pretty large family, none of them lived nearby but would visit the church when they were in town. Sonja Burnett was their granddaughter who was a biracial beauty. I was constantly in awe of her hair and her flawless skin and I looked forward to her visits. She was just hip in a way I was not. Would never be.

Brother Bill and Jim were older "brothers" and also had various administrative duties. Jim Jaudon was a good man, he lived in a nice-sized country themed house in Amherst and had tons of land, we had some great bonfires and sing alongs on his property. He even took the time to build my baby doll a wooden cradle. I loved him. And although his daughters were older and his wife

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seemingly always just out of reach I loved being around them. Bill was a strange yet benevolent hearted character who felt things so deeply and intensely that he was constantly free-styling additional verses to songs well after the hymn was complete. They were always off-key and off-pitch and if he started to cry it was a pretty safe bet that others would be brought to tears as well trying to stifle the inappropriate occurrence of laughter in church. His best lyrical performance was this gem:

I see

A rainbow

'round the throne

I see

A rainbow

'round the throne

Multiply those lines by a few dozen and Bill's song was forever etched into my memory.

My mother's job was to make the "bread" essentially what other churches refer to as the communion wafer. Sometimes she would

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make it at home in our oven, other times she would leave early and join other sisters to pray, fellowship, and make the bread. This was apparently a big deal, a process for which one should be honored to partake in. I used to watch her make it but once is enough, nothing miraculous takes place, and it isn't exactly bursting with flavor. I never thought to ask who taught my mother how to make it though. Hmm.

I had enough common sense to know that even though this was the church I was born into that this was most likely not something the rest of society would subscribe to. I refused to invite friends to church and in my far reaching mind I also knew that it would be nearly impossible to find a boyfriend that would not think I was weird for this. I know right? Priorities.

I did end up bringing a boyfriend to one of these "services" but not by choice. I had committed several cardinal sins at that time: [REDACTED]. We acknowledge that the Jews are God's chosen people they just can't be "chosen" as partners. Almost immediately my parents went into missionary proselytization mode wanting to 1) force us to city hall to wed so we were no longer living in sin 2) get him to say the words, "Oh Lord Jesus" because if he did that

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(even with trickery involved) his soul would be saved and we could stay together. You know, equally yolked.

There were a couple issues with this conversion plan: 1) we only lived together for financial reasons, no that's untrue. I only allowed him to live with me because his parents gave him \$1000 dollars a month for every month he remained unemployed and I stupidly thought and expected that at least some of that money would go toward the rent. 2) neither one of us wanted to marry the other. He was still carrying on a host of online relationships and I couldn't help but to view him as unemployed excess baggage that I couldn't wait to drop. But neither of us voiced these sentiments out loud. Unfortunately, we were still "together" when my parents came to Florida for a visit and guilted us into going to church with them.

The Church in Orlando was almost exactly like the Church in Elyria with a mirror image cast of characters of the ones in my hometown. Only the Church in Orlando was more ethnically diverse. We were late, and the meeting had already started when we took our seats in the second row. There were only three rows anyway the room was the size of a typical home's family room so you couldn't go unnoticed if you'd had Harry Potter's cloak of invisibility. My mom obnoxiously passed a hymnal to God's Chosen

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One, and passed one to me. As we sang, I saw in my sneaky sideways glances that God's boy was completely uncomfortable and disgusted with the lyrics. It was laughable, only because I was too. We sat through a half dozen songs and several testimonies from "saints" that had heard from the Lord earlier in the week through their study and fellowship of Witness Lee's materials.

We didn't talk about it when we got back to our apartment. Instead he popped in a P90x dvd, and I went to a quiet corner and continued reading, "Against the Stream" by Noah Levine a rebellious manifesto on buddhism. I chuckled to myself that day, A Jew and a Buddhist in the house of the Lord and the walls did not come crumbling down. Yet another bullet hole to the head of Living Stream Ministry philosophy I'd say.

