A LESSON IN SHORT SHORTS:
A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS

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ABSTRACT

A Lesson in Short Shorts:

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Doctor of Letters Dissertation

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Lesson in Short Shorts is a collection of memoir-based essays that explores the art of narrative through creative non-fiction. The themes of this creative dissertation focus on feminism, disability, and personal discovery. The writer uses essays as a mode for personal exploration and social commentary, connecting individual experiences to broader societal contexts. The dissertation is framed by interdisciplinary methodologies, blending feminist and disability theories to examine the intersections of gender, identity, and advocacy. The principal methodology used is autoethnographic narrative.

The critical reflection highlights the writer's evolution of creative non-fiction through published authors' work. The focus of the research is based on Critical Disability Theory, and Disability studies, along with feminist theories, provide a critical lens, shedding light on the lived experiences of marginalized groups and the structural barriers they face. The writer used work by authors Phillip Lopate and Mary Karr to provide insight on memoir writing. Essay collections by Melissa Febos and Rebecca Solnit were used to examine themes such as vulnerability, resilience, and feminism. Personal essays from authors Alice Wong, Harriet McBryde Johnson, and Molly McCully Brown were

used to examine narratives of those with disabilities. All authors were used to examine the power of storytelling to foster empathy and awareness.

The author brings personal experience of living with a physical disability to the included creative pieces. The essays also speak to the author as an educator and advocate of the themes and concepts included. This dissertation aims to bridge the gaps in existing literature by addressing the intersection of feminism and disability, offering unique perspectives on identity, societal expectations, and justice. The dissertation advocates for increased representation of feminist and disability narratives in mainstream literature.

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I greatly appreciate Tamara Hart. She is my number one reader and has given me countless ideas for essays and feedback over the years and is responsible for most of my revisions. Her support means the world to me, and she should know how much I appreciate her.

GLOSSARY

The following glossary was created from multiple sources. These definitions were written for better understanding of terms used in Disability Studies and those within the disability community. These definitions were written with care to include and acknowledge all different body abilities. Please use these terms to better understand the use of these terms in this dissertation. Hyperlinks are included within definitions to provide more resources.

Ableism/Ableist

Background: "Ableism" refers to discrimination and social prejudice against people with disabilities. Ableism comes in all forms, from overt prejudice to more subtle microaggressions.

Example: Disability advocate Anthony Pulrang defines ableism in this way in an article for *Forbes*: "Any statement or behavior directed at a disabled person that denigrates or assumes a lesser status for the person because of their disability. Social habits, practices, regulations, laws, and institutions that operate under the assumption that disabled people are inherently less capable overall, less valuable in society, and/or should have less personal autonomy than is ordinarily granted to people of the same age" (Pulrang).

Abnormal/abnormality

Background: "Abnormality" is a word used to describe a condition that deviates from what is considered normal. It can be appropriate when used in a medical context, such as "abnormal curvature of the spine" or an "abnormal test result." However, when used to describe an individual, "abnormal" is widely viewed as derogatory. The phrase "abnormal behavior" reflects social-cultural standards and is open to different interpretations.

NCDJ Recommendation: The words "abnormal" or "abnormality" might be acceptable when describing scientific phenomena, such as abnormalities in brain function. However, avoid using such words to describe a person. Referring to someone who does not have a disability as a "normal person" implies that people with disabilities are deviant or strange. "Typical" can be a better choice. Be cautious when using the term "abnormal behavior." Explain what it means in the context in which it is being used.

Able-Bodied

Background: This term is used to describe someone who does not identify as having a disability. Some members of the disability community oppose its use because it implies

that all people with disabilities lack "able bodies" or the ability to use their bodies well. They may prefer "non-disabled" or "enabled" as being more accurate.

Author's Note: This is a highly debated word in the disability community. Some have taken this word and used it as a power in the way of using the term non-disabled to mean able-bodied. While others have refused to use the word altogether. I personally use it as more of a descriptor when explaining visible versus invisible disability.

Example: My appearance presents me as able-bodied, but I am actually someone with a disability.

Afflicted with/stricken with/suffers from/victim of

Background: These terms carry the assumption that a person with a disability is suffering or has a reduced quality of life. Not every person with a disability suffers, is a victim, or is stricken.

NCDJ Recommendation: It is preferable to use neutral language when describing a person who has a disability, simply stating the facts about the nature of the disability. For example: "He has muscular dystrophy."

Author's Note: I am not a "victim" of my disability. I have struggles that abled-bodied people might not have, but I in no way consider myself a victim, and I agree that using the term victim is not the correct way to handle disabilities.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

Background: The Americans with Disabilities Act is federal civil rights legislation that was signed into law in 1990 to address discrimination on the basis of disability in employment, public accommodations, transportation and telecommunications as well as state and local government services.

NCDJ Recommendation: Use Americans with Disabilities Act on first reference; ADA is acceptable on second reference.

Autism/autism spectrum disorder/autistic

Background: Autism spectrum disorder is "a group of complex conditions related to brain development, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. Common symptoms of autism include difficulties in communication, impaired social interaction and restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior, interests or activities, according to the Institute. However, symptoms vary across the spectrum. Many experts classify autism as a developmental disability" (NIH).

Prior to 2013, subtypes of autism, such as Asperger's syndrome, autism and childhood disintegrative disorder, were classified as distinct conditions. The fifth edition of the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders consolidates all autism conditions under the larger autism spectrum disorder diagnosis.

Opinions vary on how to refer to someone with autism. Some people with autism prefer being referred to as "autistic" or an "autistic person." Others object to using autistic as an adjective. The Autism Self Advocacy Network details this debate.

