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Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles: An autoethnographic study of a mother-daughter relationship experienced through a wounded body

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

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Preface

Hello, reader! I am so excited for you to be reading my autoethnography. I wonder why you are reading it—maybe you're my committee, and are getting ready for my defense. Maybe you're my friends, excited to read the finished product of something that has long been in the works. Or maybe you're another student, one that I have not met yet, using my thesis as an example for your own. No matter who you are though, or why you are here, I am so happy that you are! I am thrilled to be able to share a bit of my life with you—however interesting or uninteresting you may find it.

Before we delve into the deep stuff, I would like to take a moment to introduce myself to you. My name is Kathleen Smith, as I am sure you already know. I am named after my great-grandmother (spoiler alert: story about her incoming!), and I grew up in a very religious, traditional, homeschooling Catholic home. What does this mean, exactly?

Well, by traditional, I mean that the roles that my parents played and that I grew up in were very stereotypical male and female roles. My father was the breadwinner and my mother was the home-maker. My brothers did the yardwork, my sister and I did the housework. How do I feel about that, you may wonder. Well, to be quite transparent with you, it's the way I grew up! So I feel a sort of familiarity and comfort in it, but I also acknowledge the problematic nature of traditional gender roles.

My mother was our teacher. That is to say, I was homeschooled, so she quite literally was my teacher. Our classroom was the dining room, and my father was the principal. Recess was always held outside, and could span hours in length if we were too busy playing to come back inside. I loved being homeschooled until I was older. I had so much fun being able to explore the subjects I found interesting, take time on the subjects

that were harder, and grow in myself without the constant influence of other kids. As I got older, though, my extroverted nature took over, and I started to long for more socialization and structure in my day.

In high school, I attended a very small, private, Catholic school. Now *that* experience is for another autoethnography. Let's just say, although I met many wonderful friends that I am still close to today, we are absolutely trauma-bonded from our high school experiences.

You will read much more about the role of Catholicism as I grew up, but in this preface I did want to reiterate that I still consider myself Catholic, I still believe in God, and I think that I will never *not* be able to consider those two things true for me and my identity. Many Catholics would not even *consider* me Catholic based on my belief-system, however, I will always consider myself a Catholic, even if it is just culturally. For a long time, I was very angry at religion—specifically Catholicism—and you will see many different pieces of that anger come out at different points within this thesis. But, in the spirit of Christianity, I forgive. Is Christianity perfect? Absolutely not. And in this thesis, I show many sides of organized religion that are imperfect and that have hurt me greatly. Do I still consider myself Catholic? Absolutely, and maybe this is the central hypocrisy of my life.

I hope that, after reading this thesis, you may leave with something that resonates with yourself. Is it the conflicts between my mother and I that speak to your soul? Perhaps my experiences becoming sick, and having to be taken care of. Or maybe, it's the strict role that religion played in my life. Or, it could be nothing at all—but even so, I do

hope you enjoy reading this thesis and will leave with a deeper understanding of the beautiful experience of being a daughter.

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Abstract

This thesis is an embodied autoethnography that examines my experiences of accepting and coming-to-terms with my relationship with my mother through my chronic illness. Utilizing creative vignettes and short personal stories, throughout this autoethnographic thesis project I shine light to my lived experiences as a daughter in a Catholic household, diagnosed with chronic illness in adulthood. I use narrative theorizing to understand how the stories I tell in this thesis create meaning in my relationship with my mother. Through personal narratives I explore themes of autonomy and connection within a mother-daughter relationship, illness narratives and illness as a turning point, and myself and mother as wounded storytellers.

Chapter 1: Introduction

B: What's your thesis statement? Like if you have to boil your whole thesis down to a single statement what would it be?

K: Hmmm. Well I don't really know... I mean it's about a lot of different things, isn't it?

B: It is but we want to narrow your focus. Think about it. It will be out guide
In the end, it doesn't really matter what you choose. But what you choose will then inform your analysis section.

K: I know we said it was a coming to terms story with my illness, but I feel like it's also a coming to terms with my mom... idk if you read it the same way

B: Think about it and let me know. It's nothing we have to know right now but something you should have in your pocket. Make sense?

K: Yes yes it makes a lot of sense! But what do you think?

B: I'm gonna stay quiet for this part. I want you to spend some more time with it and let me know tomorrow or Friday.

K: But I don't want to be wrong... what if i say it's one thing but it would be stronger as something else?

B: I'll ask: does coming to terms with your relationship with your mom related to coming to terms with your illness?

K: I think coming to terms with my illness helped me come to terms with my mom, actually, because she helped me so much come to terms with it and was there for me when I needed her.

Mother-Daughter Relationships

"My mom is my best friend." I said matter-of-factly one day in a class on interpersonal communication, because it was the truth. Of course she's my best friend. I tell her *everything*. I

call her when I'm upset, I call her when I'm happy. I call her when good things happen to me. I call her when bad things happen to me. I complain to her when someone bothers me. I text her when someone hurts me. That's what best friends are, right? People who tell each other everything.

I hate my mom, I wrote in a journal entry in my late teens. *She's so controlling, she always takes everyone else's side except mine, she doesn't understand me, I can't be myself around her.* I can see myself, angrily scribbling out whatever thoughts came to mind about my mother. More frequently than not, I would later go into my journals and rip out any pages where I talked negatively about her. Even keeping those sentences in a diary created too much guilt for me to handle. This is one of the rare entries that, for whatever reason, survived my page purges.

Autonomy and Connection

My mom and I's relationship has always been defined by extremes. We're either extremely close—speaking every day, or every other day, sharing our thoughts and fears with each other, venting to each other— or we're not speaking. We have a blow up fight, and go days, weeks, or months without so much as a glance or word towards each other. There have been *very* high highs, and *extremely* low lows. I was often very insecure and anxious in my relationship with my mother growing up, because I was unsure when it was going to implode again.

Now, as an adult, the sound of people's voices talking loudly and traveling through the walls and into my room causes my body to fill with anxiety. As a child and teenager, I can remember times where I thought everything was fine, heard my parents talking downstairs, and then the next thing I knew my door was being knocked on and they were coming into my room. It's hard to feel safe when you don't know if or what you have done wrong.

Even as a child, I was extremely independent. A natural extrovert to the extreme, I resented my mother's overprotective tendencies and oftentimes fought against them, pushing

boundaries and crossing lines in order to maintain my freedom, which was an important value to me. But the boundary pushing and crossing lines often put me at-odds with my mother, and labeled me as rebellious, difficult, and sometimes even unhappy or ungrateful.

At the same time, I would feel sad and many times guilty for leaving my mother, whether it be to hang out with friends or go on dates or even go to work. Very often I would text my mom after leaving the house, telling her I felt bad for going out with my friends, or visiting someone, or leaving her. Even when she would insist it was fine, I would feel a dull sadness, because I never believed that it was actually fine. I always felt guilty, like I was betraying my mother for somebody else.

Two different feelings, existing at once in my body, pulled me in opposite directions like magnets to a pole. One side urged me to live my life, explore, be my own person and learn my own way. The other side reminded me of how much my mother meant to me, how important I was to her, and how integral I was to the family as the elder daughter. Who would she have, if I were gone? Who would she watch *Gilmore Girls* with, who would she talk to about making sourdough bread and gardening? Sure, she had my father, but that's not the same as having a daughter. My dad doesn't love gardening, and he *certainly* doesn't enjoy watching *Gilmore Girls*. I can't stand the thought of my mom being lonely, of her being sad, and *especially* because of me. I don't want to disappoint her, either. She has said to me many times, and still says to me to this day, that she would rather die than me not be Catholic. Well what if I'm still Catholic, but just not as Catholic as she would like me to be? Would that still make her feel as though she wanted to die? I tried sacrificing part of my freedom so my mom could be happy, but then *I* wanted to die. And then, eventually, it implodes again, and we stop talking once more.

Illness as a Turning Point

When I first got sick, I was in one of the stages of my relationship with my mother where we weren't speaking to each other. I knew she was worried about me, I had had a phone conversation with my father a few weeks prior, and he asked if he could share the news with my mother that I was chronically ill with an aggressive form of Crohn's Disease. I needed surgery, and was likely going to end up in the emergency room a couple more times before they would be able to operate. In other words, I was very sick.

This was the longest we had gone without speaking to each other. I missed her like I had never missed someone before. Small things like grocery shopping, eating Chick-Fil-A, or watching TV while napping on the couch would end in me dissolving in tears, succumbing to the deep, dull, feeling that followed me constantly. Inside, I felt empty, and even though my life was full in so many other ways, I felt like I was broken. I felt guilty constantly, guilt because I was too stubborn to suck it up, to push my pride away and apologize even if I felt that the apology was unnecessary.

My mom texted me one day, asking me how I was doing. We started texting a little bit, every once in a while, my mom starting conversations using excuses like asking about my health or bloodwork, or something Crohn's related, before trying to continue the conversation. She tread softly, like how one would walk when they saw a deer they didn't want to scare. Slowly, slowly, slow-motion movements, don't speak too loud or you'll scare her.

Ultimately, though, my chronic illness diagnosis was the turning point in my relationship with my mother. If I did not get sick, I most likely would not be talking to her still. Being diagnosed with Crohn's Disease was the bridge that she and I both needed in order to cross the chasm that had been created through years of digging. We needed something magnanimous enough that we could overtake years of resentment, hurt, and cycles of fighting— a reset button.

Being sick gave my mother the ability to learn how to take care of me and show up for me in the ways that I needed her to. And being sick gave me the permission to let her care for me, and helped to rebuild the trust that had been lost after childhood. In that way, although getting diagnosed with a chronic illness was not ideal, we were able to use it to start our healing process that has ultimately led to a healthier, more balanced approach to our relationship as mother and daughter.

Restrictions on Mother-Daughter Relationships Within Catholicism

Although I am a daughter of my mother, I grew up a daughter of God first. Being situated within a traditionally Catholic family put certain restrictions on my mother and I's relationship that secular mother-daughter relationships do not have. Firstly, a woman's role in the Catholic Church takes the back seat in many areas— and the family unit, as described by Saint Augustine as the domestic church, mimics those roles. A man is firstly the breadwinner for his family, and a woman is his “vice-principal” as my mother would call herself. As someone who embodies a more gregarious, confrontational (yes, sometimes bossy!) personality type, my mother and I were often at odds with each other. We had fundamental disagreements over how women should be viewed and treated within the Catholic faith, which was one barrier that caused many arguments and feelings of being misunderstood on both sides.

Another restriction Catholicism put on the relationship with my mother and I was the way they taught the fourth commandment— honor thy mother and father. The fourth commandment was not simply a suggestion, but gives parents full authority over their children, even into adulthood— and if children do not respect their parents, it's a sin. This teaching, in my household, was often used as an excuse or reasoning to punish or silence me, or my siblings, if my parents felt that we were being disrespectful in any way. This includes, but is not limited to, defending myself (“talking back”), disagreeing (“being argumentative”), or even vocalizing negative

emotions (“why are you so angry?”). Because of the way that this commandment is taught in our faith, there was yet another threshold that I could not cross with my mother, because of how careful I had to be when choosing my words if I disagreed with her. In fact, I would just avoid voicing any disagreement altogether.

Similarly, parents are to be respected as the head of the household, and this meant that if I got *too* close or *too* casual with my mother, there would be consequences. “I am not one of your friends on the playground, Kathleen,” is a phrase that she would say to me often, and a phrase that particularly hurt me, because I *wanted* her to be one of my friends. I wanted her to be my *best* friend, but that was yet another level in our relationship that could not be crossed, because to be friends with someone meant that you are observed as equals, and in the Catholic faith, a mother and daughter are not equals. The mother will always have respect over the daughter.

The Process

Journals and Letters

I made the mistake of looking through some old keepsakes that I store in a decorative box that says “Paris” in large, cursive letters high on the shelf in my closet. The motive was innocent enough: I was hoping to read through some diary entries that might give me a better insight into my earlier childhood and high school years. It’s research, I told myself. I didn’t pay much attention to think about if I would be ready for that part of the research or not. Especially not when my therapist had just announced his month-long summer vacation.

Mementos spilled onto my lap and I smiled. I loved reminiscing. Perhaps it helped me to keep up the lies I had told myself time and time again. My fake ID from before I was legally allowed to purchase alcohol (how did I get away with these-- they looked so fake), movie tickets from 2012 when I went to see *The Hunger Games* with my best friends from school, even my old high school planners where I wrote every single detail from every day, with parties and dances

and events added in the margins, were stuffed into the box. Notes from my classmates that I slipped in between the pages of my planners and journals fluttered down. I touched each gently, the notebook paper soft and yellow with age.

When I started reading my earlier diaries, I cringed. Middle school crushes, high school hormones, outrageous proclamations of love and loss and hate and pain -- teenage angst at its height. After getting past the initial cringe, I flipped through the pages and read and re-read situations that I now understand as traumatic. Stories of my dad wrestling me to my bed and hitting me with a soap dispenser. A poem I wrote about my mother and I's hatred for each other. Stories about standing outside abortion clinics, praying, crying. I wrote about my parents. How life wasn't fair. How I didn't do anything wrong. How all I did was defend myself. But in the very next entry, I wrote about how I needed to realize I was wrong. How I needed to overcome my pride and apologize. How my parents love me.

As I flipped the pages, scanning each one before going to the next, subtle changes marked signs of growing older: the more bubbly, open handwriting of my later high school entries, the first curse word I wrote in my diary ("bitch," I called my mom), admitting to having crushes, complaining about menstruation, and finally, an undertone of angst and complaints and frustration littering my latest entries, my junior year in high school. I frequently talked about feeling sad, confused, betrayed, hurt, and wronged by many different people in my life. I wrote about my first crush -- my best friend. I wrote that I "wasn't a lesbian, but I loved her in a different way." I wrote that I was "scared."

Then, I started reading the letters I had saved. Tons of them. An upwards of fifty to one-hundred different sized pieces of paper, lined, unlined, printer paper, small notepads, ripped receipts with notes written on the back, all of them letters from either my Grandma Smith, Nan,

or Mom. A box full of mothers. There were little notes, some not important (“Kathleen -- Please put more effort into making your bed. I am happy to see you have made it for three days in a row but I know you can make it better than that. Love, Mom”), some were left in lunch boxes, some were poetic, (“Your presence is simply clandestine. God bless, Nan”), some were letters written when we were far from each other, some when we shared the same house.

Reading these notes and journal entries was part of my method while writing my thesis. I did not use most of these items in my actual thesis– they simply helped me to situate myself in the past and think about what I wanted to write about. I only used these notes when I was writing the first chapter of narratives. My second chapter was written purely in the present.

Writing has always been a source of comfort and enjoyment for me. Even as a small child, instead of doing math problems I used to make up personalities for each number and write stories based on the equations. Five plus four equals nine, five has a crush on four, but nine is rich and four wants him. So, storytelling already came naturally to me as I began to write for my autoethnography class. When I first started the autoethnography process, I thought it would be easy because of my past in writing stories. I didn’t realize that the process of autoethnography was more than storytelling.