By the time I left home I knew I didn't want to be a part of the "Lord's Recovery" movement anymore. The people seemed simultaneously nice but disingenuous like robots who only had the thoughts inputted by their designer who was, in my humble opinion, not Jesus Christ but Witness Lee. All this talk about not worshipping any other God's and the whole damn movement revolved around this one guy who decided his interpretation of the bible was more accurate than anyone else's. Whatever. Jesus is probably as turned off as I am. The reason I could not easily

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break away is because each there is a local "Lord's Recovery" church in almost every city. My parents would call ahead and inform the elders I was coming, for school, to train, to live, etc. The elders of that locality would choose a family who would "adopt" me and make sure I get to church, read the morning revival, come to small group meetings, etc. This was the case in Knoxville, Tennessee. I loved the family though, they were actually really nice and they took care of another member of the University of Tennessee's track team Stephen Harris, and though I thought he was a little strange I was comforted by his presence at the church. Eventually, my study, training, and competition schedule got to be too much and I stopped attending meetings regularly. Dear God, the barrage of calls, messages, and texts you get when you start missing meetings is unreal. I thought Catholics and Jewish Mothers had a lock on guilt- miss one of these meetings and watch what happens.

I moved to Los Angeles on short notice but it was more than enough time for my parents to make a similar phone call to the elders there. I met the Wises' a lovely interracial family that lived in Westwood, walking distance from my condo and the track at UCLA where I was training. I loved Ruth. She was everything I could want in a friend and more, and sometimes when we were alone I thought I could see doubt in her eyes too. Just seeing that made me drop my guard with her. I made other acquaintances

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but they were of the robot variety. There was one person, a Korean young woman named Joo Joo that I grew to like for her smile, innocence, and the size of her heart. She was considered what was called "a serving one." There job is to guide other members of the church into the life of an overcomer. Putting worldly things aside and living for the Lord completely. We started to spend a lot of time together and I finally invited her to my condo. She was enamored by my 60 inch television. So much so that she stayed for hours flipping through channels and watching movies. I was pleased at how happy she was and how much fun she was having. When she got up to leave she made me swear not to tell anyone she watched television. It wasn't allowed in the Recovery. I promised not to tell, but my heart sank for her. Okay, there is a lot of junk on television but giving people strict rules to live by actually is a distraction from the life you want them to live and enjoy. Joo Joo kept coming back. I made it my personal mission to expose her to the non-sinful yet worldly pleasures of the world by taking her to an arcade. You should have seen her! We played like children and again when it was time to leave she swore me to secrecy. Finally, something or someone must have gotten to Joo Joo she didn't want to meet me at my condo or at the arcade anymore so we met on campus where we ate in the student union. She had a morning revival, a bible, and her cell phone on the table in front of her.

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"What's up Joo, how have you been?"

"I've been go—hold on I need to take this" She snatched up her cell phone hit accept and said hello. Whoever was on the other line sounded like they were barking a long to-do list at her. She just silently shook her head occasionally saying "ok" or "yes." I wasn't really listening until she started to initiate her goodbye sequence.

Everyone has one, it goes something like this, "Well look..." or "Ok Cool so how about..." Something about the pitch in the voice elevates and you start trying to wrap up the conversation. Joo Joo had just used a variation of one of these when she said, "I'll take care of it as soon as I'm done with this appointment." She hung up her phone.

"Appointment? I thought we were having lunch?"

"We are but we also have to go over the reading from today's Morning Watch."

"We *have* to? Says who?"

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"I'm a 'serving one' it's my job to guide you to a stronger spiritual life and away from worldly things."

"Dude, you sneak and watch tv at my house."

"shhh..."

"You know what, I'm not your appointment, I thought we were friends, and I thought this was lunch." There was nothing much said after that. To her credit she didn't try to push any literature on me, but I was upset. Really upset.

Shortly after Joo Joo got word that her father in Korea was sick, so she went back. Her visa application says that she is a full-time "Christian Worker" and because of this she was detained there and I never saw her again.

I miss Ruth, Donny, Nathan, and Christy they helped me feel welcome in a city where every man or woman is out for themselves, to be the next discovered actress or model, to strike it rich. To become someone better and different than themselves. They were real to me, and I didn't get to thank them properly. So here it is. Thank you Wise family for embracing me and my flaws, for not trying to change me, but for loving me.

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You unknowingly helped me survive a chapter in my life that nearly destroyed me.