NCDJ Recommendation: Refer to someone as having autistic spectrum disorder only if the information is relevant to the story and if you are confident there is a medical diagnosis. Ask individuals how they prefer to be described. Many prefer to be described as "autistic," while others prefer "an autistic person" or a "person with autism."

Autoethnography

Background: The American Psychological Association defines the term as **"**an autobiographical genre of academic writing that draws on and analyzes or interprets the lived experience of the author and connects researcher insights to self-identity, cultural rules and resources, communication practices, traditions, premises, symbols, rules, shared meanings, emotions, values, and larger social, cultural, and political issues" ("What is Autoethnogrphy?" 4).

In an article for the Journal *Forum Qualitative Social Research*, Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams and Arthur Bochner define the term as, "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience…A researcher uses tenets of *autobiography* and *ethnography* to *do* and *write* autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product." (Ellis et. al.).

Author's Note: This was the method I chose to use in order to learn more about disability studies and apply it to my life and my writing. By using this research and writing method, I was able to analyze my personal experience and understand how it fit into the broader concept of disability writing.

Chronic disease/chronic illness

Background: A chronic illness is defined by the National Health Council as "a health condition lasting three months or longer and includes conditions such as cancer or heart disease" ("About Chronic Diseases" 1). Many illnesses, such as diabetes or multiple

sclerosis, are life-long conditions. There is debate about when someone with a chronic illness is considered to have a disability.

NCDJ Recommendation: When referring to a person with a chronic illness, only refer to the condition if it is pertinent to the story you are confident there is a medical diagnosis. Ask your sources how they want to be described. Some people prefer "person with diabetes" rather than "a diabetic."

Author's Note: The term chronic is used in disability studies to express disabilities that can't be cured. Someone with chronic pain from a disability can't reduce that pain, which means they must now live with chronic pain. Chronic might be used in different ways, which is determined by the type of disability.

Congenital disability

Background: A person who has a congenital disability has had a disability since birth. Common congenital disabilities include Down syndrome, heart-related medical conditions, and most forms of cerebral palsy. "Congenital" is not interchangeable with "genetic," as a genetic condition is present from birth, but a congenital condition is not necessarily genetic.

NCDJ Recommendation: It is acceptable to state that someone has a congenital disability or lives with a congenital disability. Alternatively, it is acceptable to say that a person "has had a disability since birth" or "was born with a disability." State the specific disability, if possible. Avoid using "defect" or "defective" when describing a disability because the terms imply that the person is somehow incomplete or subpar.

Author's Note: I used the term defect and the phrase "born with a disability" for almost thirty years. This is how doctors spoke to me, my parents, and teachers. I didn't know any better. Writing this Glossary taught me that by not using these terms, I can change the way my disability is explained and understood.

Cripple/crip

Background: Merriam-Webster defines the noun "cripple" as "a lame or partly disabled person or animal" and as "something flawed or imperfect" (Merriam-Webster). It is also used as a verb. The word dates to Old English, where it was related to words that meant to "creep" or "bend over" (Merriam-Webster).

According to the blog grammarphobia, Patricia T. O'Conner and Stewart Kellerman wrote that the term cripple "became offensive in the early 20th century and was replaced by 'handicapped' and then by 'disabled'" (Conner and Kellerman).

Recently, some disability activists have reclaimed the word. Jon Henner, an assistant professor at University of North Carolina at Greensboro, who is Deaf, describes himself as a "crip linguist."
While some activists have embraced the word, adopting hashtags such as "#criplit" and "#cripthevote," others are very much against its use. Keah Brown, a writer and disability activist who has cerebral palsy, tweeted in 2018: "I just really can't stand the word cripple, so whenever I see it, I block it out. I legit ignore every notification with the word in it" (Brown).

NCDJ Recommendation: Avoid using "cripple" as either a noun or verb unless you are describing the "crip" movement or if it's in a direct quote.

Author's Note: Cripple, I think is one of the toughest words in this glossary. I feel the need to take back the power of this word by using it to describe myself. But if someone else were to use this term to describe me, I would find it to be derogatory. It's one of those words that has to be used correctly, and if not, it becomes a weapon.

Defect/birth defect

Background: A defect is defined as an imperfection or shortcoming. A birth defect is a physical or biochemical difference that is present at birth. Many people consider "defect" and other forms of the term offensive when describing a disability as they imply the person is deficient or inferior to others.

NCDJ Recommendation: Avoid using "defect" or "defective" when describing a disability. Instead, state the nature of the disability or injury.

AP style: The stylebook says "birth defect" is acceptable in broad references, such as lessening the chances of birth defects. But it should not be used when referring to a specific person or to a group of people with a specific condition. Instead, be specific about the condition and use only if relevant to the story. Some prefer the term "congenital disorder."

Deformed/deformity

Background: According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, "a deformity is a condition in which part of the body does not have the typical or expected shape, a Physical deformities can arise from a number of causes, including genetic mutations, amputations and complications in utero or at birth" (Merriam-Webster). However, the word "deformity" has a negative connotation when used in reference to those with disabilities.

NCDJ Recommendation: Avoid using "deformed" as an adjective to describe a person.

Developmental disabilities/disability

Background: The Centers for Disease Control defines developmental disabilities as "a group of conditions (that arise) due to an impairment in physical, learning, language or behavior areas. These conditions begin during the developmental period of life, may impact day-to-day functioning, and usually last throughout a person's lifetime" ("Developmental Disability Basics").