I thought that this paper would be about intergenerational trauma, passed from mother to daughter, and how that trauma manifested itself on my body in the form of Crohns. Easy enough, I was sure. I wrote vignettes every evening after work this past summer, stories of my mother, stories of my grandmother, stories about my childhood experiences. Then, this fall, I wrote more stories, delving into my illness experience, exploring my emotions and feelings. As I finished, and put everything together, there was one problem– my thesis was no longer about intergenerational trauma, but rather, it was about learning to live with an indelible mark that my

childhood has created on me and coming to terms with how my mother has both been the source of trauma as well as the comfort from trauma.

It perhaps would have made most sense to choose a thesis advisor who was a woman— maybe even a mother— who could add to my body of knowledge with her own experiences. However, Dr. Broderick was suggested to me by my committee member, Dr. Hobson, because, “He is interested in this work and grew up Catholic,” she told me over the phone. “I’m not sure if he’ll agree to be your chair, because he’s never met you, but it’s worth a shot.” Five minutes into my Zoom introduction with Dr. Broderick, after I offered him a sales pitch of my thesis idea, he agreed— as long as I had a therapist. “Digging into these kinds of projects can really harm someone, so I want to make sure you’re okay throughout the process,” was what he told me. I was apprehensive to work with a faculty member that I had never met before, but it turned out to be one of the best decisions I made regarding my thesis. Dr. Broderick not only grew up with a similar background but was an abundance of knowledge when it came to autoethnography. He was able to help me extract meaning from my narratives, and could understand my experiences, feelings, and emotions even without being a daughter or a mother. And although we connected on various levels, we also used the same language— autoethnography.

I have an obligation to be self-reflexive as I write my autoethnography, questioning why I am interpreting my narratives as I choose to, and inspecting the methodological choices that I make as an autoethnographer. This was most difficult when it came to how I portrayed my family. All stories and experiences are going to be woven and tangled within others. My narratives are simply one interpretation of situations in which there are multiple interpretations and meanings. With that being said, it was very hard for me to give an accurate representation of my interpretation of my stories, while also portraying my family fairly as well. I attempt to recognize throughout my thesis my own internal biases and mistakes, while also being true to my

story. However, not telling my story was never an option, even if that meant shedding light on people in a sometimes unflattering way, depicting scenes where people are at their most vulnerable, and telling stories that I'm sure we all regret happening. I always try to stay true to the characters in my story, though, and paint them in ways that redeem them as well.

Autoethnography is a beautiful and valid method to look for meaning behind experiences and make sense of them. However, it also has its dark side, the negatives that are often left out of the re-telling of the process. The nights of restless sleep, the aches in my body, the feverish feelings I felt in my head and gut. The tremors in my hands, the anxiety that overtook my body as deeply and aggressively as the Crohn's did. My weepiness, my sadness, my regression into a child, craving for my mother and for the past. Not being able to leave my bed, not being able to finish my schoolwork, having no interest in the activities I used to love. Barely being able to take my dog out to use the bathroom— sometimes letting her pee on the floor and cleaning it up the next day. I used to be an extremely clean person, now my apartment is in disarray, laundry unfolded, garbage not taken out, books strewn across my coffee table. I simply cannot care anymore for those things, I care only about getting better.

This thesis uses autoethnography as a method to understand the long and non-linear journey that is the healing process. There are two kinds of healings at play in my thesis: firstly, a healing of the relationship between me and my mother, or should I say, an acceptance of the realities of my mother's and my relationship. Secondly, the beginnings of a healing of bodily trauma. I use autoethnography to investigate the way I embody both this trauma and this healing, to show the messiness that is mother-daughter relationships, as well as the true sacrifice and love that goes along with them. I use narratives and vignettes as a way to craft my experiences as both a daughter and a wounded body. Some of these narratives and vignettes were informed by journal entries, letters, and notes written by me as a child, or to me from my mother or

grandmother. Through the reading, writing, and editing process I was able to analyze patterns and themes which helped me as I continued to write and make sense of the stories that I told. This thesis aims to address patterns of autonomy and enmeshment, maternal sacrifice and love, and how my relationship with my mother was healed through the diagnosis of a chronic illness.

Orientation:

I have divided my thesis up into six meaningful parts. Chapter one, which you just read, is an introduction to my thesis topic, a mother-daughter tale experienced through my body. Chapter two is my literature review, where I delve into mother-daughter literature, specifically about the concepts of autonomy and connection within mother-daughter relationships. In chapter two I also introduce the method I used, the theory which guided my analysis, and why I chose both. Chapters three and five are creative vignettes, while chapter four serves as an interlude between the two. Chapter six is a discussion of my vignettes, implications of the method, and areas that I have highlighted for future research. Lastly, I end my thesis with a single vignette acting as an epilogue.

In chapter three, I used creative non-fiction vignettes to highlight specific family stories from my childhood and adulthood that have impacted me. They are stories of emotional, and sometimes physical, trauma. They are experiences that have informed the relationships that I have with my family, but especially my mother. They are interpretations of past events that maybe are long forgotten by the rest of my family. And lastly, they are memories that have always lived within me, sometimes sneaking out at night when I lay in bed trying to fall asleep.

Chapter four serves as a bridge between the two chapters. I write about the last conversation that I had with my mom before going silent until after my illness diagnosis. This situates the reader in the mindset that I was in before my chronic illness diagnosis, and sets the context for chapter five.

In chapter five, I again utilize creative non-fiction vignettes to tell the story of where I am at now. What state my body is in, both physically and emotionally, and how I view myself. I am situated in the awkwardness of the in-between— learning how much of myself to give to my family, and how much of myself to protect. In this chapter, I use nature imagery to attempt to conceptualize my emotions and draw the reader closer to me. I am attempting a balancing act, how to stay true to my experiences while giving grace to my mother, allowing myself to trust while also questioning, and giving myself the permission I need to sit in the dissonance of it all.

Lastly, chapter six is a discussion of my narratives. Using narrative theorizing, I analyze the meaning behind the data and make sense of my vignettes. I go over the themes of my thesis – mother-daughter tensions of connection, illness as a turning point, and myself as a wounded body. I then delve into the implications of the method, point to areas of future research, and end my thesis with a final creative vignette that acts as an epilogue.

Chapter 2: Theory and Methodology

My advisor, Dr. Broderick, suggested that I add a vignette before delving into the literature review and explanation of it all. “The vignettes should elucidate what you're talking about for each chapter (e.g., theory method chapter should have a "theory/method" kind of vignette, even if that is just dialogue between your committee members).” Call it writer’s block, or maybe simple burnout, but I couldn’t think of one for the life of me. I seem to have forgotten every single conversation about my theory and method, or rather, I have blocked them out. Instead of writing a vignette about how I came to learn about narrative theorizing or autoethnography, I’d like to start my thesis by telling one about my mother and I.

I bought my mother a journal for her birthday one year. It was a one-line-a-day journal, because she always complained that she didn’t have the time to sit down and write pages, but that she still wanted to document her life in some way. I bought it at Anthropologie, our favorite store, after I saw her admiring it. The journal was a rich teal, a deep, saturated color, embossed in gold. A quaint little ribbon sprung out from the thin pages, pages that were thin as the bible whose pages she turns.

Months went by, and I forgot about the little one-line-a-day journal. My mother’s birthday is in November, but one sticky June afternoon, I spotted the journal on the ceiling-to-floor bookshelf in the living room. A trait that I inherited from my mother is her nosiness, and I am no better than her when it comes to invading someone’s privacy. I decided to sneak a glance. After all, it’s been months. I just wanted to see a couple entries, I wanted to see what captivated my mother’s life, what stood out to her on her days. I wondered if they were the same little details that stand out to me.

I opened the journal and flipped to the very beginning. Two entries. Of course she didn’t keep up with it—my mother loves beautiful, tangible things but is not great at using them.

Entry one. November 21st, 2018: *My beautiful first-born Kathleen gifted me with this journal for my birthday! I can't wait to keep up with it and document the days ahead!*

Entry two. November 22nd, 2018: *Productive day! I made lentil soup, baked scones, and cleared out the garden.*

Annoyed, I grabbed the journal and brought it to my mother, who was laying on the couch watching *Gilmore Girls*. “Mom! I thought you were going to start journaling! There’s only two entries!”

She laughed. “You know me, Katie Nana, I’m so bad at writing about myself! If anyone wants to remember me, it has to be you that does the writing!”

Theory

Connections of Tension

Relationships between mothers and daughters can be messy— and traumatic experiences can spark vivid and emotional memories (deAnda & Geist-Martin, 2018). These memories are some of the ones I have chosen to write about. People associate certain events with landmarks that help them accurately recall information (Zwartz & Sharman, 2013). In the case of myself and my thesis, the stories that I remember most vividly and retell are landmarked by either a pulling away or a coming towards my mother. Memories of early childhood and adolescence are also more easily able to be recalled than later memories (Janssen & Murre, 2008). Many of my stories are either from adolescence or present day— the in-between years are difficult to recall.

Memories help a person to make sense of the world (deAnda & Geist-Martin, 2018). Even though memories may not be completely accurate, they give us insight into how one might feel about a situation (Conway & Loveday, 2015, as cited in deAnda & Geist-Martin, 2018). Therefore, memories can be a useful tool in understanding how or why someone may view a situation that has happened to them. In order to make sense of family secrets and family silence,

sometimes we must write about them (Ellis, 2008). A part of growing up is to reconcile with these secrets and accept our family as who they are (Ellis, 2008). Narrating our pasts further connects us to ourselves, our cultures, families, and communities (Fivush, Habermas, Waters, & Zaman, 2011).

Cooks (2000) discusses the importance of family and how family stories shape your idea of who you are, your identity, and who you think you should be. When you reflect on these family stories, what do you do when you don't like them? When you don't want the identity placed onto you that they so nonchalantly and carelessly attached to your very being, how do you make sense of it? How do I change who I am -- who *am* I? There is a constant tension, a pulling of who I want to be, versus who my parents want me to be. I can only see myself through my mother's eyes, and I hated her for that.

Copple (2021) writes about the different ways through which mothers and daughters communicate. Specifically, she writes about the hurt she has accidentally inflicted on her daughter, the hurt she has inflicted on her mother, and vice versa. In her autoethnography, Copple (2021) highlights the interconnectivity of mothers and daughters, and how the same patterns of communication recur throughout generations. Davis (2009) similarly writes about her mixed feelings about her mother and the secrets which her mother kept from her until adulthood. Davis (2009) also writes about the guilt and confusing emotions that she feels when writing about her mother, as if she is betraying her and her secrets.

In a similar way to Davis (2009) and Copple (2021), my mother and I have hurt each other, and I feel guilt surrounding my relationship with my mother. Our mother-daughter relationship was, and is, messy. Our lives are interwoven together, my very cells containing her same mitochondria, passed from mother-to-daughter, and yet we are so different, and our differences cannot be reconciled. If only I could, I *would* reconcile them. I would very gladly

give up the being that I am to be the being she wants me to be. But that is impossible, and I simultaneously mourn the loss of the daughter she wants while I celebrate the life of the daughter I am.

Autonomy and connection are important values within the mother-daughter relationship (Smith et al., 1995). Separating from one's mother and becoming autonomous and independent is a major issue in most daughter's lifetimes, and this process can be life-long (Smith et al., 1995). Separation and boundary-drawing is a normal process in the mother-daughter relationship, but when this process is interrupted, emotional conflicts can occur between mothers and daughters (Smith et al., 1995). However, perhaps paradoxically, the more autonomy that is allowed in a mother-daughter relationship, the more intimacy and connection will grow (Smith et al., 1995).

The stories and memories that I am telling in my thesis are not to be used as "objects of scrutiny" (Etherington, 2003, pg. 18). Rather, they are a way to make sense of the trauma that a daughter can inherit from her mother— and how trauma manifested on the body can be used to heal *through* the body. These stories are not a criticism, but a retelling and analysis of how being brought up in a deeply enmeshed relationship with my mother affected the way I view myself and the world. Lastly, this thesis is an attempt at making sense of my relationships with my mother through my chronic illness journey.

Narrative Theorizing

While methodology may direct us on the guidelines, techniques, and processes by which we complete research, theory is the guiding principle that inspires us in how we interpret the experiences and epiphanies which we write about (Madison, 2005). With that in mind, narrative theory stands out as the lens through which I will look at and write about my experiences.

Narrative theory acts under the assumption that people understand experiences through drama (Scott & Hariman, 1984). Narration is an art form and a mode of expression-- humans are natural

storytellers, and symbols are created and communicated as stories (Fisher, 1984). Furthermore, storytelling is done in order to make sense of experiences and to share commonalities between people (Fisher, 1984). According to the narrative paradigm, humans view the world as a set of stories through which we are constantly creating and re-creating our lives, and through this framework we approach the world, act, and make decisions (Fisher, 1984).

I also chose this theoretical framework to guide my writing because of the importance of stories and legends within my family and religion. I make sense of intergenerational trauma through the stories that I have been told growing up. Stories about my mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, and Irish ancestors shaped my childhood. Family lore and legend were often told in hushed voices around the candle-lit living room after reciting the Rosaries. Bedtime stories consisted of books about saints and Eucharistic miracles. Stories are how we made sense of Catholicism and how traditions and practices were explained to us as children. Sometimes, stories were used to explain why we did something, such as praying certain prayers each night as a family, making sacrifices and offerings, or dressing modestly. Stories were used to evoke emotion and to explain the often strict rules by which we lived our lives

Illness Narratives

Trauma is held in the body in a variety of ways, from illness and pain to disability and addiction (Etherington, 2003). The traumatized body is a magnet for negative effects (Brennan, 2004, as cited in Richardson, 2013). When parents use a child to meet their own needs rather than the needs of their children, those children can experience confusion about their self and identity (Etherington, 2003). It is therefore important to understand how trauma can manifest itself in various ways on the body, and to recognize the signs of trauma, so that one can be aware when they have children of the cycles and patterns that may be trauma responses, and how to

avoid or change those behaviors and cycles. One of the ways that trauma can manifest is through illness.

Writing about illness using narratives helps to explain and understand the lived experience of sick people (Sakalys, 2003). Illness narration is an important way in which sick individuals can make sense of their illness, help restore their individuality and personhood, and to reclaim their experiences as an ill person (Sakalys, 2003). When individuals become seriously sick, their body can become separated from their self, it can become foreign and unrecognizable, and it becomes medicalized (Sakalys, 2003). Illness narratives restore individuals with their body and help them to cope and take control over their illness on their terms (Sakalys, 2003).

I took huge inspiration from the book *The Wounded Storyteller*, by Arthur Frank (1995), as well as other literature by Arthur Frank on the role of illness in storytelling. In *The Wounded Storyteller*, Frank examines how serious illness or injury changes the trajectory of one's life. The illness or injury is what Frank refers to as the "wound," and the wound changes the way a person perceives the world around them. Even before being diagnosed with my illness, I had to make adjustments as to how I navigated the world. Getting increasingly sicker meant staying home often, or planning out my routes so that if I had a flare-up or attack I could get home quickly. It meant not being able to make definitive plans with friends, because I never knew how I would be feeling in even an hour or two into the future. After being diagnosed, the way I perceived my experiences shifted drastically again. I had to come to terms with the news that my body was ill and I was going to lose part of myself. I had to follow a strict diet, and at the worst parts of my illness, could only stomach liquid shakes. I had to say no to lunch or dinner invitations from friends, and I had to come to terms with accepting help and loss of control.