I wasn't always a contrarian Christian. Obviously. I was baptized twice. Once at the YMCA swimming pool when I was about seven or eight. I only vaguely knew what it meant and was really there for the pool time and the cake. The second time came when I was fully engulfed in the Church in Los Angeles. I was convinced due to the lack of success in my career, love, and life that I was doing life wrong and that maybe I needed to start again with a clean slate. So I was baptized in an overcrowded apartment bathtub with dozens of people crammed into the hallway hands raised, showering me with blessings and prayers that I would "go forth into the world a new creation." Some of my friends were in tears, I teared up too but only because my mascara wasn't waterproof and ran into my eyes after I was dunked. There was also cake.

My first meaningful relationship in college was with an atheist. I was baffled. I just could not believe I could actually like an atheist. *How could you not believe in God I thought. How could you live with yourself? Who do you turn to when you're in trouble?* I was intrigued, I had no understanding how a person could navigate through life without having something divine to

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account for every good and bad thing that happened to you. In the end he was a normal-ish person. Not anymore immoral than the rest of us. I was at his apartment when my mom called. I almost didn't answer. I almost always never answer them on the first attempt. They are never pleasant conversations. They are usually interrogations, accounting briefs, scoldings, sometimes bible studies, but rarely ever "hey I was thinking about you and wanted to see how you were doing!" That was my dad's job and those calls with him typically lasted less than five minutes. I don't fault him for that though I hate being on the phone too. I was in an exceptionally good mood this day so I picked up the phone on the third ring.

"Hello"

*"Hi T." Hmm. She's calling me "T" this might be a pleasant call after all. I thought.*

"Hi Mom. What's Up?" I don't remember what she said, or what she said she was calling for because she then asked what I was doing and I told her I was at my "friends" house. God forbid he hear me refer to him as "my boyfriend" within earshot or he'd sit me down and give me that "let's not label this" conversation that

leaves everybody feeling uncomfortable. But not more uncomfortable with what happened next though.

"Are you sleeping with him?"

"WHAT? Mom? No." This was a knee jerk response. I mean she wasn't even the one who gave me my first sex talk and the only reason she did give me the "talk" again was because she found out some other woman beat her to it. So yes, I was subjected to that awkward conversation twice, my mom even used the same book. I located it and checked it out for her from the library. I wouldn't even give my mother and A for effort for that one.

"You know you can talk to me about anything right? I'm your mother, who will you talk to if not me?" she continued. *Plenty of people* I thought. I had to stifle a laugh, who did she think she was fooling? I hadn't talked to her about anything since that fated dinner my freshman year of high school now suddenly she's my BFF?

I hung up the phone, but I felt bad. I wasn't ashamed of my "relationship" but I had lied about it and I didn't like the way the lie made me feel. I did not like that I was an adult and I

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still felt the need to lie in order to avoid the wrath of mom.  
So I called her back.

"Hi T."

"Hi. When you asked me earlier if I was sleeping with him, I  
said "no". That was a lie." I said.

"You are having sex." It wasn't a question it was a statement.

"Yes" I confirmed.

"Me and your dad will talk to you later." Her voice had turned  
ice cold and she hung up the phone. *So much for being able to  
talk to you about anything* I thought.

My parents were in Knoxville, Tennessee the next afternoon. They  
came to take my Saturn back to Ohio, to tell me to my face that  
I was being cut off financially, and to meet this boy with whom  
I had been sinning with.

He was a good sport, for a while. My parents peppered him with  
questions about his upbringing, his parents, his schooling, and  
most importantly his religious beliefs. When the conversation  
got to the part where he confessed his atheism my mom began to

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call on the Lord loudly, as if she were in the presence of a demon that needed to be exercised. A laugh escaped his lips which only made things worse and seeing that he was under her skin he drove his atheist apologetic reasoning home like the final nails in the coffin. My dad had to half carry my mom to the car, he gave me a look that betrayed the sadness in his eyes and the left. Mom in the Chrysler, Dad in my Saturn.

The silence in the apartment after they left was deafening. And the all too amused expression on my "friend's" face was making me sick from embarrassment. So I called my little sister to talk through the shock of it all.

She said she couldn't talk. She was busy having a house party with at least a dozen friends in the Jacuzzi tub built into the back patio.

My parents were so worried about what their adult daughter (me) was doing in her free time away at college that they did not even notice the wild child thriving under their roof. It's no wonder then why when the opportunity came to break from it all I hit the ground running.