According to the *Guidelines: How to Write About People With Disabilities*, published by the University of Kansas Research & Training Center on Independent Living,

> Developmental disabilities is an umbrella term for a number of life-long conditions apparent during the developmental period. The developmental period is generally understood to end at the age of 22. The most common DD conditions are intellectual disability, Down syndrome, autism, cerebral palsy, spina bifida, fetal alcohol syndrome, and fragile X syndrome. Although the term intellectual disability (ID) is often used in conjunction with developmental disability, many people with a developmental disability do not have an intellectual disability. The acronym IDD is used to describe a group that includes people with ID, people with another DD and/or people with both. (Guidelines: People Disabilities 15)

NCDJ Recommendation: While it is acceptable to use the terms "developmental disability" and "developmental disabilities," it is preferable to use the name of the specific disability whenever possible. Say she has cerebral palsy or he has a developmental disability. Do not say mentally retarded.

Differently-abled

Background: This term became trendy in the 1990s as an alternative to "disabled," "handicapped" or "mentally retarded." Currently, it is not considered appropriate (and for many, never was). Some consider it condescending, offensive or simply a way of avoiding talking about disability. Others prefer it to "disabled" because "dis" means "not," which means that "disabled" means "not able." But particularly when it comes to referring to individuals, "differently abled" is problematic. As some advocates observe, we are all differently abled.

NCDJ Recommendation: "Person with a disability" is a more neutral term than "differently-abled."

Disability studies

Background: In an article for the *New York Times*, Cecilia Capuzzi Simon defines the discipline as "examining the policies and practices of all societies to understand the social, rather than the physical or psychological determinants of the experience of disability. Disability Studies has been developed to disentangle impairments from the myths, ideology and stigma that influence social interaction and social policy. The scholarship challenges the idea that the economic and social statuses and the assigned roles of people with disabilities are the inevitable outcomes of their condition" (Capuzzi Simon).

NCDJ Recommendation: Use Disability Studies in the same way you would reference other academic disciplines.

Disabled people/people with disabilities

Background: The phrase "disabled people" is an example of identity-first language (in contrast to people-first language). It is the preferred terminology in Great Britain and by a number of U.S. disability activists. In Syracuse University's Disability Cultural Center's Language Guide it states, "The basic reason behind members of (some disability) groups' dislike for the application of people-first language to themselves is that they consider their disabilities to be inseparable parts of who they are." For example, they prefer to be referred to as 'autistic,' 'blind' or 'disabled'" (Disability Cultural Center).

Several U.S. disability groups have always used identity-first terms, specifically the culturally Deaf community and the autistic rights community.

NCDJ Recommendation: Ask the disabled person or disability organizational spokesperson about their preferred terminology.

Disfigurement/disfigured

Background: According to the *Guidelines: How to Write About People With Disabilities*, published by the University of Kansas Research & Training Center on Independent Living,
"disfigurement refers to physical changes caused by burns, trauma, disease or congenital conditions" (Guidelines: People Disabilities 16). This term should be used for those who underwent a physical or mental change. Someone born with a disability should not be explained as being born disfigured. Disfigurement is the act of change, not the outcome. If disfigured is used towards someone with a disability, it is being used in a rude manner.

NCDJ Recommendation: Do not call someone "disfigured" as it is considered derogatory. Refer specifically to the physical changes.

Disabled/disability

Background: "Disability" and "disabled" generally describe functional limitations that affect one or more of the major life activities, including walking, lifting, learning, and breathing. Various laws define disability differently.

NCDJ Recommendation: While it is usually acceptable to use these terms, keep in mind that disability and people who have disabilities are not monolithic. Avoid referring to "the disabled" in the same way that you would avoid referring to "the Asians," "the Jews" or "the African Americans." When describing individuals, do not reference disabilities unless it is clearly pertinent to the story. When possible, refer to a person's specific condition.

Author's Note: I have found in my research that although "the disabled" should not be used in case there is a derogatory connotation, terms such as "the disabled community," "Laws that protect the disabled," are more acceptable because they are used to explain the type of grouping.

Handicap/handicapped

Background: Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines handicap as "a physical disability (as a bodily impairment or a devastating disease)" (Merriam-Webster). The term has fallen out of favor in the disability community.

NCDJ Recommendation: Avoid using "handicap" and "handicapped" when describing a person. Instead, refer to the person's specific condition or use "person with a disability." The terms are still widely used and generally acceptable when citing laws, regulations, places or things, such as "handicapped parking," although many prefer the term "accessible parking."

Impaired/Impairment

Background: Disabilities are often referred to in terms of impairment, as in "hearing impairment" or "visually impaired." Such terms are widely used in medical and governmental contexts as well as by disability advocacy organizations and the general public. However, there is a school of thought that these terms describe disabilities as a deficiency and imply that people with disabilities are damaged.

NCDJ Recommendation: When possible, avoid describing a person or condition as "impaired." Alternative language for "hearing impairment" and "visual impairment" are offered under those entries.

Interabled

Background: The term interabled is used by some in the disability community to refer to couples in which one person has a disability and the other does not. Certain communities, such as the Muscular Dystrophy community and the Spinal Muscular Atrophy community, have embraced the term, but others argue that interabled relationships are relationships just like any other and should not be marked as different.

NCDJ Recommendation: Since the term is not in widespread use, its meaning should be explained for a general audience; ask sources how they prefer to describe their relationships whenever possible.

Invalid

Background: The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines an invalid as a noun "one who is sickly or disabled" and an adjective "affected by disease or disability" (Merriam-Webster). The Diversity Style Guide explains, "It is probably the oldest term for someone with physical conditions that are considered seriously limiting. However, it is such a general term that it fails to accurately describe a person's condition and is now widely viewed as offensive in that it implies that a person lacks abilities" (Diversity Style Guide).