I am caught in what Frank calls Remission Society. Remission Society is made up of people who are well, but cannot be cured, and whose disease affects their everyday life. For

example, Crohn's Disease is part of Remission Society, because it cannot be cured, and I don't even know yet if I am in remission or not. People in Remission Society fluctuate from being sick and being well. This creates a sense of uneasiness and restlessness, even anxiety, because one never knows what they will be feeling in a month, week, even a day. For myself, I was constantly worried about making plans for the future, because I never knew if I was going to feel well enough to follow through with them.

In my thesis, my mother takes on the role of caregiver for me, her grown daughter. My mother became a presence of consolation for me. Frank (2004) explains that consolation is not *only* comfort, but rather, a promise not to abandon the sick individual. My mother made her promise not to abandon me in my illness clear, as she accompanied me to doctor's appointments, created a space in her home for me to stay while recovering, kept me company in the emergency room for thirteen hours while we waited for a room, and stayed by my bedside my entire four day stay in the hospital. Care, according to Frank (2004), is "an occasion when people discover what each can be in relationship with the other," (p. 4). Frank also discusses the notion of alterity, which is a "kinship despite differences," (p. 115). Through my body's experience of illness, my mother and I experienced alterity. Our differences which had once caused massive meltdowns of our relationship every few months were now put aside as we experienced kinship with each other. I was able to experience my mom fulfilling the caregiver role that I had lacked in childhood, and my mother was able to experience being fulfilled in the caregiver role that she was unable to fully provide for me in childhood, because of our tense relationship.

Illness stories refuse to become part of the past (Frank, 1995). Rather, they are fragments of the past that constantly haunt our present (Frank, 1995). My thesis is not telling a story from the past, but rather, a re-telling and interpretation of the present, because I am constantly re-experiencing my disease in different ways throughout my life. At one time, I did not have to

hesitate when applying for jobs, my mouse hovering over the “Disability Self-Disclosure” form that each job you are applying to asks to fill out. At one time, I did not have to worry that my body could not fight a cold without antibiotics, because of immunosuppressants. At one time, I did not have to think about what would happen if my body builds up antibodies against my Humira, and it stops working.

And at one time, the process of writing did not hurt me as it did now.

“My burn out is so bad it feels just like when my Crohn’s got really bad,” I texted my advisor, Dr. Broderick, towards the end of writing this thesis. “I really can’t do this for much longer so I hope life gets better. Or is this what it really is?”

“It is 100% not what life is!!! It’s what bodies do when they are under immense stress. It’s their way of communicating to us that we are in crisis. This summer you will be able to take time and your body will heal,” he responded back to me.

My body is indeed in crisis, as I continued to write about topics I thought I had processed long ago. I realized that mostly everything had not been processed, but simply swallowed and left in me to fester. Perhaps the Crohn’s grew from it all, blooming within me like a flower in manure. Now, my writing was plucking each of these memories out of me and arranging them in a vase to display.

Method

Autoethnography

It was late March, and I was *tired*. Tired of the dreary winter days that were stubbornly lingering. Tired of the cold that hit my entire body as soon as I opened the front door. Tired of keeping up with classes and people and appearances. I was the kind of tired that permeated my whole body and wouldn’t go away no matter how much I slept. The only thing that kept me going -- that I wasn’t tired of -- was writing.

I had never heard of *autoethnography* before, but I knew what ethnography was and loved reading them. One of my favorite books was an ethnography by Elizabeth Warren Fernea called *Guest of the Sheik*, and every time I finished reading it I would question my life choices. *If I had known what ethnography was in undergrad, maybe I would've gone into a different field, like sociology or anthropology, instead of Communication Studies.* However, the Spring semester of my first year in graduate school, I took a class called Autoethnographic Methods. Although I did not yet know what autoethnography was, the class had ethnography in the name, and counted as my research class, so why not? Little did I know that that small decision would change my entire path.

Writing came easily for me when writing for that class. In the past, I would often sit and stare at my computer screen for hours while writing for research. It would take me all day just to write a couple pages of work. But not for this class. A sense of purpose and understanding flowed to the tips of my fingers as I wrote my autoethnography. I didn't feel like what I was doing was nonsensical or useless. I understood the process, I *was* the process, and me, my stories, my writing were the research-- and what is more interesting than oneself? From eleven-years-old and onward I have written. Before I knew what autoethnography was, I made sense of family secrets and trauma through journal entries, free-writing, and writing fictional stories based off of my life. I came to terms with who I was through my writing. It made sense that autoethnography was a comforting class.

Although at times I struggled, at times it was hard, and at times I did not understand, I could always find the meaning in my writing. With the help of my professor and classmates, themes, metaphors, and meaning emerged behind my writing. As the author and the researcher, as well as the subject of my writing, these themes were not only interesting, but also useful for me as I navigated the situation in my life that I was also writing about.

Autoethnography is a research method that seeks to describe, analyze, and make meaning out of personal and cultural experiences (Ellis et al., 2011). An autoethnographer writes about certain experiences or epiphanies that originate from the researcher's cultural identity (Ellis et al., 2011). However, what separates autoethnography from personal narrative is the analysis of one's experiences and the cultural insights offered. An autoethnographer has the advantage of set theoretical and methodological tools to use, and they must frame their experiences and epiphanies around these tools and past literature to make meaning out of them (Mitch Allen, 2006, as cited in Ellis et al., 2011). These personal experiences and epiphanies "illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in doing so, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders," (Ellis et al., 2011, p.276).

Autoethnographers make meaning from their experiences, rather than trying to depict exactly how life happened (Bochner, 2000). Experiences are not fact, but socially constructed dependent on interactions (Pollock, 2008). It is important then to be aware that the experience is something that must be interpreted (Denzin, 2014). Through autoethnography, we are able to write about our experiences— from our own perspective, without having to worry about how objective or subjective an event is— and then interpret those experiences in order to make meaning from them that can then be extended to others.

Through this thesis I will not be attempting to retell to the exact detail the stories from my childhood, interactions with my family, and specifics of my disease. Rather, I am interpreting situations in my life. I am not interpreting each narrative or vignette as a separate situation, but rather, I am looking at them as a whole— how these stories from childhood have informed me and who I am now.

Autoethnography must also be accessible outside of academic settings so that autoethnographers can engage with audiences that are academic as well as nonacademic (Adams

et al., 2017). Bochner (2013) writes that the “human sciences need to become more human” (p. 53). In other words, it is important that this method remains true to its roots— humans. Research is often inaccessible for a person who does not study that particular subject or who is not situated within academia, however autoethnography attempts to overcome that obstacle, allowing anyone to read and understand it.

Autoethnography is a research method by which the autoethnographer can insert all parts of themselves-- their subjectivity, experiences, and emotions. It not only is encouraged, but expected, in autoethnographic work (Bochner, 2013). As a new graduate student trying to find my place in the academic world, autoethnography resonated with me, as well as the ability to understand and also partake in it without feeling as though I need to hide my own self in the work which I write. In fact, the humanity and messiness in autoethnography is what makes it relatable to audiences.

The act of autoethnography is a reflexive and iterative experience, writing and rewriting passages and stories to gain understanding from them. For many autoethnographers, autoethnography itself is a way of being, living consciously, emotionally, and reflexively (Ellis, 2013). Autoethnography challenges how we live our lives and forces the researcher to observe and interrogate our own selves, our beliefs, and the way we think and act (Ellis, 2013). After I started writing for my autoethnography class last semester, I felt that my life and actions became increasingly intentional. I started observing myself within situations, analyzing interactions with people, and questioning why things happen the way that they do. My natural curiosity for human psychology and thought became relevant and even useful for my writing. Ellis (2013) writes that autoethnography has saved many people’s academic careers, but for me, it was the birth of one.

An important component of autoethnography is the creative, aesthetic, and performative appeal (Jorgenson, 2002). Autoethnographers are encouraged to think outside the box and are

able to express their creativity through a myriad of ways. In her novel about autoethnographic methods, Ellis (2004) writes about using thick description. Thick description means to be evocative and vulnerable, to describe the experience in a way that pulls the reader into the story so that they feel like they are entwined within it. This can be done in many different ways, from using poems, to social media posts, to journal entries. There are no boundaries or limits to creativity in autoethnography. This aspect of autoethnography is another reason why I gravitated towards it as a research method. The strict and structured methodology that is traditional to the social sciences does not reflect the messiness and disorder of humans and life.

It is important for the autoethnographer to reflect and take into consideration their positionality within their autoethnographic work. This is done through practicing reflexivity. I recognize that I am writing my autoethnography from the standpoint of a white, middle-class, chronically ill, woman. Positionality informs us of our own biases, the power in which we hold over others, and the privilege which we are born with (Madison, 2005). Autoethnographers are constantly practicing reflexivity in order to be aware of their positionality (Alexander, 2011). To do this, autoethnographers must ask themselves questions throughout the process of writing their autoethnographies, questions such as: “What is your location, positionality in the story, to the story, to the happening? What is your sense of empowerment or entrapment, agency of oppression in this situation/context? What are the power structures at play in these moments (e.g. time, place, relationships)?” (Alexander, 2011, p. 105).

There is no doubt that in this autoethnography I have divulged many family secrets that perhaps should not have seen the light of day. My first chapter of vignettes, especially, contain angry narratives of times where I felt wronged, where I felt pain, where I felt betrayal. They come from a time in my life where I felt no sense of loyalty towards my family after they had

hurt me repeatedly. I couldn't understand where they were coming from, I couldn't understand why my mother especially would say the things she has said.

Secret-keeping can become a central form of family communication (Poulos, 2018). There is a call, in these moments of trauma, sadness, betrayal, hopelessness, and grief. A call to make sense of these experiences and sensations through story (Poulos, 2018). To forget is to survive— but secrets come out eventually, no matter how much we try to hide (Poulos, 2018). They can be triggered by a smell, a sound, a glance— the way the wind runs her fingers through your hair or the simple touch of a person's head on your shoulders. No matter what, the secrets will come out. It is through the telling of these stories and family secrets that we do not forget, but rather, that we come together as a family, where we accept the secrets, we accept the messiness, we accept the betrayals and the traumas and the hurt and pain, and move forward.

So, maybe these family secrets were better left unsaid. Maybe people will read this, and they will be hurt. Maybe, maybe, maybe. But what I know for certainty, is that through telling these family secrets I have started to come to terms with the hurt and have rebuilt my relationship with my mother. Through telling these family secrets, I can see my mother as a whole being, not just fragments of sharp shards of glass that cut my heart deep. I can see her own trauma, her sadness, her happiness, her confusion, and I can see her, too, as a wounded storyteller. And perhaps the messiness, the hurt, the confusion, is all just part of the deep, unique, and intertwined connection of a mother and daughter.

Embodied Autoethnography

Embodiment is when the body is not seen as simply a *body*, or an object, but rather, the subject— an experience of the world, first-hand (Hokkanen, 2017). When researchers have multiple roles (researcher, participant, and data), embodiment gives us a window into this web of

interconnectivity between roles (Hokkanen, 2017). Embodiment allows the researcher to use their body to make sense of the data, and vice versa.

My body is offered as data in embodied autoethnography (Spry, 2009). The audience of my autoethnography sees my body not only as part of the story, but also as evidence that this story happened. Being diagnosed with an autoimmune disease such as Crohn's Disease put my body on display for doctors, nurses, medical students, family, friends, and others who now were able to inquire about some of the most private parts of my life, and body. My body, in this autoethnography, is becoming the "cultural billboard for people to read and interpret in the context of their own experience," (Spry, 2001, p. 719). Knowledge is constructed through the body— and knowledge is evocative (Spry 2009).

The body exists as both a tool and a research subject (Byczkowska-Owczarek & Jakubowska, 2018). The embodied approach to autoethnography as method focuses on the embodied experience of the subject as well as the body as a tool, a tool which gathers and creates data that go beyond words (Byczkowska-Owczarek & Jakubowska, 2018). Knowledge is created from the body and there is an emphasis on the researcher's body in embodied autoethnography, it is located at the center, and the researcher gathers their data in the body while describing their own embodied experience (Byczkowska-Owczarek & Jakubowska, 2018).

Embodied autoethnography is fitting for my thesis because I am telling a story of a turning point in my life, a discovery, a rebirth, *through* my body. My illness is felt in my body, and literal sections of my body, diseased slices, were removed halfway through my writing process of this autoethnographic thesis. I claim to have come to know through my body, and I claim to have learned through my body. I use my body as data in this autoethnography. Becoming diagnosed with a chronic illness such as Crohn's Disease means that suddenly, everyone has assumptions about your body. I have been told countless times "T.M.I." or "You

overshare,” when I speak about my experiences with Crohn’s Disease. Being diagnosed with a chronic illness that isn’t glamorous or pretty means that, suddenly, I must not speak about it. I must hide my illness experience, keep it a mystery. But, to hide my illness experience is to hide all that I have gained from it. Therefore, I use embodied autoethnography not only to claim my experience, but to (over)share it.

Chapter Three: *Domine, non sum dignus*

*Asperges me*¹ | Cleanse me

“I do hope you will be coming home for Christmas break, right Kathleen?” My mom tried to bring it up nonchalantly over the phone, but I knew she was hesitant to ask.

I don't know, will I be threatened with a gun by my brother and will my dad call me a nasty bitch this Christmas? I think spitefully to myself. “Uh. I haven't thought about it really. Do you think that's a good idea? I mean where would I sleep?”

“Oh yes, please come home! You can sleep in your sister's trundle bed. She won't mind sharing her room with you.”

“I don't know. . . I mean I have to wake up early for work and stuff. . .”

“So does she! She has to wake up early for school, I'm pretty strict with her now that she's in high school. And on Wednesdays she wakes up extra early for co-op. It'll be so fun to have all my children here for Christmas, like old times!” My mom spoke quickly, her voice an octave higher than usual. *I mean it does seem like she really wants me to come home...*

“I mean... I'll definitely think about it.... I think I can make it work. But I have to be in bed by ten, I wake up early to work, so the boys can't be super loud on their video games.”

“Don't worry. Jack doesn't even play games anymore. He's way too busy with school now. He does all this research for one of his professors in engineering. He gets paid somewhere between seventeen and twenty dollars an hour -- I can't remember -- and makes his own schedule. So he's totally busy right now with all his research.”

I sighed inwardly. “Ok. I guess I'll come home.

¹ Each heading is a prayer or beginning of a prayer taken from the Tridentine Catholic Mass with the English translation on the right. The Tridentine Rite of the Catholic Mass is held solely in Latin, hence the Latin titles.

As my car heaves across Afton mountain at 11pm on a Tuesday night, I wonder why I didn't trust my instinct and stay at school for Christmas break.

Well. Won't make that mistake next time. Except, I probably will.

It was only two days into being home for Christmas break and I was already forced to leave because of, yet again, another family altercation. *Why am I always the one forced to leave?* I wondered this to myself even though I knew that I chose to leave. It made me feel less guilty telling myself that my parents were forcing me, though.

I had a great evening with my mom and sister-- we made dinner together and watched Gilmore Girls in the living room, chatting and drinking tea until well past our bedtimes. *How could my mom turn on me so quickly after such a good evening together?*

My brother and I fought that evening. It wasn't really a fight though. He was doing the talking, and I was doing the reacting. My dad has always told me that what gets me into trouble is not my actions but how I react to situations. I'm too upset, too hysterical, too loud, too defensive. I just need to sit there and take whatever is coming at me with quiet confidence. "You catch more bees with honey, Kathleen," my dad used to say to me quite often.

I had asked my mom to tell Jack to be quieter while playing on his video games, since I had to wake up early. Lying on a spare mattress in my sister's room, which is adjacent to Jack's room, I heard him calling me a bitch to a friend on his Playstation. "Mom," I complained to her as I walked downstairs, "Jack is calling me a bitch to his friend, and saying he wishes I'd never come back."

"Well, what do you want me to do about it Kathleen? He's a grown man, I can't control his words."

I walk back upstairs, but once I get into my sister's room and hear Jack mocking the way I spoke to my mom, I lose my temper and start the reacting. "Jack, shut the fuck up. At least I'm

not a weirdo like you, and I have actual friends that hang out with me in person and not just on some stupid video game.” I double-check my sister’s door to make sure it was locked.

“Friends? You don’t have any friends, I’d rather be alone forever than have the friends that you have. And at least I’m getting a degree that’s going to make me money. You’re wasting your life getting a master’s degree at a school where you can party your way through a 4.0, I’ll be making more with my undergraduate degree than you’ll ever dream of making.” Jack says things that hurt you to your core.

My mom overhears the yelling, and, pissed off that her two eldest children had interrupted her *Murder, She Wrote* episode, she stomps upstairs, but softens her footsteps as she approaches my brother’s room. “Jack, you cannot say these things to your sister. She has a right to be here too. You need to coexist with her.” I smirk to myself, satisfied. *Finally she’s defending me.* My mom continues. “I understand you have a lot of anger towards her about what happened last year, and for good reasons too. But it’s not okay to disrupt everyone else.”

Wait. What? Anger at me, for good reasons? What is she talking about? “What are you talking about?” I demand. “Jack is being so rude for no reason, I’m just trying to sleep!”

“Kathleen, *enough* from you! Oh, I heard you say the f-word. And from my eldest? So disappointing. You’re twenty-four years old-- *act* like it!”

I fume. There will be no changing my mom. No getting her to see me, *me*, not just as her daughter, but as a *human*. I decide to leave, and announce it to her, loudly. This causes my father to come upstairs. He tries to open my sister’s door, which I am safely barricaded behind, but finding it locked, yells at me to open it. I don’t until I’ve finished packing. “I’m going back to Harrisonburg,” I say matter-of-factly as I dramatically swing the door open.

“GOOD. DON’T LET THE DOOR HIT YOU ON THE WAY OUT. ALWAYS A PROBLEM WITH YOU. ALWAYS. It can NEVER just be a good night.”

As I am walking out the door, my two other siblings, Daniel, a junior in college, and Sarah, a high school sophomore, help me bring my bags out. Sarah cries, and asks me to visit her. Daniel hugs me goodbye. My dad follows behind at a distance.

“Are you proud of yourself Kathleen? Look at what you’ve caused!”

“Why don’t you take a look at your son first!” I scream as I get in the car.

“That -- fucking -- mouth.” He takes his shoes off and throws them at me, aiming for my head. One hits my car, the other hits my arm. As I drive away, I watch him tip-toe carefully in his socks to go retrieve his shoes.

It was a damp night, and the rain pattered soothingly on my windshield. My dog, Aoife, was curled in the passenger seat. Her nose tucked under her chest, she rested, but looked up at me, her eyes stretching so that the whites showed underneath. “It’s just you and me, baby. A girl’s trip,” I said out loud, the sound of my voice breaking the rhythmic pattern of the rain.

My tears had dried, and in their place was a thin crust of salt that made a path from the corners of my eyes to the bottom of my chin. I blinked. *How does a mom say these things to their daughter? About their daughter? And why does Dad have to scream at me? Why is he always defending Jack? What kind of father thinks to take the shoes off his feet and throw them at his daughter as she’s trying to leave?*

My phone rings. It’s my mom, and I answer.

“Kathleen, don’t even bother saying anything. It takes two people to fight. You’ve disappointed me.”

“Jack is out of control. This is ridiculous. He goes ballistic for absolutely no reason.”

“I’m not calling you to sit here and listen to you blame my son, your brother, for your fights. You guys clearly cannot coexist, so I think it’s best you don’t come here when he’s around.” My heart overflows with hurt.

“Fine by me. I don’t want to be anywhere near him. I don’t want to be in the same room as him.”

“And he feels the same about you.” There’s a pause. I don’t respond, because I’m pissed. My mom lowers her voice and speaks gently now. “But, I want you here for Christmas... Can you still come? Jack will be in his room the whole time anyways.”

“No.”

“Please? Come, for me? I want to see all my children on Christmas, and I want you to come to midnight Mass with us.”

“No. I don’t want to.”

My mom tries to guilt me one more time. “Who knows how many more Christmases we have together, Kathleen. Come, please.”

“I’ll think about it.” *Damnit, Kathleen. Be strong.*

“Good. I love you.”

“Love you too. Goodnight.” I hang up and cry more.

I cry because I feel immeasurably guilty. I am seen as the one perpetuating conflict by not coming over for Christmas. I’m always causing problems and then disappointing my mom, causing her sadness. I don’t think of my dad-- as much as I grieve the loss of our relationship, it will never run as deep as the one between a mother and her eldest child, her daughter. The worst part is that I *want* my mom to be my best friend, but she isn’t, and she never will be. My mom knows so much about me, but can *never* know everything. She scares me. I disagree with her about a lot of big things, and she will never know that because I am scared of her. But I still love her to death. Even after the things that she has said to me in the past, how she has and will continue to side with my abusive, narcissistic, and psychopathic brother again and again, I make excuses for her because I love her.

No matter how many times people tell you things, sometimes you just have to experience them for yourself. Over. And over. And over. Again. But this time it was different. I *knew*. I *knew* that I wasn't in the wrong this time. I *knew* that a father shouldn't throw his shoes at his daughter. I *knew* that a brother shouldn't exploit his sister's deepest insecurities and fears. I *knew* that a mother should defend her daughter when someone is saying things to her like what my dad and brother said to me. I *knew* that I couldn't keep doing this.

One day, as a teenager, I did something that angered my mom. I had talked back to her, complaining of the unfairness of the chores which we were given. My mother slapped me hard across the face and called me ungrateful. I did not react with so much as a flinch. She slapped me again, harder this time, and spoke harsher words that cut me to my soul. Still, I did not protest or argue. This happened a few more times before she finally exclaimed, with disgust, "I wish you were never born." The tears slipped out, and I ran upstairs.

The next morning, my mother confronted me in my bedroom. "I was just so mad that you weren't reacting to me that I couldn't stop. You made me say those things -- if you had just reacted like a normal human being I wouldn't have lost my temper like that."

I could not control my mother's reactions to things, to her blaming me, to her punishments. I learned that I could not change the way my family system was set up. It was not until over a decade later, driving over a mountain in the middle of the night, that I would learn that I am not bad. I am just not who my parents want me to be. I am not my mother's child.

It was time for me to stop feeling guilty. It was time for me to assert myself. I am Kathleen Smith, and I am not going to go back home for Christmas. I will not forgive my family this time.

Confiteor | I confess

An elbow in the chest was all it took for me to start playing more aggressively. I had been casual, taking it easy, jogging around the field, but an elbow into a soft part of my body was like spurs jolting a horse from a lazy trot to a high-strung canter. I ran down the field as fast as I could, weaving in and out of other players as I chased the ball down. It was going to be a good game.

It was the fall, and I hadn't had a good opportunity to play in a while, since summer sports ended a few months prior but soccer doesn't start until Spring for girls. After Mass every Sunday, the kids from the church get together to play a game of soccer. Even one of the younger priests joins in some Sundays.

Saint Joseph's is a Tridentine Catholic Church, meaning they adhere to the traditional, pre-Vatican II liturgy². Mass at Saint Joseph's is entirely chanted or sung in Latin, and women are strongly encouraged to veil themselves at Mass. Pants are disapproved of, and skirts and dresses are the main attire for a woman going to Mass. Only boys and men are allowed to assist the priest on the altar as an altar server, per pre-Vatican II rules. These things did not bother me, nor my female friends who attended this church. Firstly, because it is how we were raised, but secondly, because we understood that men and women have separate roles in the Church, and we accepted this.

²Vatican II is the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, and introduced a slew of cultural changes within the Church, as well as changed the way the Mass was held. Prior to Vatican II, Mass was held solely in Latin, with the priests facing away from the congregation. After Vatican II was held, the altar was turned around so that the priest faced the congregation and Mass was held in the vernacular. Vatican II also took away the requirement for women to veil during the Mass.

I feel a struggle within my own Catholic upbringing. Catholicism brings the comfort of community, of people with the same beliefs, of conformity. There is a gentleness and kindness, especially within the women of the church.

As I write this, I reflect on a recent encounter with some Catholic women, who were strangers to me. I had just recovered from Covid-19 and pneumonia and was visiting my sister at her homeschool co-op³. As I walked through the door, I was faced by a group of bustling women, children propped on their hips or haphazardly gripped with one arm against their torso. As my mother and I walked in my mother greeted the first woman she saw, the organizer of the co-op. When she introduced me to her, the woman's face lit up in recognition and she called the other women over. "This is Kathleen!" she announced to the ladies, some still clad in their veils from Mass.

A cacophony of exclamations met my ears. "We've been praying for you!" the women chirped, placing hands on my shoulders and back and ushering me into the foyer of the square brick building that they used for co-op. (My mom sheepishly admitted to me later that she put me on the public prayer list at church-- she apologized, as if embarrassed I found out).

The simple fact that the women remembered me in their prayers, a stranger to them, and greeted me as though they had known me forever touched me. My mother putting me on the church prayer list also touched me as did her slight embarrassment, as though she knew I would perhaps think the tradition a bit silly. As I think about this, I wonder if this action is my mom's own way of showing me her love for me.

³Co-op is a group of homeschooling families (typically of the same religion) who meet together once a week. Mimicking a classroom setting, children are divided not by grade but by skill level, with classes taught by parent volunteers. It is not only an opportunity for homeschooled children to be socialized, but also an opportunity to be taught the Catholic Faith by other parents and with other children.

In traditional faith communities, it is of utmost importance to keep the commandments, not for fear of Hell, but for fear of disappointing God. This pressure – the pressure of displeasing God – and the crippling guilt which follows if a sin was committed is what kept me, and many other children, in the Church. It is what kept us from rebelling, from questioning, and from doubting.

However, I was one of the only girls who would rather play soccer than sit and talk while taking care of the younger children.

On this particular fall afternoon after Mass, I had changed from my church dress to my soccer clothes, traded my veil for shin guards, and partook in a lovely afternoon of running, passing, shooting, and tackling. It was a good game.

The next Sunday, as I was packing my soccer clothes in a duffel bag, my mom approached me.

“Father asked that you abstain from playing soccer with the boys after Sunday,” she began. “A dad of one of the boys complained that it was too physical of a sport for girls and boys to play together. He said that he saw the way some of the boys were touching you.”

My face flushed red and I was immediately embarrassed, but as an eleven-year-old, I didn’t know what my mom meant. *It’s not like I had touched the other boys*, I thought. At eleven-years-old, I hadn’t even had my first period yet.

“There comes a time,” she said, “where boys and girls need to play sports separately. You don’t want to put anyone in a near occasion of sin, do you?”

“I don’t think that’s fair. I love playing soccer after Mass, and Jack and Daniel are allowed to! I’m just as good as the other boys, if that dad is mad then he can make his son not play!” I protested, and tears started to well in my eyes. When I get really angry, I start to cry, a feature that has not changed from eleven-year-old me to now. And nothing makes me angrier

than something I don't consider fair. My mom's brow furrows as I talk back to her. She raises her voice.

"Kathleen *Elizabeth*. You need to be compassionate and understanding! Do you want to be the reason a young man strays from God?

"Father is stupid! He has no clue what he's talking about, and it isn't *fair*!"

"How *dare* you question father! That is a *sin*! Go to your room, and don't come out unless you're ready to be mature."

I stomp up the stairs, crying. *Why did I have to be born into a family that was Catholic, I thought to myself. Why can't I be normal like the other kids? Why can't I just not have to worry all the time?*

I'm barely eleven, and raised in the traditionalist rite of Roman Catholicism. We do not talk about men or sex or our bodies, and we do not ask questions about them either. Maybe this sentiment is self-imposed, or maybe it's implied by the way my mom fast-forwards kissing scenes and whispers words like *bra* or *underwear* whenever my brothers or dad are around. Whichever it is, I don't know. All I know is that we don't talk about this kind of thing, and when we do, it's awkward and I hate it. So my mom and I never talk about it again.

I felt ashamed. That Sunday, I went to Confession. "Bless me Father, for I have sinned. It has been two weeks since my last confession. I caused a near occasion of sin."

Judica Me, Deus | Judge me, God

"I need a *therapist* because of you Kathleen! Do you understand what you've done? I would rather *slit my wrists* than find out that a daughter of mine did this!" Tears streamed down my mother's ruddy cheeks. My father stood silently behind her, arms crossed, eyes cast down. I focused on the round reflection of light on his bald head. "What did I do *wrong*? What did I do wrong as a mother, to raise a child like *you*?" She continued hysterically.

The windows in my parents' bedroom were open, and a soft breeze filled the space. It was a cool day, in the mid-sixties; a beautiful Fall afternoon that signals a change of seasons. But I was empty. My heart was failing me; a hard knot of feelings in the center of my chest and the bottom of my stomach. Feelings I couldn't identify, but that hurt. I didn't cry. I didn't even blink. I had learned to show no emotion while my parents yelled at me.

That morning, my mom, sister, and I went to the barn we rode horses at, and I went on a trail ride with my sister. When I got back from riding and led my horse towards my mom's car, I could tell she had a weird look on her face. She quickly put her phone in her lap when I approached.

"Untack your horse, get in your car, and drive home. Now." Even though the heat sweltered down on me, her voice sent chills, and I was scared.

"Why? What's going on? Tell me what happened!" My voice came across as desperate as I begged, and I could already feel the fear welling in the form of tears behind my eyes. If they found out what I was scared that they knew, my life would never be the same. My relationship with my parents would never be the same.

"Get. Your horse. Untacked. *Now*. And if I have to say it again, you won't be happy." As my mom spoke, I saw that she had my phone gripped in her hand.

"Can I have my phone?"

"This is my phone now. No you can't. You'll never have this phone again. You'll never have anything from us again."

My mother told me to drive in front of her, so she knew I wouldn't try to drive away. Strangely, it was the most insulting thing I felt that she had said to me that day. She really thought I would try to run away from her? I may be scared, but I'm not an idiot.