NCDJ Recommendation: Avoid using "invalid" to describe a person with a disability except in a direct quote.

Invisible disabilities

Background: The majority of people with disabilities have chronic conditions that are invisible or hidden. Although many in the general public associate disability with people using wheelchairs or white canes or who are missing limbs, more people have conditions that can't be seen but are defined as disabilities under the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act.

For example, millions of Americans are hard of hearing, but most do not use sign language and many do not use hearing aids. Mental illness is a prevalent, invisible disability. Many chronic health conditions also are considered invisible disabilities, depending on their severity and impact on daily living. Chronic illnesses such as Parkinson's disease, diabetes, lupus or Crohn's disease may fall into the category of invisible disabilities.

According to the *Guidelines: How to Write About People With Disabilities*, published by the University of Kansas Research & Training Center on Independent Living,

> Invisible disabilities, sometimes called hidden disabilities, include a wide range of conditions that are not immediately apparent to others, such as autism spectrum

> disorders, mental health conditions, learning disabilities, and fibromyalgia. Some people with accessible parking permits have an invisible disability, so it is not fair to assume they are not permitted to use an accessible parking space based on their appearance. (Guidelines: People Disabilities 16)

NCDJ recommendation: Do not apply the term "invisible disability" to people without asking what they prefer. Many people with chronic illnesses do not consider themselves disabled and thus may be offended by the term. If a preference is unknown, specify the condition rather than referring to it as a "hidden disability," which is vague and open to interpretation.

Lame/lamebrain

Background: Lame is a word commonly used to describe difficulty walking as the result of an injury to the leg. Many people object to the use of the word to describe a physical condition because it is used in colloquial English as a synonym for weak, as in: "That's a lame excuse."
The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines "lamebrain" as "a dull-witted person" (Merriam-Webster).

NCDJ Recommendation: Avoid using "lame" or "lamebrain" to describe a person except in a quote. In the case of a leg injury, explain instead that an injury resulted in difficulty walking.

Neurodivergent

Background: Merriam Webster's Dictionary definition states, "having or relating to a disorder or condition (such as autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyslexia, or obsessive-compulsive disorder) that impacts the way the brain processes information: exhibiting or characteristic of variations in typical neurological development" (Merriam-Webster).

Medical Expert, Jodi Carlton, explains, "Neurodivergent individuals experience, interpret, and interact with the world differently than neurotypical individuals. the concept of neurodiversity, a term introduced by sociologist Judy Singer in the 1990s…Singer likened the diversity of human cognition to biodiversity in nature, framing neurological differences as natural variations rather than medical flaws" (Carlton).

Carlton also explains,

> Terms like *autism spectrum disorder* or *attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder* still center the conversation on what's perceived as dysfunctional. This reinforces the misconception that neurodivergence is a defect to be fixed rather than a

> difference to be valued and understood. A major flaw in this perspective is its narrow focus on the challenges associated with neurodivergence, while overlooking the remarkable strengths, talents, and cognitive diversity that often accompany it. (Carlton)

Neurodiverse/Neurotypical

Background: Merriam Webster's Dictionary definition states, "having or relating to brain function that is not neurotypical. Terms such as 'neurodiverse' were introduced in the 1990s by autistic sociologist Judy Singer as an alternative to deficit-based language, such as 'disorder'" (Merriam-Webster).

Neurodiversity

Background: Merriam Webster's Dictionary definition states, "individual differences in brain functioning regarded as normal variations within the human population." The second definition is, "the concept that differences in brain functioning within the human population are normal, that brain functioning that is not neurotypical should not be stigmatized, and that people with neurodivergent brain functioning should not be excluded from groups, organizations, etc." (Merriam-Webster).

In the article "What is Neurodiversity" for the Harvard Medical School, Nicole Baumer writes,

> The word neurodiversity refers to the diversity of all people, but it is often used in the context of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), as well as other neurological or developmental conditions such as ADHD or learning disabilities. The neurodiversity movement emerged during the 1990s, aiming to increase acceptance and inclusion of *all* people while embracing neurological differences. Through online platforms, more and more autistic people were able to connect and form a self-advocacy movement. At the same time, Judy Singer, an Australian sociologist, coined the term neurodiversity to promote equality and inclusion of "neurological minorities." While it is primarily a social justice movement, neurodiversity research and education is increasingly important in how clinicians view and address certain disabilities and neurological conditions. (Baumer)

Non-disabled

Background: "Non-disabled" refers to someone who does not have a disability. According to the *Guidelines: How to Write About People With Disabilities*, published by the University of Kansas Research & Training Center on Independent Living, "Non-disabled is the preferred term when the context calls for a comparison between people

with and without disabilities. Use 'non-disabled' or 'people without disabilities' instead of healthy, able-bodied, normal or whole" (Guidelines: People Disabilities 17).

NCDJ Recommendation: "Non-disabled" or "does not have a disability" are acceptable terms when referring to people who do not identify as having a disability. In general, avoid using "able-bodied' except in a quote.

Author's Note: When surrounded by those who know about my disability, I sometimes use the term "non-disabled" to make those around me aware that they are not a part of my group. I do this in a sarcastic manner just to show that there should not be any pity placed on those with disabilities.

People-first language

Background: According to the *Guidelines: How to Write About People With Disabilities*, published by the University of Kansas Research & Training Center on Independent Living,

> Person-first language—which literally puts the person first in a sentence—offered a way to acknowledge that a person's disability is only one aspect of their identity. Person-first language is used in the title of the 1990 landmark civil rights law, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Person-first language acknowledges a person's humanity before conveying an objective fact. She uses a wheelchair is a person-first alternative to the inaccurate, outdated, and offensive wheelchair-bound. (Guidelines: People Disabilities 3)

People-first language is not preferred by all people with disabilities. Specifically, some members of the autism and Deaf communities prefer identity-first language.