When I pulled up to my house, my dad was home from work. That's when I knew she knew. There was nothing else this could be that was serious enough for my dad to come home from work.

My parents had just discovered that I had sex before marriage. I had confided with my aunt weeks prior while we were on a run. I thought I could trust her, considering that she herself had had a child out of wedlock. I was nineteen, had just been broken up with, and felt vulnerable. I hadn't thought anything more of the conversation with my aunt and didn't know she had felt obligated to tell my mom.

My parents forced me to receive "counseling" from the priest at our parish, a middle-aged man named Father Novokowsky. Large, with curly grey hair and a Canadian accent, he was the *last* person I wanted to talk to about my sexual past. Nonetheless, I was forced to give him, and my parents, every single detail, down to the day I lost my virginity, where I had had sex, and what kind of sex we had. To this day, it is the single most humiliating, embarrassing, and belittling experience I have ever had to endure. The burning sensation of shame and guilt that I feel in my chest does not fade, even as I write about it now, six years later.

After months of "counseling," and a few weeks of the silent treatment from my parents, one day I woke up and everything was back to normal. We never spoke of this incident again.

The way my mother uses silence – systematically, strategically – has manipulated the way in which I viewed myself from a young age. The conflicts that we had and my subsequent unhappiness were not worthy enough for even a response from her. This left me feeling completely unimportant and stupid. *Why am I making such a big deal about this*, I would wonder. *Maybe I'm the problem.*

Lavabo | Wash me

Driving back from New York a couple days after Christmas everything seemed fine and normal. My parents decided to stop for gas in Baltimore. They are driving an SUV, with Jack and I in the middle row and Sarah and Daniel in the back seat. My sister asked Jack if he could get out to let her climb over his seat so she could use the bathroom. She wasn't able to climb over my seat because there was luggage in her way, and I was sitting diagonal to her.

"Jack, can you let me get out? I need to use the bathroom," was my sister's request.

"No."

"Seriously. I need to get out."

"No you don't." I could tell by Jack's tone of voice that he had had one of his sudden mood shifts, and it pissed me off. *Why does he act so weird, what is his problem? It's literally the smallest request and he can't even unbuckle his seat and get out for her?* Even though I knew it was going to start something, I couldn't help myself. I intervened.

"Jack, can you please let her out? She can't get out of my seat; she can't climb over the luggage." Jack had been normal this whole trip, and we had even talked a bit. He can suck it up and just do something for once.

"Kathleen, you think you're so great, don't you? You think you can just tell me what to do all the time?"

"I'm literally just asking you to move. It's not hard."

"If I ever get a hold on any of the guns Dad has, I'll shoot you right in the head."

My siblings and I sat in stunned silence for a split second. *I shouldn't have intervened. Why do you have to be this way Kathleen. Why do you have to always start shit. Ignore him. Ignore him. Ignore him.* I repeated the simple sentence in my mind even as I continued to push

his buttons. “What?” I asked incredulously. “Are you serious?” He didn’t say anything but continued to glare in front of him, still refusing to get up.

Shaking in anger, knowing I caused this and pissed at myself for it, but now too angry to let it go, I get out and start helping my sister climb over my side of the car. “You have some real mental issues that you need to get under control,” I said to Jack as my sister and I walked into the gas station. *I know that’s going to piss him off.*

“Kathleen, don’t say anything to mom or dad. Let me do all the talking,” my sister kept whispering to me in low tones as we walked in. I was still shaking with anger, but agreed. If I opened my mouth, I would say things that I’d regret even worse later on. I would ask my parents why they haven’t gotten him help, what their excuse for him this time was. I’d refuse to get in the car without an apology. I’d demand that they punish him. And I knew they wouldn’t go for any of that.

My sister and I entered the 7/11, and she calmly told my mom what happened as I perused the chip selection. As my mom left the store, my sister and I followed further behind, still talking and trying to distract ourselves with something else. We knew whatever was going to follow this confrontation between my mother and my brother was not going to be good. And I knew it wasn’t going to be good for me, either.

“Jack? How *dare* you speak to Kathleen like that,” my mother began. Jack immediately dissolved into sobs.

“She,” -- *sob* -- “demonized,” --*sob*-- “my,” -- *sob* -- “mental,” --*sob*-- “illness,” he punctuated each word with a sob. My mom stopped and stared at him.

“What? What did she say to you?”

“She said that my depression makes me crazy, and that there was something wrong with me.”

“Oh my *God*, Mom are you *kidding* me??! I did *not*! All I said was that he needed to get it under control and --”

“Oh now, *this* is a different story! So you used your brother’s depression against him? How *dare* you?” She started yelling, turning her back to my brother, who had stopped sobbing, and facing me. Her eyes met mine, and her face grew red.

“No I *didn’t*! I can’t believe this, you always take his side! He literally threatened to shoot me with a gun!”

“You are TWENTY-THREE, Kathleen! Deal with it! Ignore him! You’re the oldest! Just shut *UP* sometimes!”

“You know what? Fuck you.” The words came out of my mouth before I had a chance to control them. I had never, not once in my entire life, said the word “fuck” in front of my mom, and the first time I did it was directed at her. I knew I had *fucked up*.

My mom’s silence and slow turn towards my Dad, who was coming out of the gas station, was the only confirmation I needed to know that any credibility I had was lost. I might have at least been somewhat heard, but my temper had been lost. As my dad has said to me, so frequently, I never shut up.

My sister held me back as they talked. They both started walking back to the car a few minutes later, and I met them halfway. My dad immediately started yelling incoherent things at me.

“He threatened to shoot me with a *gun*, Dad!”

“Yeah? Probably because you’re a nasty bitch.”

I went into the gas station bathroom and sobbed. While I was in there, a woman walked in. There were a few moments of silence before she knocked gently on my stall. “Hello?” She asked, meekly. “Are you. . . do you need help?”

I desperately wanted to scream yes. To ask her to get me out of her. To beg her to take me anywhere in her world that she knew would be safe and pluck me out of the one I was in now. But I could not. “Oh, yes,” I reply, “I’m fine, thank you though.”

When we got home, my dad told me he didn’t want to see my face, so I left. I knew that leaving the house was a dramatic gesture, but at this point I didn’t care. As I was leaving, I walked downstairs and saw Jack sitting on the couch with the two of them, talking. I had never felt so betrayed. Yes, maybe I could have stopped this from happening if I didn’t open my mouth, but why should I? What respect did Jack deserve from me?

I believe that my parent’s reaction is a protection mechanism. They are scared. What will he do, to himself or to others, if he is not satiated, and punishment is not served to me, the scapegoat child? The police had been called by neighbors to our house in the past because of Jack’s erratic behavior, and Jack has also admitted to having fantasized and trying to commit suicide before, so my parents may not be willing to risk Jack committing violence against someone or himself by punishing him.

I wasn’t allowed home during the day. I had to leave for work before everyone woke up, and come back after they were in bed. Eventually, my dad tried to meet me for lunch. My mom found out and threatened to divorce him for seeing me. Meanwhile, my brother Jack continued living in their house, eating with them, and going places with them. My dad eventually told me I had to leave, that he couldn’t risk losing his wife because of his daughter, and on a Wednesday night kicked me out.

My father and mother had been having increasingly serious fights over my dad’s willingness to talk to me and maintain a relationship with me. He had been trying to bridge the gap between my mom and I, but she was unresponsive. He had even confided in me his own

unhappiness in different aspects of his life. We had temporarily grown closer, as my mother and I grew further apart.

My dad begged me to apologize to my mom. It would make my life easier, he asserted, but it would also make his life easier. I refused. As much as I wanted to protect my father from unhappiness, I needed, more than anything, to protect myself.

My refusal forced my dad into choosing between my mother and I, and he chose her. Could I blame him though? If I had swallowed my pride he could've maintained his relationship with me and *without* my mom's threats of divorce. I could have apologized but kept my distance from my mother. Did I trust myself to do that though? No, not at all. I made the right decision. It's price? My once close relationship with my father. He made his decision too, and sacrificed the same. Like father, like daughter.

I lived in my car in my work parking lot until finding a room I could rent and signing the lease. The next time my parents and I were in the same room together was at my grandfather's hospice house. My Dad, and then my Mom, hugged me next to my dead grandfather. The elephant in the room was not my grandfather's corpse, but the unresolved feelings that my mom and I put aside after he died.

"Can we forget that this whole fight ever happened, Kathleen? We both said terrible things. Can we just pretend we didn't?"

"Yes." We got lunch together at Harris Teeter after we said the Rosary for my grandfather, and we never spoke of it again.

Ite, Missa Est | Go, the Mass has ended

My mom and I had a fantastic time together. Target, antique shopping, lunch, Pottery Barn, and Marshalls, we spent the day talking about school, work, friends, family, and anything else that came to our minds. Relaxed, enjoyable, and refreshing, the thought of leaving my mom

this time gave me a pang of homesickness that I had not felt in a long time. It's days like these where I think that maybe my mom does love me like she loves Jack.

I have been thinking about my mom's hands a lot recently. They have more wrinkles now, and the skin is softer. I can see her veins and tendons more easily. I've been so used to seeing her hands for as long as I can remember, but now I feel like I'm really *seeing* them.

People tell me she manipulates me, and every few months or so we'll have a huge falling out and I'll leave my house crying and vow never to talk to her again and to never come back home and that this was finally the last straw and I can't do it anymore. But then, somehow, I come back. I wonder if my mom loves me because of who I am, or because of what I am—her daughter.

When I was a child, I used to pray that I would die before my parents, because I didn't know how I could ever exist without them. I still feel the same way now, although not as dramatic as before. I don't pray that I'll die before them, but I do think about the day when one or both of them do pass away, and I wonder how I will feel. Will I be heartbroken? How soon will I be able to continue my life after they leave me? Will I feel scared? Will I feel guilty?

For now though, I push those thoughts aside, and I rest my head on my mom's shoulder as I have done so many times before.

Chapter Four: An Interlude

Breaking Family

My mom and I aren't talking again.

Mom :

I guess you get to decide what gets discussed with us and what doesn't now.

Are dad and I just a means to an end?

You have no wisdom and know nothing.

Do you even love us?

I shake in my chair as the gray text bubbles continue to pop up. She texts me over and over again, hurtful and more hurtful things until she thinks I'll respond. I set down my phone. I will not respond. I cannot respond, my hands shake too much.

III. Breaking Cycles

"The only way you can start healing is by seeing your parents for what they are and what they have done to you."

I've been having dreams recently. Bad ones. In one of the nightmares, I was hiding from my parents in the woods across the street from my childhood home, and they were searching for me with a spotlight. They found me, and I started running. In another one, a priest was chasing me out of Mass, whipping me because instead of listening to his homily I was staring at the beautiful paintings in the church. But I had nowhere to run; the Church was in a swamp. In the third nightmare, my mother somehow found out I was in therapy, and told all her friends. I could hear them talking behind my back. I am just so tired. So tired, and so guilty.

"Why do you feel guilty?"

Because. Am I tearing this family apart by breaking the cycle that has kept me safe for so long?

“What are you scared of?”

I DON'T KNOW! I know it doesn't make sense, but I am scared! I'm scared of the future -- what if I need my parents? -- but I am scared of the present -- my mom *will* text me again, and it *will* hurt me more -- but I am scared of the past -- nasty bitch, soccer playing slut, bad Catholic -- but I am scared they don't love me. No, not that they don't love me. I'm their daughter, of course they love me. I'm scared they don't like me.

“And there it is, that's what's behind the guilt.”

I see my mom everywhere. I see her in the grocery store as I watch other middle-aged women push carts down the aisles. *I wonder if they have daughters too.* I see my mom in the brands of food I buy. I see her in the clothes I pick out. *Would my mom like this on me,* I wonder. I see my mom in the dinners I make, the English muffins I eat, the comfort TV shows I watch. *Murder, She Wrote, and Gilmore Girls.* I see my mom's eyes in the mirror, I see her thin lips, I see her short stature. I see my mom in my need for control. I see her in the way I repress my emotions. I see her in my anger when they finally spill out.

I pick up my phone. I see my mom in her contact photo. I see myself in my mom. *Open her contact up.* I see the love in my mom. *Click on her number.* I see the hope in my mom. *Message or call?* Or do I feel the hope in me? *Turn phone off.*

I need my mom's shoulder to rest on.

I miss my mom.

Chapter Five: *Et sanibatur anima mea*

The muscles in her legs are rigid and curved, like the topography of the ocean floor. She stares-- dark, black, holes that envelope you and the earth inside her. Big, black, bug eyes, gently sloped, the light refracting and reflecting, spilling onto you, like a beacon-- searching.

What does she see?

She searches your face, looking for the threat she is sure it contains. She is sure, because you have hunted her before.

Not *you*, you insist. Others, but not *you*.

But, you do not know her. You do not know that she has grown and emerged from a long line of others before her-- before your kind. Evolution has worked in her favor; She has learned to fear. You know this, deep in your heart, in the chasms of your soul, in the part of you that does not want to admit it exists. She was born to be free, but she was born to be scared.

She was baptized by the spirits of her wild ancestors before her; They whispered in her ear, *run*. She answered in the curvature of her back and the stretch of her legs. An animal instinct she couldn't deny.

Run from the fear.

Run for protection.

Run-- as fast as you can, until you feel as though your soul has left your body and you run away from yourself. Run to what is safe, run to the bed of leaves, the soft woods, where sunlight dances and spatters across the overlapping leaves and refracts against the grainy tree trunks, skipping across cool streams and pebbles. Run to where it is safe.

Staring at her, how *could* you know? How could you see the wildness, the starvation, the complexity of an animal as simple as the doe? You see her as a thing of beauty; Something to

hunt. How could you see the eons of lifetime, stretched across the universe in the pinprick of her pupil?

She stares into you, searching for the threat. Evidently, she finds it, as she turns on her hooves, so tiny and slight, and bounds away, a white tail flashing a flag of surrender.

“Kathleen! Come downstairs for Mass!” I rolled over, confused, and nearly fell off the couch on the third floor of my parents’ house. *Oh, that’s right*, I wiped the sleep from my eyes. *I’m here.*

It was March of 2020, and the Covid-19 epidemic plastered itself onto every news channel headline. Businesses were closed, churches were closed, and mask mandates were in place. I had been staying at my parents’ house for the past few days following an emotional breakup, and today was Sunday. Even though churches were closed, EWTN (the Eternal News Television Network, a Catholic TV station) was still broadcasting a priest saying Mass each Sunday. So, my parents compensated by turning the downstairs living room into a makeshift church.

Large paintings of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Immaculate Heart of Mary, with blessed palms from last year’s Palm Sunday sticking haphazardly out from behind the frames, dwarfed the television. Golden candlesticks adorned each side of the television, and beeswax candles were scattered throughout the room. My dad had brought every statue of Joseph and Mary that he could find and put them on our mantle. On a wall, a long crucifix loomed. Lastly, a petite figure of baby Jesus – the Infant of Prague – rested quaintly in the middle of the coffee table, amongst rosary beads strewn about. It looked like an exorcism scene from a horror movie.