NCDJ Recommendation: Ask the person with a disability how they prefer to be described; if that's not possible, ask a spokesperson for the organization representing the relevant disability for preferred terminology.

Physical Disability

Background: According to the *Guidelines: How to Write About People With Disabilities*, published by the University of Kansas Research & Training Center on Independent Living, "Physical disability is an umbrella term that refers to conditions affecting a person's physical functioning, dexterity, and stamina, thereby affecting a person's ability to operate in their environment. Examples include spinal cord injury, amputation, and other conditions that may have physical manifestations, like multiple sclerosis or stroke" (Guidelines: People Disabilities 18).

Visible Disability

Background: According to the *Guidelines: How to Write About People With Disabilities*, published by the University of Kansas Research & Training Center on Independent Living, "Visible disabilities are conditions which others can observe. Visible disabilities include many physical disabilities, Down syndrome, and conditions that require the obvious use of supports such as communication devices, external hearing aids, crutches, etc." (Guidelines: People Disabilities 20).

NCDJ Recommendation: see "Disabled people/people with disabilities" and "disabled/disability."

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INTRODUCTION

A Lesson in Short Shorts is a collection of essays. The journey to dissertation began with a memoir writing class. I have always loved creative writing, but learning more about creative non-fiction completely changed how I write and what I choose to write. Like fiction, non-fiction contains different categories. Nonfiction includes self-help, historical nonfiction, books based on specific time periods or events, autobiographies, and biographies. Creative non-fiction is a category of writing that compiles different genres or sub-genres of non-fiction. I decided to focus on "life writing." The most popular form of life writing is memoir. However, there is another well-known form of memoir: the personal essay. These are forms of creative nonfiction, but there are distinctions between them. There is a fine line and some overlap.

Memoir writing is defined as "focusing on a specific event from the past through the author's personal viewpoint. Yet unlike an autobiography, it doesn't have to span over the course of an entire life, but instead can focus on a period of time, a group of characters, or a specific personal theme" (Glantz). A personal essay is defined as "Using the author's personal experience, whether current or from the past, to explore themes with viewpoints relative to the reader" (Walter). For my dissertation, I had to decide what my focus would be for my creative work. I decided to focus on researching individual memoir-based essays. My project is a memoir written as a collection of personal essays. I believe my creative work is a hybrid of memoir and personal essay writing. I classify this collection as a personal narrative based on discovery, personal observation, and reflection.

Although the collection is a memoir that chronicles my journey of acceptance and understanding, the essays are not in chronological order; instead, they are organized by themes and discoveries made through research. Each essay is included in the order in which I discovered certain themes and used my research to write. As I read, I wrote. The essays are in order based on where I began reading and learning.

The art of creative non-fiction is based on personal narratives. The writer must be ready to be open to tell a story that needs to be told. As writers, it is our job to find the "gaps" in the stories that already exist. Once, during a creative writing workshop, I was told, "Write what you want to see in the world. What feels immediate? What's missing? What should be written right now?" I asked myself these questions before I wrote every essay in this collection.

Writing from my perspective on a topic requires research and a deeper understanding, which helps me develop my opinion on the topic while I learn more about it. I hope that by releasing my stories into the world, my readers will be aided in their own discovery.

I chose Drew's Doctor of Letters Program because I was intrigued by the idea of an Interdisciplinary Studies degree. I am a college professor, and I consider myself a continuous student. I am always looking for ways to broaden my knowledge and understanding. I think the best teachers are always learning. I wanted to bring different perspectives to the classroom, and I felt Drew University's D.Litt program would help.

My journey into essay writing began much earlier in my studies at Drew. I have a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing. My thesis was a memoir based on my childhood. Surprisingly enough, I did not focus on my disability at all in this memoir. When I

decided to attend Drew's D. Litt program, I did not begin my studies with an idea of what my dissertation would be. I figured it would be a creative project, but I wanted to see what I would learn in my classes and decide on my project later

Once I began the program, I learned that Interdisciplinary study is an approach to education, research, and problem-solving. With an interdisciplinary approach, an educator can break down traditional boundaries between academic fields. This encourages collaboration from different disciplines and allows discussion on various issues and how to problem-solve using different solutions from theories and pedagogies. Interdisciplinarity integrates knowledge from diverse areas.

In this dissertation, I drew on the foundation of interdisciplinary study to incorporate different disciplines into my research and writing. I knew that I would use creative non-fiction for my creative dissertation model. I used Disability Studies to learn more about its history, theories, and ideologies, to define how I would incorporate disability into my essays. I used Feminist texts and Feminist theories to learn more about the authors and conversations, both historically and today. I read articles written by women who were advocates in the feminist movement. Once I decided that these would be my themes to include in my work, I began reading personal essays on these topics. As a woman with a disability who writes from personal experience, I needed to read what others were writing about these themes. Crucial advocates such as Gloria Steinem and Kenny Fries were helpful authors who defined my discovery.

My creative writing journey began by examining the relationship creative non-fiction cultivates between writer, memory, and awareness. Creative non-fiction can be used as a form of social commentary. I knew that social commentary needed to be an

essential part of my memoir-style essays. As a writer, I needed to speak directly to the reader in a way that actively invites the reader to develop an opinion on the topic, understand my opinion and consider it.

My decision to write a collection of essays about disability was a personal journey. I was born with Congenital talipes equinovarus, also known as clubfoot. I spent the first twenty-six years of my life trying to hide this part of me. I wanted so badly to have an able body. I wanted to be like my friends and tried not to worry about my future. I had minimal pain, but my arthritis and lack of cartilage caught up with me. At twenty-six, I had surgery that helped with the pain but brought in a new problem: my movement was limited. I can't walk long distances, standing still is uncomfortable, and if I walk too much, I will be sore the next day.

This was when I realized that I could no longer pretend that I lived in an able body. I am a person with a disability, and finally, I have decided to accept it. Then, I realized I didn't know much about my disability or disability in general. I had been hiding my disability my whole life, but now I wanted knowledge and truth. This dissertation is a personal quest for me, and the creative work in this essay collection is what led me to this realization.

The research I compiled on disability and Disability Studies created the framework for my learning. Once I better understood Disability Studies, I built my methodology for writing, found texts containing themes and content that matched my focus, and strengthened my knowledge of the craft of essay writing. Once I found a lens of focus on the theme and message, I started my creative writing process.

After my first Memoir writing class with Bill Gordon, I wanted to take every creative non-fiction course Drew offered. I then took an essay writing course with Robert Carnevale. I enjoyed his class and learned so much that I petitioned to take it a second time. Most of the work in my collection came from assignments I wrote in this course. This workshop, along with Bob Carnevale, gave me the confidence to write an essay collection as my dissertation project.

As I began researching different kinds of creative nonfiction, I decided that my interests would match best with essay writing. Then, I began to find authors, collections, and anthologies that focused on the themes I wanted to write about. I noticed that for some authors, the purpose of their essays is social commentary. The use of personal experience and intimate anecdotes can illuminate a social issue or a specific community. I noticed that issues of disability justice were brought up in these essays through the conversation the author had with the reader. The creative non-fiction essay takes many forms; these authors used personal experience to highlight disability. The honesty, vulnerability, and intimacy of creative non-fiction invites an emotional investment from the reader, creating a context in which awareness is heightened. The reader can read a personal story from an author and find empathy, relevance, and understanding. Narratives have the power to raise fresh awareness about a social issue. That was one of my takeaways from reading the essays I found. Essay writing can be a chance for catharsis, a deeper understanding of a topic, or an opportunity to contribute to the conversation. Essay writing is a chance to write what the author wants to see in the world. An opportunity to answer the question, what should be written right now?

The first time I read a personal essay was “I Want a Wife” by Judy Brady. I was preparing to teach my first college composition course, and the coordinator gave me a packet of reading materials. I was amazed by Brady’s direct tone. Her bluntness and honesty made me love this kind of personal essay. She speaks to gender disparity in such a tongue-in-cheek way. I had never read anything so sarcastic.

The next essay I read was “Shitty First Drafts” by Anne Lamott. I still use this essay in my college composition courses. Accomplished writer Lamott discusses the writing process and how no one should expect to write a perfect essay in one draft. I had read novels and non-fiction texts in my undergraduate experience, but finding a creative non-fiction essay was eye-opening and changed how I taught. I had always used Op-Eds but now I had found a new resource, the personal narrative.

The first essay that taught me the power of the craft was “Some Thoughts on Mercy” by Ross Gay. He begins his essay with an explanation of how he handles his beehives. This overarching metaphor is captured in how he explains run-ins with the police. As a black man, he knows he is stereotyped by authority figures. He ends the essay by returning to the metaphor. Just because he had more control over the bees, he held the power, but that didn’t mean he should abuse it. He could have lit the hive on fire and walked away. But as he cleared the honey from the frames, the bees never attacked. They went about their business. He knew the bees were taking mercy on him just as he was. Without saying it directly, Gay taught the biggest lesson I had learned from an essay so far. Just because we have the power to hurt someone doesn’t mean we should. I wanted to write an essay like this.

During my time in an MFA program, I was tasked with writing "close reading" papers. I was writing a memoir and had to read other memoirs with similar themes or styles to learn the art of non-fiction writing. I was to read a text and find one piece of craft to focus on and analyze how the writer used this device. After reading Gay's essay, I appreciated the power of metaphor. I challenged myself during the writing process to focus on metaphor the way Ross Gay does in his essay. I can say that I feel I successfully used his essay as a model of craft for my essay "A Lesson in Grief." I am so proud of this essay because, like Gay, I allowed myself to be vulnerable about a topic that is not easy to discuss. It is also a topic that I believe, should be discussed more. Taking what I learned from an MFA program, I continued my research on craft through the readings I chose for my Literature Review. I carefully chose these essays because I knew that I would want to incorporate the craft and themes into my writing.

Also, while writing my MFA thesis, I read *The Art of Memoir* by Mary Karr. Known to be one of the greatest nonfiction writers, she explains that truth is the contract between the nonfiction writer and their reader. Without truth, creative nonfiction writing has no ground; it becomes a fictional story. "A memoirist starts with events, then derives meaning from them. In this, memoir purports to grow more organically from lived experience" (Karr xvii). After reading Karr's book, I better understood the memoirist's duty to the reader. By using resources from my previous studies, I was able to make solid connections to my current writing project.

As my coursework at Drew was ending, I knew I had to start thinking about my Dissertation project. I first thought I wanted to continue the memoir I had started for my MFA thesis. I soon realized that essay writing was my true passion. During the Joy of

Scholarly Writing course, I decided to write a memoir in essay style. I believe that telling the truth is both the essay writer's chief obligation to her readers and her best hope of really reaching them. "A memoirist forging false tales to support his more comfortable notions—or to pump himself up for the audience—never learns who he is. He's missing the personal liberation that comes from the examined life" (Karr 12). Karr explains the examined life, and I believe this is ideal for essay writing.