My father solemnly brought the relic of a saint– a piece of neck bone they purchased at a shrine – into the living room, and the ritual of Mass began.

As the priest blessed the altar with incense, my mother blessed ours– the makeshift altar which consisted of the television, statues, and candles. Then, she blessed us, waving around a mini thurifer. Incense smoke rose and wafted, swirling and drifting towards a vent in the ceiling. We had learned our lesson since last time and kept the vent open after setting off the fire alarm.

My mom is mad at me for wearing pajamas to Mass. “Would you wear this to Saint Joseph’s?” She challenges my eye roll.

“If Saint Joseph’s were in our living room then yeah,” I reply nonchalantly, acting as casually as I possibly could with the living room turned into a shrine. My mom would have none of that, and she kept Mass paused until we changed into dress clothes.

The entire Mass my sister and I giggled. Sit. Stand. Kneel. Sit. Stand. Kneel. Kneel. Kneel. When are we going to stop kneeling? The rug is making my knees burn.

“Domine, non sum dignus,” I pray with my family.

“Domine, non sum dignus,” we repeat after the priest.

“Domine, non sum dignus”

And as she closes her eyes, images of sunlight spattered branches sink deep into her subconscious, and the smell of damp wood and leaves wafts gently through her nose.

She was already having problems in school. Not academic problems, she loved to learn, but social problems, which confused her because generally she really loved people. It seemed as though the people were not loving her.

She prayed daily to her mother, her silly little rituals stretching across her silly little prayer beads, each orb slipping between her thumb and index finger like pearls slipping off a string.

Domine, non sum dignus

Domine, non sum dignus

Domine, non sum dignus. . .

She prayed mostly for comfort, because recently everything had been hurting. Her teammates refused to run with her after what happened at school, and her mother wasn't talking to her either. Her stomach hurt all the time, and she didn't know what was wrong with her. It was always right after eating, and it was really embarrassing. A swallow, squeeze, and sprint to the trash can so she wouldn't vomit all over the lunchroom floor.

Her mother didn't speak to her that morning, per usual. Probably because of what happened at school, she thought. She didn't think what happened was terrible, in fact, she thought it was funny. But her mother had not.

"I'm going to paint our mother," she pitched the idea confidently to her art teacher, "as a zombie."

"I *love* that idea!"

She thought it would be creative. Also, her mother hadn't been talking to her in a long time. In fact, she didn't think she was even listening, either. She wouldn't notice, she doubted. Just a fun little painting. An experiment. A push to the limits without crossing the line. She needed to know if her mother was listening.

Another teacher had seen the painting on the drying rack in the shared art/bioethics classroom. She called her mother and told another teacher, another mother, who happened to be

friends with a group of mothers who told their children not to interact with her, that she was a blasphemer.

Her mothers haven't listened to her in decades, it felt like. Decades of the rosary, worn thin like stones in a stream.

Domine, non sum dignus

Domine, non sum dignus

Domine, non sum dignus.

Panting, gasping, her throat burns and pulsates as her eyes wildly shift from side-to-side. The chilled mountain air puffs out like mini atomic-bomb mushrooms from her nostrils, and the condensation leaves dew drops on her whiskers. She is in danger, she knows it. Nothing is there, but she can feel it, and deep in her being the instinctual pull to run leaps forward and grabs her, it takes her body over and she bounds, effortlessly, through the sticks and mud and bugs and leaves, through the forest full of life.

Once, I fainted during Mass.

It was embarrassing. I was in high school, so everything was embarrassing. We had been kneeling for a long time, and I started to see black patches in front of me. At first, spots here and there. Slowly, they started overtaking my vision, more splotches appearing and filling gaps in between the existing ones.

For whatever reason, I wasn't scared. I kept kneeling. I couldn't see anything, but it was comfort. My head felt like static. Words were blurry in my ears.

“Kathleen, we’re standing now,” I heard my mother’s voice distant, like it was inside a TV with the volume on the lowest setting before mute. I felt nothing, but turned my head towards the noise.

“Sed tantum dic verbo et sanibitur anima mea,” Father crooned to us, his voice sinking into the blackness.

Slipping, tumbling, falling slowly, the peace overtaking my body. I smiled as I fell further, down this black hole of unconsciousness, thinking nothing, seeing nothing, being nothing.

My arm broke the surface of reality first. A disjointed limb being pulled out of the peace. Slowly, I was rebirthed, through the waters of reality, and spilled, myself and all my messiness, on the floor of Saint Patrick’s Catholic Church.

“Did you have a vision?” The first words I heard, my grandmother’s voice, as I woke up in the vestibule. A splitting headache. I couldn’t understand anything.

“Kathleen, Kathleen!” My mom’s voice was a high pitch of desperation, and I felt her hands on my back, applying pressure so that my head was in between my limp legs. “Oh, she’s waking up. Kathleen!” My mother rubbed my back as I started to regain consciousness. “Are you okay?” I nodded slowly, chin to chest and repeat. “You’re okay, you’re okay,” she was assuring herself more than she was assuring me. “When I had told you to stand up, you looked straight through me. It was as if you were looking at something past me. Did you see something?”

I was upset to disappoint my mother and grandmother. I didn’t want to tell them that the only thing I saw was the blackness. I didn’t want to tell them how good it felt. “I . . . I don’t remember,” I finally said.

A week later, I was diagnosed with walking pneumonia. “No wonder she fainted!” Our family physician exclaimed, a cold stethoscope pressed underneath the strap of my bra. “I hear pneumonia!”

Et sanibatur anima mea.

Do I run to run away, or do I run to run towards, I wondered to myself as my feet hit the pavement in rhythmic succession.

For twelve years now, I’ve been a runner. I started running at thirteen years old, purely because I was self-conscious of my body and felt that running was the only way to control how I looked. How would I have known what it would become for me? To gain control was to gain my freedom.

Slowly, as more miles passed under my feet, running became my outlet for any stress, feelings, or emotions I was experiencing—big or small.

The memories pass by me like the miles. I run through the happy times, I run through the sad times. I run through the big emotions, the ones I yearn to process but have not yet. I run through the small ones, too. The ones that bug me like a gnat behind my ear. Running is when I truly feel peace—when my heartbeat is inside my ear and my breath is as deep as my lungs can expand.

But now, running is being taken from me. An invisible disease threatens my body, and all control I once had is lost. My legs stiffen as I wonder how much longer I can run, before I’m too tired, too sick, too achy.

Stress is the main cause, they say, of flare ups. So stay away from stressful situations, they say. What is the advice if you're a grad student and your whole life is a stressful situation? There isn't really. So for now, I continue to run, until the pain overtakes.

What is my purpose, the Deer wonders. It seems all she does, according to her, is wander the forest, each tree looking like the one before it, searching for a patch of sunlight that she can take momentary comfort in. She sees no end to the feeling of emptiness which fills her lungs like a balloon. It seeps into her caverns, and makes her bloat with nothingness.

No matter how fleeting it is, she is thirsty for that feeling of restfulness, thirsty to feel *done. Done* wandering. *Done* running. *Done* searching.

Done. Done. Done.

She feels her heartbeat trapped within the confines of her ribs.
Done.Done.Done.Done.Done.Done.Done.Done.Done.Done.Done.Done.Done.

Its pace picks up and she anticipates the fear that is to follow.
DoneDoneDoneDoneDoneDoneDoneDoneDoneDoneDoneDoneDoneDoneDoneDone.

What am I running from, she wonders even as she runs away.

"Yeah, so, unfortunately, due to the high levels of prednisone you're taking, I think our safest route is to do a loop-ileostomy and give you a temporary bag," Dr. Hoang's soft eyes looked at me. She looked expectant. I noticed the other doctor in the room, a woman in her thirties, also giving me that same, pitiful, expecting stare. *Why aren't they saying anything*, I thought, panicked. What did they expect from me? *Oh, they expect me to cry*. "I'm sorry. . ." Dr. Hoang spoke.

From the corner of the room, a sniffle erupted. Three heads swiveled in unison to look at my mother, furiously digging through her large square purse for a napkin to dab under her eyes.

Damnit, now I'm going to cry. “Wh-e-n,” her voice wavered, “when will it be removed?”

The doctors turned back to look at me again. “In twelve to sixteen weeks, most likely.” Dr. Hoang’s voice was sympathetic. “It’s the safest route to go with a disease of your progression.” She stayed silent again.

I didn’t say anything. I knew if I spoke my throat would be tight, and I would have that squeaky voice that you make when you’re trying not to cry. I hate that feeling, deep inside the chasm of your chest cavity, the feeling that your heart is being squeezed. I wasn’t crying because of the ostomy bag, I was mostly crying because my mom was, and her crying is contagious for me. “Well.” Damnit, my voice was making the squeaky sound. It sounded like I was holding my breath while trying to speak. “That sucks,” I finally managed.

An hour later I’m sitting at sushi with my mom, trying to figure out arrangements for after my surgery. Dr. Hoang had warned me I probably would be out of commission for a while. Two weeks, at least. My mom was rambling on about sleeping on my couch for the duration of the two weeks. My anxiety was building. I loved my mom, but I liked having a safe place to go if something were to happen. If she stayed at my apartment, I would be trapped.

Suddenly, my mother’s phone rings. “Oh God,” she sighs, “It’s Nan. Hey Mom, what’s up?” Her tone switched gears as she accepted the call.

“Go with you to the—”

“Well I—”

“Okay Mom, but—”

Listening to my mom's side of the conversation was a headache-and-a-half for me. I couldn't imagine what listening to Nan's side of the conversation felt like for my mother. It took years for my grandmother to get to the point, and even longer for her to comprehend anything the other person in the conversation had to say. Most of a typical conversation with Nan was spent answering her seemingly bizarre and random questions that had nothing to do with whatever you were telling her, and then not remembering what you were even trying to tell her in the first place.

"I told you I couldn't do today, Mom!" I heard a tinny "oh-h-h-h-h," stretched for at least five seconds on the other side of the phone. "No, I said any day *except* today," my mom continued, clearly aggravated. She widened her eyes at me and made an exasperated face, gesturing wildly at the phone.

"Okay—"

"Okay—"

"Okay, bye Mom," she hangs up the phone. "I can't stand her, Kathleen. I tell her that this is the only day I *can't* do, and she schedules an appointment with the social worker for *today?*"

"Mhmm," I absentmindedly pick at my sushi roll with my chopsticks. I never know what to say to my mom when she's complaining about Nan. It almost feels as though I'm living in a strange, alternate reality. My mom complaining about her mom to me— her daughter. It feels wrong. It feels too comfortable.

"I'm not going to let her manipulate me through guilt," she continues. "My parents always knew they could make me feel bad. It was easy for them to manipulate me like that."

I nod. My mom clearly doesn't need a response, just a person to listen.

“I love her, and she’s been very sweet and done very good things for me too. I just don’t get along with her. I love her, because she’s my mother of course. Fourth commandment, honor thy mother and father. I love her, but I’ve realized I just don’t *like* her.”

I have exhausted myself trying to fight a losing battle. This is a silent war. I’ve been fighting since before I knew I was. It’s not fair how I got a head start.

It’s Me versus me.

The body keeps the score, or does the score keep the body?

Keep her locked in a cell made of cells. She is a prisoner of war.

The last face I remember seeing before going under is my mom’s. “I know she’s twenty-five, but she’ll always be my baby,” I hear her say to the surgeon as she wheels me to the operating room. The surgeon laughs.

“Oh, I know! They will always be our babies,” she says.

She dreams of deer.

What beautiful creatures.

No purpose but to drift freely through fields and woods, the sun bleaching their tawny hides, sipping water from streams and nuzzling the soft earth for foliage.

She wished she were a deer.

I wake up, groggy and confused. “Do I have an ostomy bag?” I whisper. For some reason, I can’t really open my eyes. My head spins. It’s too much effort to try and pick it up. I flop it back on the pillow.

“Kathleen, Kathleen,” a male voice croons my name like a mother lulling their child to sleep. “What year is it? Where are you? Kathleen, Kathleen . . .”

Again, I wake up. I’m not sure how much later it was, but a different nurse was next to me. A woman, this time. I became attached to her immediately, even though I never knew her before this and will never know her again. “Can you tell me where you are, honey?” I couldn’t see her yet, my vision was still blurry, but her voice sounded young and sweet.

“UVA hospital,” I whisper. “Do I have an ostomy bag?”

“What year is it,” she asks.

“2021. But do I have an ostomy bag?” I can barely speak. My diaphragm feels bruised. Taking in a breath causes my abdomen to feel as though it is going to rip open. *A hernia is when your muscle splits open and all your guts spill out*, I remember my brothers telling me that in the car, when we were young, and then dissolving into giggles. It was an inside joke for years: “What’s a hernia?” “Oh, when your muscle splits open and your guts spill out,” followed by fits of laughter.

“No ostomy bag!” The nurse says, and I am jolted from my thoughts back to the present. I can hear the smile in her voice. “How do you feel?”

“In pain. Nauseous.”

“Alright, lemme give you some meds,” she says.

“Don’t give me codeine,” I say.

“Why not?” she asks.

“My grandma and mom are allergic, and I’m scared I am too” I say. I don’t remember much else.

I hear my mom before I see her. It’s nine o’clock now, past visiting hours, but she has waited in the hospital to see me since ten-thirty. I felt bad for my elderly roommate, who was woken up when they transported me into my room.

“Mom,” I say when she walks in. I couldn’t say much else. The catheter in me burned, and everything hurt.

“There’s my girl,” she said softly, smiling and waving. “How are you feeling?”

“Alright,” I say. “In some pain.”

My mom grinned. “Dr. Hoang called me as soon as you were out of surgery. When she told me you didn’t need the ostomy bag I started crying on the phone to her. She said your abdomen muscles were some of the strongest she’s ever had to cut through, and that, besides for the Crohn’s, everything else looked so healthy! Isn’t that great news?!”

I smiled and nodded. “I’m just. . . so happy I didn’t need the. . . ostomy bag,” I say. It’s hard to speak without taking deep breaths, but breathing hurt so bad.

“Me too. It truly is an answer to our prayers. It’s honestly a miracle I think.”

Shortly after that conversation, the nurse informed my mother that it was time for her to go. Assuring me she would be back in the morning, my mom kissed my forehead and left.

Et sanabitur anima mea.

My parents visit me every day I am in the hospital, but my mom stays for the bulk of the time to keep me company. It was important that I walk around some the day after my surgery, so

with my IV on one side and my mom on the other to stabilize me, we would take a lap or two around the nurses station. She always helped me into bed, and it reminded me of how she helped my grandfather while he was in hospice:

“Alright Dad, hold onto the side rail, and I’ll lift your legs up and over,” she would say to him. I always felt as though I were intruding on a private moment, when she would help him get into bed. It made me feel weird to watch, as if I were a spectator on the intimate parts of illness that I shouldn’t be allowed to spectate on. Now, it was my turn.

“Try to use your arms, not your abdomen, to pull yourself up Kathleen,” my mom instructed me. The years that she was an RN in her twenties had not gone to waste. With expert hands, and the muscle memory of someone who had done this in ages past, she skillfully helped me into my bed. I felt like a child being tucked into her crib. I wonder if my grandpa felt the same way.

“No matter what Mom, you call me, text me, I don’t care what time. I don’t care where I am. You have my phone number. I’ll be there.” I listened to my elderly roommate’s son talk to her. From what I had learned about her, listening to the nurses and doctors talk, she had had a stroke which left her nonverbal, and communicating was very difficult. Her son came in every day that I was there, to spend time with her. He had apps on his phone to help her regain some of her speaking ability, and he would practice speaking with her.

“What’s that, Mom? Can you say that word?” He would ask her. She would sound it out in distorted, jumbled language, her speaking sounding like her mouth was full of air.

“Listen to me, Mom,” he would say when she would get frustrated, “This too, shall pass. I know, I know. But it’s okay. This, too, shall pass.”

Et sanabitur anima mea.

“I’ve been thinking about how happy Grandpa was when he found out I named you after his mother,” my mom said to me one day as we were driving back from the barn we keep our horse at. “Nan said that all day he wouldn’t stop dancing and singing your name around the house.”

“Did he know I was going to be named Kathleen?” I had never actually asked this question before, and I was curious.

“Mmmmm, no, because we didn’t know what we were having. I don’t think he found out until he baptized you in the hospital.” There were some complications in my birth, and my grandpa had baptized me with a water bottle. In the Catholic Church, anyone can baptize another person in life-or-death circumstances. When the priest showed up at the hospital, he had been annoyed when he found out I was already baptized.

“Oh, that’s funny. I’m surprised you didn’t tell him,” I stared out the window at the blur of farmland. I noticed the cows were laying down, legs tucked under them, like large dark rectangles dotting the faded brown landscape. A sure sign of bad weather to come.

“He loved his mother so much,” my mom continued. “He took such good and loving care of her up until she died.”

I had been named after her, Kathleen McHugh. When my grandfather was young, she was diagnosed with Rheumatoid Arthritis. It slowly crippled her until she died in the hospital of a secondary infection when my grandpa was only twenty-one.

She is revered as a family saint. Having offered her suffering for her sins and the sins of the world, she never complained. Cheerful, devout, and kind, Kathleen was the epitome of

saintly example. Family lore has it that, on her deathbed and while in a coma, Kathleen recited the Rosary and was able to receive the Eucharist, even though she was not coherent or able to speak or respond to anybody in the room. *Tough shoes to fill*, I ruefully think to myself. I wonder if she would be proud of the girl that I am, if she would have chosen me to carry on her name.

“Grandpa loved her so much,” my mom repeated. “I wish you would’ve known her.”

“Kathleen, why don’t you come take a ride with me? I’m going to winterize the camper.” I internally cringed at the idea of going on a ride with just my dad. Alone. In the car with him. For forty-five minutes to the camper and forty-five minutes back. What would we talk about? Would he say anything weird or sentimental to me? *Ugh. I don’t want to go.*

“Ummm, sure, sounds good,” I spoke, even as the voice inside my head yelled at me to stop. *I don’t want to hurt his feelings*, I argued with myself. *If I say no, he’d have to go by himself, and I don’t want to make him sad.* . .

Ten minutes later, I was gingerly placing my feet in the passenger's side of my dad’s silver grey Honda. The floor was littered with various fast food containers and church bulletins, and it was hard for me to slide my feet in without getting any trash on them. I felt a pang of guilt stir inside me. Seeing the fast food containers and the bits and pieces of my dad’s life, thinking about the many hours he spent in the car sometimes outnumbering the hours spent outside of it, I felt like an intruder. *A daughter shouldn’t be an intruder on her own father’s life*, I thought as I struggled to press down the overwhelming sense of nervousness and guilt that had started to envelop me whole.

It was hot, and the ripped black leather seats of Dad’s car were sticky and warm. The seat felt rough against my skin as I slid inside his car, and I widened my legs to avoid a large rip in

the middle of the chair. Dad's car always had a unique, peculiar smell. Hot leather mixed with old fast food mixed with his cologne -- *Curve for Men*, a scent Mom had bought for fifteen-dollars at TJ Maxx one year; it was a Christmas gift. I wondered if Dad liked the smell, or if he was indifferent and just let Mom get him whatever she liked. I could feel the tiniest pinpricks of sweat start to swell on my skin. I hardly sweated, even in the late Summer heat that Virginia is so famous for, but inside Dad's car I felt like I was trapped inside a test tube.

"Alrighty, ready to head out?" Dad asked as he squatted to crouch into his low car. He grunted as he bent low. "Phew, my back has really been bothering me these days."

Dad wore a maroon t-shirt with a faded map of the Blue Ridge Parkway printed on it. It was tucked into thick, brown cargo pants. How he wasn't dying of heat exhaustion, I had no idea. Covering his shiny bald head was a faded Blue Angels baseball cap. He rubbed his thick hands on his thighs in anticipation for the drive, or maybe to wipe his palms before gripping the hot steering wheel.

My back was stiff against the leather. I tried to relax, to will my spinal disks to sink into the curvature of the seat and mold myself to it-- to feign some sort of comfort-- but they wouldn't budge. We sat in silence for most of the ride. At first, I attempted to talk about "safe" topics with Dad-- the weather, what he was going to do to the camper, what Mass we were going to on Sunday. Eventually though, I resulted to staring at my phone, absorbed in its screen as if it were the most interesting piece of technology that existed. The guilt festered in me stronger. *Now he'll think I'm more interested in my phone than in him*, the words shot across my brain like a banner. *What's worse, telling Dad I didn't want to come or him realizing we have nothing to talk about?*

After helping Dad winterize the camper -- spreading mothballs here and there, putting protective coverings over the tires, packing things away -- we rode home in the same manner as before. Suddenly, Dad's neck turned to the right, so fast I thought he had hit an animal. "Look at that!" he breathed out in a low but exclamatory voice.

I turned as well. So close to me that I could reach my hand through my open window and touch was a deer bounding beside the car. Her gait was bouncy and effortless. To the right of the deer was a tall fence, wrapped in chicken wire and topped with barbs. She was stuck between the car and the fence. If only she stopped running, she would be able to cross the street safely to the other side, a large field of tall grass. But the doe would not stop her graceful bounce, even as the white showed in her shiny black eyes and she looked wildly around. Her instinct bound her to continue. She was scared, and to be scared was to run.

"No way she can clear that fence," Dad mused, whipping his head between the doe and the road every few seconds. He started to slow the car down, so she could run ahead, when without warning, her little hooves kicked high into the sky and she flung her body clear above the fence, with inches to spare between her fawny belly and the rusted barbed wire. Her white tail whipped in the wind like a flag, and she disappeared in the woods within seconds.

"That was *crazy*," I exhaled, exhilarated at the experience of being so close to such a graceful and cautious creature.

"Well I'll be," Dad spoke again, not to me but to himself. "She really jumped that fence didn't she?" He turned to me.

"That she did." I spoke slowly. "That she did."

I sigh, and look above me. I am encapsulated in a midnight-blue dome with stars that have been painted on with a stippling brush.

The same sky I looked at as an eleven-year old who had just moved into a big house with no neighbors.

The same sky I looked at as a fifteen year-old being bullied by students whose moms were friends with the teachers.

The same sky I looked at as a twenty-year old going through (what I thought) was a heartbreaking breakup.

The same sky I looked at as a twenty-three year old being told to leave.

She could tell us wonders, this pinprick of a coordinate. Life of a family, life of a girl. Laughter and happiness around the firepit on the wood line. Celebrations and parties for this occasion or that— or sometimes for no occasion at all. She could tell us stories of sadness, crying, yelling, anger. Being kicked out, being welcomed back in. Leaving home in tears, or coming home in joyfulness.

These memories fade in my mind as time continues her steady march forward. They fade into legends, imprinted as constellations from my eye to the midnight-blue sky. I will forget, but she never will. I zoom out, before we were here, what memories did she hold?

I zoom out more. Just a pinprick in the night sky. One in two-hundred-billion-trillion memories that she holds in her bosom. Not the first, and not the last.

And in the moonlight, a small doe plucks her hooves gingerly across the damp soil of the backyard. Silently she moves, slowly, her eyes wide and watchful. The star and moon speckle her back with the shadows of the leaves. She stops, and snuffs the air, deep *whoofs* in and out. Her eyes are glossy and translucent, and the reflection of the moon pours out of them like melted

wax. She stares, appraising me, deciding whether to listen to the instinctual pull of the tide inside of her, telling her to *run*. Or will she stay, despite the animal instinct, despite the eons of lifetime within her, despite the curvature of her back and the stretch of her legs.

I watch as she makes her decision. And with that, I go back inside to Mom.

Et sanabitur anima mea.

“Stories have to repair the damage that illness has done to the ill person’s sense of where she is in life, and where she may be going. Stories are a way of redrawing maps and finding new destinations.” (Frank, 1995).

Chapter Six: Discussion

This thesis is a mother-daughter story experienced through my body. The themes that emerged throughout my narratives are patterns of mother-daughter tensions of connection, illness as a turning point, and being a wounded storyteller. In mother-daughter tensions of connection, I am being pulled in two different directions: fighting to see myself through my own eyes as opposed to the eyes of my parents, longing for independence and freedom, and feeling in debt to them, my creators, the ones who raised me and gave me life. In illness as a turning point, I see my diagnosis of Crohn’s Disease as a chance for change and redemption on either side of the relationship— both mother and daughter. Finally, as a wounded storyteller, I examine what my wounds are, and how they came to be.

Mother-Daughter Tensions of Connections

Using my body, through illness and illness narrative, I was able to come to terms with my relationship with my mother. It has always been difficult for me to understand my mom, maybe because I couldn’t, or maybe because as a child and adolescent I wasn’t yet ready to. Or perhaps I simply did not want to. There is an interconnectivity between mother and daughter that can and will breed hurt, and these tensions of connections recur throughout generations (Copples, 2021). It is a rite of passage for a daughter.

My mother was a safety blanket for me, but also a plastic bag, suffocating me. I experienced severe separation anxiety from my mother, throughout childhood and adolescence, and even into my teenage years. It seems counterintuitive— separation anxiety, but also the

longing for independence. And yet, the two lived inside of me, simultaneously, swirling around in my gut, creating the tensions and dissonance which guide my life.

I wanted my mother to love me for who I was, unconditionally, I wanted her to be proud of me, to brag about me, and even if there were some things she didn't like about me, I still wanted her to accept me. For a long time, I felt that this could not be achieved. Before my illness, I felt as though my mother would never be who I needed her to be unless I was the carbon copy of what *she* wanted me to be. The times of great distress, where I felt as though I could *never* live up to her expectations or the daughter that she would be proud of, those were the times where I would flee, running away and ceasing all communication.

Smith et al. (1995) discusses this notion of fleeing when the process of becoming autonomous is interrupted and causes conflict. In my relationship with my mother, it seemed that as soon as I would try to stretch my legs and claim myself and my identity, I would be confronted and challenged. My defense response was to run away. If I ran far enough, I would be safe—I could grow into myself without any danger of disappointing my mother or making her sad.

I use deer in chapter five of my thesis, *Et Sanibatur Anima Mea*, as a way to represent myself and the inner turmoil that my body was constantly going through during this coming-to-terms. Deer are quiet, scared, tense, but beautiful animals. Built to run away, that is their most powerful defense mechanism against prey. I wondered what it would be like if a deer decided to go against her instinct. I represented myself leaping over the barriers of enmeshment and bounding towards freedom in the vignette with my father at the end of the same chapter, as we watched the deer run alongside our car before jumping over a fence of barbed wire.

I often felt anxious, confused, and upset, but I could not pinpoint the reasons why I felt those feelings. I just felt scared. I wanted to run— I wanted to run away. What I was running away from, I had no clue. But I wanted to leave, and felt trapped. I felt trapped no matter where I went. Trapped in my body, trapped in my situation, trapped in my relationship with my mother..

I use the deer as a way to express how I'm feeling. For me, I felt as though I was bred to be afraid. Not only through the intense Catholic upbringing that I had, but even physically— my anxiety was something inherited through generations of mothers, and the Crohns had been lying dormant in my body since birth. I felt that people couldn't understand the fear, they didn't see what I was running from — how could they, when I couldn't even see what it was— and I felt alone. Constantly searching for a place to lay, and be still. Looking for comfort in anything, looking for security in anyone.

In chapter three of my thesis, in the vignettes entitled *Confiteor* and *Judica Me, Deus*, I talk about the implications of being raised in a Catholic household, and the restrictions that it put onto both my body and my relationship with my mother. She, being the mother, was in charge of making sure that I stayed pure, that I followed the rules of our faith, and that I did not stray away or cause someone to sin. Because of her role in the family that is dictated by Catholicism, there was always going to be a barrier between us that could not be crossed. She cannot forsake that role, so to accept my mother and come to terms with our relationships meant to accept the role of Catholicism that will always be present in our relationship.

Illness as a Turning Point

During the course of writing this autoethnography I was diagnosed with an aggressive form of Crohn's Disease. I needed surgery almost immediately after my diagnosis. This sent me spiraling, because I felt a lack of control. I had done everything right— I ate well, I exercised, I was hygienic— and yet I still became sick. The ultimate loss of control is the loss of your

functions. In chapter five, I describe myself as being locked in my own body— a prisoner of myself. My body became foreign to me after my diagnosis, a common experience for people when they are diagnosed with a chronic illness or serious disease (Sakalys, 2003).

After my diagnosis with a chronic disease, I was forced to push the false semblance of control which many of us have aside. I had to face the reality that I needed help from someone who *did* love me unconditionally. I *needed* her, and she *needed* me to need her, too. I needed to become ill, in order to understand that her love for me *was* unconditional, even if she went about it the wrong way sometimes. And she needed me to become ill so that she could see the independence I was losing, and realize how independent I had become. How I have grown into my own woman, into my own life, as an individual with pieces of her in me, and pieces of myself.

I explore these feelings throughout chapter five, as I am facing the diagnosis of a chronic illness and learning what that means for me. How my life will be different, how it will be the same, and how the role of my mother plays an important part in each stage. A loss of control meant I had to lean into others to help me with the small, daily things. I touch on this when I write about my mother helping me into my hospital bed, and when I think about how she helped my grandfather as he was losing his own bodily functions.

Similarly, in the fifth chapter of my thesis, I explore how getting sick helped me to come to terms with my third chapter, *Domine, Non Sum Dignus*. I ruminate on stories from the past and present that show my mom's love for me as unconditional, in her role as my caretaker and life-giver. I explore ways in which I, too, am not innocent in the cycle of conflict. By running away and closing off communication, I was acting on fear and anger. Although justified in many ways, I was perpetuating a cycle of conflict and refusing to look at my mother as a whole human

being, with fears and wants and memories and trauma, but rather, as a one-dimensional character in my own story.

Again, my thoughts echo back to Arthur Frank and his concept of consolation and caregiving (Frank, 2004). My mother took on the role of caregiver, which meant to stay with me, not to abandon me, *regardless* of our differences. And this, in my life, is what constitutes unconditional love for me. Without getting sick, my mother would not have been able to show me her unconditional love in the language that she knows—caregiving.