My first question was, what do I write about? I thought about some of my favorite writers. Ross Gay commented on racial injustice and the abuse of power by law enforcement in his essay. He examined moments in his life and reported in a way that by the end of his story, the reader is left wondering how anyone in law enforcement could abuse such power. Judy Brady speaks with such sarcasm that the reader understands the ridiculous and outrageous nature of her essay to be tongue-in-cheek but also realizes that this woman examined her life and that of other women to reflect her experiences against society and bring to light the disparity between genders at the time. I began to ask myself, what message was important to me to write about? I thought back to one of the semesters I taught Judy Brady's essay. A student was convinced that Judy Brady was a penname and the essay was written by a man. The student believed that there was so much conviction and passion in the essay that it had to be the honest thoughts of a man. That is the power of writing. These writers are life examiners and social commentators, resulting in thought-provoking pieces of writing. I knew I had to find something that I could write with conviction and passion, like Gay and Brady.

In the introduction of *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Phillip Lopate gives his definition of the personal essay. He explains what is necessary to follow the tradition of

essay writing. He uses categories to define, which include “The personal element. Honesty, confession, and privacy. The contractions and expansions of the self. Cheek and Irony. The idler figure. The past, the local, and the melancholy” (Lopate i). He also discusses the importance of “Form and style, and quotation and the uses of learning.” Most importantly, he ends the introduction with a section titled “The personal essay as a mode of thinking and being” (Lopate i). After reading Lopate’s introduction, I better understood essay writing.

His introduction is a manifesto for one of the most extensive collections of essays ever published. Authors such as Joan Didion, Virginia Woolf, George Orwell, James Baldwin, and Anne Dillard are included in this collection. Lopate explains the personal essay in the introduction, so the reader has a foundation of what to expect in the essays to come. “One would like to think that the personal essay represents a kind of research on the self in ways that are allied with science and philosophy” (Lopate xliii). Creative writing is not just for “the writer,” I believe that essay writing is used in many capacities in other areas of thought, as Lopate explains.

For an essayist to write a compelling and thought-provoking essay, the writer must look out into the world to see what needs to be communicated. What commentary can the writer add to an already uncertain world? Culture, technology, and standards are constantly changing in society; if the essayist isn’t the one to comment on these changes and their effects, who will? It is up to her to analyze how a society is affected by specific changes. “In the final analysis, the personal essay represents a mode of being. It points a way for the self to function with relative freedom in an uncertain world” (Lopate xliv). Writers are analyzers of the world around us.

Lopate's classifications of writing are universal. Although essays have evolved and developed over time, writers have grown, new topics have emerged, Lopate's classifications remain the same. In a world that is embracing and pushing for the evolution of Artificial Intelligence, this need is more critical than ever. As humans, we use this advanced technology to write emails, research papers, business proposals, cover letters, and many other modes of writing. What this technology can't do is write the human experience. This makes writing more important than ever. A human's experience is unmatched by technology. The use of Artificial Intelligence will change many industries, but I hope creative writing will never be one of them. I don't think a computer could write a better metaphor than Ross Gay.

Lopate discusses how writing is essential to philosophical beliefs and ideas. "The essay is not, for the most part, philosophy; nor is it yet science. How seriously ought we to take its; aims of being experimental? It lacks the rigor of a laboratory experiment; it doesn't hold onto its hypotheses long enough to prove them. But it is what it is: a mode of inquiry, another way of getting at the truth" (Lopate xlv). Like Lopate Mary Karr has a set of beliefs she uses to define memoir writing. Karr believes that if a writer can't remember something perfectly, it's better to be more vague than to lie. The difference between nonfiction and fiction is telling a true story.

My research began when I considered the question: How can a writer create an emotional investment in the reader and get them to care about the topic enough to compel change? Some of the themes in my essays required research, and I read as much as possible to expand my knowledge of these topics, allowing me to write a collection of essays. However, as writers, I don't believe we are truly experts on specific topics.

Writers are constantly learning and evolving, and the need for discovery looms over them when they begin a new piece of writing.

I first had to figure out what research methodology creative writing was considered. Creative nonfiction writing is a type of qualitative research known as ethnography or evocative inquiry (see glossary for definition). In her research, Caitlin M. Mulcahey explains the history of evocative inquiry and how it is currently in its eighth stage.

> 1950-1970, the modernist or golden age of positivist social critique began to blur genres of initial migration between the arts and social sciences. 1970-1986 represents the period of the emergence of reflexivity and critical theory. 1986-1990 was the postmodern period of 'The Narrative Turn.' 1990-1995 was the post-experimental period of 'The New Ethnographies.'...2010-present is a period of qualitative researchers becoming better at connecting personal troubles to social justice, lived experience to social policy. (Mulcahey 195)

Once I understood that qualitative research was a deeper dive into the insights of real-world problems, I knew I was in the right place. Unlike quantitative research that compiles data and statistics, qualitative research is the type of discovery that doesn't have a definitive answer. This is what essay writing and reflection are all about. I then wanted to know if personal essay writers used a specific type of qualitative research or evocative inquiry.