A Wounded Storyteller

How am I a wounded body, and where did those wounds come from?

I explore this in my thesis— why did someone like *me*, healthy, robust, happy, fun-loving, become sick? Where did this illness, lying dormant deep in my bowels, come from? Whose fault is it? Is it anyone's?

Illness narratives help to restore control to the sick individual (Sakalys, 2003). For myself, this was extremely important, as my independence was and is an important part of who I am. Confronting my illness and situating myself as a wounded storyteller not only restored myself with my body, but helped me cope—a common theme for individuals with serious illness (Sakalys, 2003).

One cannot be certain whether or not my chronic illness has been living in me since conception, or if it has manifested itself due to high levels of stress and emotional trauma. But my chronic illness is not the only wound that causes me to identify as a wounded storyteller— my wounds from enmeshment with my mother also have a role to play.

A close relationship with one's mother is never a bad thing— in fact, I think that to feel close to the woman who held you in your womb-home and bore you into your life-home is an

innate desire that cannot be taken away. But to become so close to your mother that your very souls are entwined together and there is no room to become yourself, where you become enmeshed like fingers interlocking as they connect hands and arms and bodies, when, if you try to pull away, skin tears and leaves the other raw, this is where the wound grows and festers. Chapter three highlights the pain I felt when I would run away, especially in the vignette entitled *Asperges Me*.

We are all wounded storytellers, in our own right. My mother is no different. She, too, is a wounded storyteller, wounded from trauma that she has experienced in her life. Trauma that I may not ever be privy to, but that I know exists. Two wounded people will never create the perfect relationship— whether or not that even exists is a question for another day. But, when the wounded people confront their wounds, when they stand up to them and shout, “no more!” This is when the healing can start. The body is where it happens.

Implications for the Methodology

Getting Sicker

Every night before bed, I tried to write a couple pages for my thesis. I started in May, after my last semester ended, but since then I started getting sicker, which made it more and more difficult to write about these things. After working all day and exhausting myself physically, the last thing I wanted to do was exhaust myself mentally too. But I also knew that I was going to be busy next semester, and I needed to get as much of my thesis done as I could.

Getting sicker. That’s an odd phrase for me to write, since I didn’t consider myself sick until after the surgery, when I was feeling better. Once I started recovering, I could compare how I felt back then to how I feel now, and I could realize how sick I really was. But back then, I was just me. I was used to the debilitating stabbing pains in my gut and the constant fatigue. Multiple

times over that summer, I would have weekend-long flare ups where I would have high fevers and aches, wouldn't be able to get out of bed, wouldn't be able to walk, wouldn't even be able to move, it hurt so bad. I would just lay in my bed and cry. My friends would urge me to go to the emergency room, but I was scared of two things: 1. The cost and 2. That the pain was all in my head.

So, as I continued to write, I continued to get sicker. At one appointment, my doctor told me that any increase in stress is going to cause the pain to flare up. Looking back, I can see a correlation between writing my thesis and the progression in my disease. As I continued to confront my trauma through my writing, my body was quite literally rejecting it.

This thesis project came about unexpectedly. It was the end of the semester, and I had already committed to an internship and entirely different committee. I was taking a class in autoethnography and writing about my experiences growing up in a religious family, and I was enjoying it immensely but had not yet made any connections between religious and family trauma and the chronic illness that was, at that time, ravaging my body. In fact, I had not even been diagnosed yet. I was using my autoethnography class as a means of therapy, writing to make sense and to gain some clarity on my experiences. It wasn't until a phone call from Dr. Hobson, urging me to write a thesis, sparked my interest in doing one. After a few awkward emails letting my previous committee know I was switching to a thesis, and then a few more emails and Zoom meetings to solidify my new committee, I was officially on the path to creating a thesis.

My interest in family communication and intergenerational trauma began as most interests do— by experiencing it. Of course, at the time when I was going through many of my experiences I was a child and didn't realize that what I was experiencing was itself trauma and

simultaneously a product of intergenerational trauma. Growing up, I was told that what happens in the family stays in the family, so I never spoke of my experiences to other people. As I entered college, I slowly started to realize that a lot of my experiences were abnormal and began to unpack what made them different from other people's experiences. I experienced problems that I felt my peers didn't experience as much of – anxiety, chronic pain, fatigue, guilt – and I wondered why. I always considered myself a happy and healthy person, staying very active, being social, and having many friends, but there was always a cloud of unhappiness and discomfort that followed me in all things that I did. I felt constantly disappointed in myself, and I felt alone.

As I started writing for my autoethnography class, I realized that I craved stories from people who were like me– who grew up like me, who thought like me, who had experiences like mine. I needed to read other people's stories to know that I wasn't alone. That's when I decided that I wanted to contribute to a growing body of literature on intergenerational trauma, and I wanted to write about how it has affected me, my body, and my chronic illness.

However, it never works out the way you think it's going to.

I started this thesis project with the intent to write about intergenerational trauma, and how that manifested itself onto my body as a form of chronic illness, within the context of Catholicism. This all seemed very nice, each theme corresponding to each other and all boxed up with a little bow on the top. However, once I finished writing and started analyzing each of my themes and narratives, it became apparent to both my advisor and I that this wasn't a story about intergenerational trauma – well it was, but that wasn't the real story I was telling through my thesis.

To stay true to the method, I need to be honest with myself and the reader. As I read, and re-read, and have other people re-read the narratives that I have written, what comes back again and again is not a story of intergenerational trauma (which— yes, there are elements of that in there, and it certainly deserves its own paper at some point), but a story of pain and a broken body. It is a story of a girl who had pieces of her internal organ removed, and who has not yet even started to recover. Maybe physically she has recovered, but emotionally, she has only just discovered through her writing that she has not recovered. This is what my stories tell us— this is the trauma story of a wounded person. How did this thesis take its toll on me?

Regurgitating Trauma

Autoethnography is a mother.

When I first started to feel sick again, I thought it was my Crohns. Sleeping all the time (12+ hours a day, and then naps), no longer having any interest in the things I used to love to do because I had no energy to do them, no longer wanting to be around people, losing my appetite, and feeling overly emotional and unable to control my emotions or anxiety were all symptoms of my Crohn's Disease, in addition to not being able to digest food and feeling sick to my stomach, which I also felt very often. At a follow-up GI appointment, my doctor decided to order my annual colonoscopy for sooner than I needed it done, because he was worried that my symptoms may be a sign of my Humira not working and the Crohn's coming back.

It was not that, though. My body is experiencing such stress and burn out from the emotional toil that this thesis has taken on me that I still feel sick. I may have healed physically, but mentally I have not yet begun to recover.

I am writing this on a Sunday evening and I am burnt out. I am exhausted, mentally, physically, and emotionally. My stomach hurts, and my eyes are swollen from crying and

sleeping. I have never felt this way before in my life. And now— what am I supposed to do? I have regurgitated all this trauma, and now I am supposed to suck it back up and swallow it, creating a nice little digestible thesis to satisfy my nice little digestible master's degree?

I simply cannot do that. I am simply too exhausted to do that. We need an ethics of care built into academia, whether that be in communication studies or any academic field, but especially in work like autoethnography, when a student wants to tell a trauma tale. We cannot expect students to revisit their trauma, write about it for an entire year, analyze it, explain it to people, re-visit it, over and over again, and then present it, defend it, and move on with their lives! By the end of their master's program, not only are students tired from the rest of their course load, but they are emotionally exhausted from the autoethnography method-writing process. I do not try to elicit sympathy through discussing my pain in the writing process, but rather, I try to come to terms with wounded storytelling. It leaves its mark, and we cannot so quickly move from the hurt and pain to the academic and theory.

All this is not to say that I didn't understand the risks that an autoethnography about trauma would entail. In my very first meeting with my advisor, he warned me that this wouldn't replace therapy, and that the best and healthiest thing for me to do would be to get a therapist during the course of writing my thesis. He gave me examples of other students that he guided in the autoethnographic process, and described to me the various trauma responses which arose in their body as they wrote their theses. Of course, I did not believe him. After all, I'm stronger than they are, right?

Wrong.

However, the process of writing my autoethnography, although painful at many different times, was also one of the most rewarding and cathartic experiences that I have had the privilege

to partake in. Without my autoethnography, I would not have been able to learn about my relationship with my mother. Simply experiencing it was not enough, in order to understand I had to write about it.

This is how autoethnography is a mother. She holds paradoxes in her that can only make sense when you are experiencing them. She is simultaneously the comfort to the pain which she inflicts. She hurts you, but helps you grow.

Areas of Future Research

The process of my autoethnography took me to other places that I was not expecting to explore. I was not thinking about my experiences until the end of the writing process, and I realized that each of the themes I originally sought to explore were beyond the scope of my research. I simply did not have the time available to me to explore all these in full. What was most important to my thesis was how my relationship with my mother was experienced through my body, and my body's reaction to the writing of it. However, each of these other themes still play a significant role in the telling of my story and deserve to be discussed in some detail.

Intergenerational Trauma

The theme of intergenerational trauma came to light as I started to read through letters and cards that my mother and grandmother wrote to me and as well as exploring stories that my mom would tell me. Oftentimes, my mom would open up about childhood stories when we were with one of her siblings.

Whenever Mom and my Aunt Jenny visited each other as adults, there was always at least a few hours spent reminiscing on the trials and tribulations of their childhood. "We were always hungry," they would both say. "Nan wasn't domestic. She hated cooking, so it was usually spaghetti and meatballs most nights."

“Remember when I was in first grade, and you were in Kindergarten, Jen, and we would cut through the graveyard walking to school?”

Aunt Jenny would laugh, a sort of incredulous, uncomfortable laugh that someone does when they don’t know what else to say. “It would be the dead of winter!” She’d finally exclaim. “And that old man would yell at us for cutting through his yard, too!”

I remember sitting at my Aunt Jenny’s large granite kitchen counter, my arms cold against the shiny surface, enraptured by their stories. Thirsty for them, even. I drank every word. It was my favorite part of visiting Aunt Jenny, listening to the stories of their childhood, learning the secrets of my mother. “Is it weird for you to think of me as a girl your age?” my mom would ask me, smiling.

Family storytelling— especially when it is collaborative— is important for creating both individual and family identity (Thorson et al., 2013). As I thought through these anecdotes, I started to realize that a lot of these funny stories were actually accounts of childhood neglect and trauma, seen through rose-colored glasses and painted over with a smile and a laugh. I started listening more carefully to the ways in which my mother talked about her mother, and started writing down bits and pieces of conversation that stood out to me. Family storytelling can offer outsiders a glimpse at how people view themselves and their lives (Thorson et al., 2013). For me, family storytelling offered a glimpse at how my mother and her sister glance over their own trauma with laughter— instead of viewing it as trauma, they view it as a funny story.

A lot of what my mom said about her mother I had thought about or said about my mom. For example, in the vignette where my mother vents to me about my grandmother after getting off the phone with her in the sushi restaurant, I remember thinking to myself that I had said those

very words about my mother to other people, or to myself, when I was angry or upset at her. I started to wonder, if I ever have a daughter, will she say these things about me, too?

The Role of Religion

Religion is an extremely important influence in my life, and it dictated my life from the moment I was born. I was raised specifically in the Catholic faith, homeschooled, and then went to a small private Catholic school for high school. The theme of religion and Catholicism can be seen weaved into my vignettes in small and big ways. For example, the titles of my vignettes in my first chapter of narratives are all parts of the Mass, in Latin, the language of the Church. In my second chapter of narratives, I write about Mass multiple times and use a Latin phrase throughout:

Domine, non sum dignus, Lord, I am not worthy

Sed tantum dic verbo, Yet only say the Word

et sanibitur anima mea, and my soul shall be healed.

I made meaning of my Faith as a child through stories about the saints, eucharistic miracles, and even a picture bible with beautiful illustrations on each page. In fact, because of how often I read about miracles and apparitions and visions, I used to be extremely scared that I would have a vision or that something or someone would appear to me. I was afraid of the dark and of being by myself in my room. If I couldn't fall asleep, my mother would tell me to pray the Rosary. But, tears in my eyes, I would tell her I couldn't, because I was afraid Mary would appear to me. Although now cute and funny, these fears illustrate how real and powerful stories have over our minds, and how, through these religious stories, I made sense of the world and of Catholicism.

Catholicism also provides a lot of context for the particular pain and guilt that I felt— and still feel— on a daily basis. I write about this in my second chapter of narratives, where I talk about “our mother.” I purposefully blur the line between who I am talking about— my mother, or the Blessed Mother (Mother of Jesus). I was struggling in school after a rumor went around that I was a closeted lesbian, and people were refusing to speak to me. I felt abandoned by “Our Mother,” the Blessed Mother, and felt as though my prayers were falling on deaf ears. I painted a picture of the Blessed Mother as a zombie in my art class, because I felt as though she were dead to me, and my mother found out, as did other mothers, who then told their children not to interact with me— so I was even further alienated. I felt guilty constantly, maybe it was my fault that I’m struggling, that people won’t talk to me, that my mother and I fight. Maybe it’s all me.

Ave Mater

My fingers tremble as I press my mother's contact in my phone.

I am laying on the floor of my office on campus in my red summer dress, the one decorated with little white flowers and studded with delicate buttons down the front.

The tears stream down my cheeks and they won't stop. I lay on the floor because sitting hurts too much, and the pain makes me too weak to stand anyways. I do not care if someone walks in. I do not care who sees me this way, or what they will think. I simply do not care about anything, anymore.

I pray she answers, I cannot do this alone. I need her.

I feel like a child. I just want my mom. I'm so sad— so scared— so hurt— and the only person I can think of, over and over and over again, is my mom.

I want to be small again. I want to be wrapped in a blanket, with a cup of tea and an episode of *Murder, She Wrote* playing in the living room while my mom dozes off on the couch.

My mom, taking us to the pond near our house to pick cattails that jut from the murky waters.

My mom, who journals for three days in a row, and then two years later, and then a few more days, and then three years later.

My mom, taking me to Aeropostale and then out for Chinese food at the mall food court after I begged her for a "girls day out."

My mom, buying art supplies and trying to teach herself to paint, before becoming frustrated and giving up, only to pick it up six months later and repeat the cycle.

My mom, picking out my first prom dress with me, the one that we loved because it looked like a dress from *Pride and Prejudice*.

My mom, asking me to sleep in her bed with her when my dad was on business trips and she was home alone.

I miss my mom.

One ring. Two rings. Three ri– “Hey Kat!” My mom’s voice jumps through the phone and lands on my eardrum and I sigh in relief.

“Mom,” is all I say, and she immediately can hear the pain.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m in so much pain– and I’m just laying here on the floor– and– and I’m scared, and I miss being a kid and I miss the time before this, and– I don’t think I can do this– I don’t know how I can do this– it’s only September, how can I keep going?”

“Oh, Kathleen . . .” Mom speaks my name like a melody. “I pray every day that God takes this away from you and puts it into me. I pray every day that by some miracle I can take your pain for you. Oh, I just wish it were me, instead of you. Why did this have to happen to you, why couldn’t it have been me?”

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