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that exists within the evocative inquiry methodology. Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams, and Arthur Bochner define the term as "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze

personal experience to understand cultural experience…A researcher uses tenets of *autobiography* and *ethnography* to *do* and *write* autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product." (Ellis et. al.). Like an autobiographer, the author is the one examining the culture, society, or oneself. The "researcher" then takes their beliefs and experience and writes from their point of view. "The autoethnographer studies oneself, one's own lived experiences, and the lives of others connected to those experiences. In this sense, the autoethnographer is intimately embedded in the text, engaging the reader through self-revelation, vulnerability, and reflexivity, provoking empathy, reflection, and critical thought" (Mulcahey 198). Once I learned that there was a term for the process, I was already using to write my essays, it became clearer how to read others' work. The essayist is embedded within the context of the writing, a part of the culture they write about, and someone who experiences the topic being discussed. Instead of Jane Goodall studying the apes and watching their experiences, autoethnography is Ross Gay explaining what it felt like to be pulled over by a cop without cause. As he tells his story, he uses self-revelation and vulnerability to provoke empathy and critical thought in his readers.

Understanding autoethnography meant that I could now connect a term to my essay writing. I knew that I was using lived experience, analysis, reflection, and vulnerability to evoke emotion and provoke critical thought, but now I understood the methodology of it. "Good autoethnography should connect the teller of the tale to their audience and should create meaning that is both imaginative and analytical. In other words, good autoethnography should move the reader both emotionally and

intellectually" (Mulcahey 198). I knew what reading creative nonfiction essays could do for me: get me to think in new ways. Now I had a model, a definition, and a strategy.

Although creative non-fiction essays are often categorized as autoethnography writing, I realized that different philosophies, paradigms, and worldviews can also be used in this type of writing. I found a few perspectives that helped frame my research and the writing style I would focus on for this project. This framework involved advocacy/participatory, Feminist Theories, as well as Disability Theory. These worldviews created a checklist for my analysis of writing.

The first perspective I used to build my research methodology was advocacy/participatory. This framework focuses on reforming the institutions where the participating group lives and works; sometimes, it is even used to reform the researchers' lives. I found this method interesting because it touches on the two groups I decided to research: women and those with disabilities. These two groups have similar qualities regarding oppression, suppression, and alienation. This framework helped me understand which literature would be the most helpful. Feminism first emerged in the 1800s and evolved. Suffragettes reformed feminism to win the right to vote in the 1920s. The Equal Rights Movement reformed the idea once again in the 1970s. Once I understood the ideology of advocacy/participatory, I could then pinpoint when reform happened, allowing me to research those periods and find writing that was used to advocate for reform.

Once I understood the worldview of advocacy/participatory, I could use other frameworks as my foundation for my research. Feminist Theories and Disability Theories were two essential views I needed to understand. I found that these theories fell under the

umbrella of interpretive communities. As a researcher, I used these interpretive communities as genres or categories for my reading. I also learned that these specific theories exist because interpretive communities are considered "othered." Queer theory exists because it is in the minority compared to heterosexual ideology. John Creswell, in *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design,* explains,

> The participants in these interpretive projects represent underrepresented or marginalized groups, whether those differences take the form of gender, race, class, religion, sexuality, and geography or some intersection of these differences. The problems and the research questions explored aim to understanding specific issues or topics the conditions that serve to disadvantage and exclude individuals or cultures, such as hierarchy, hegemony, racism, sexism, unequal power relations, identity, or inequities in our society. (Creswell 23)

Before focusing on the authors themselves, I focused on creating a framework or lens, and I delved into both theories to learn what to look for in the essays. My analysis was based on a feminist research approach, which is defined as,

> Problematic women's diverse situations and the institutions that frame those situations. Research topics may include policy issues related to realizing social justice for women in specific contexts and knowledge about oppressive situations for women. The theme of domination prevails in the feminist literature as well, but the subject matter is gender domination within a patriarchal society. Feminist research also embraces many of the tenets of postmodern critiques as a challenge to current society (Creswell 25).

Understanding this methodology as it relates to feminist writing helped me sort through the essays I found, categorize essays, interviews, and scholarly articles, and understand my writing style within the category of "feminism."

I set out to define feminism through my research. I soon realized that this was not an easy task. Not every woman is a feminist. Not every feminist is a woman. Feminism isn't always an identity. It can be a discipline, a discourse, a way of life, and so on. Feminism is both a field of study and a way of advocacy. In the article "The Many Voices of Feminism" written by Colleen Dryden and Natasha Erlank et. al. They explain, "Some feminist theory creates the impression that, analogous with class consciousness, women have to have an awareness of their common oppression as women and have to follow this up with action in order to be considered truly feminist" (Dryden and Erlank et al. 114). The article discusses the differences between identifying as a "feminist" and practicing feminism. They questioned the theory by asking themselves if understanding oppression was what made these two things different. In the article "Feminism: Efforts at Definition," author Patrick Colm Hogan attempts a definition,

> Across a broad range of writers, activists, and ordinary people, the term 'feminist' appears to be used most consistently with respect to a particular set of political aims. Thus, virtually every feminist advocates actions to reduce or, ideally, eliminate rape, wife abuse, the sexual molestation of young girls, female infanticide, underfeeding of girls, restrictions on reproductive freedom, etc. Along with women's basic physical rights to health, nutrition, etc., as well as their right to exercise control over their own sexual and reproductive lives, seem to be almost universally affirmed by feminists. Moreover, feminists quite generally

> share the (certainly correct) belief that women have been deprived of these rights in a manner and degree to which men have not. This, however, does not change the fact that women as women have been systematically deprived, while men as men have not- and some conception of this seems crucial to feminism of all sorts as well. (Colm Hogan 46)

Colm Hogan's is the best definition I have come across. My understanding was that feminism was agreed on dismantling the patriarchy.

I wanted a better understanding of feminism's history, so I kept digging. I had learned about feminism throughout my life, but I didn't understand where feminism started. I read *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan when I was sixteen. I had read archived articles from Ms. magazine and knew that Gloria Steinem was Editor-in-Chief. What I didn't realize was that a collection of women had begun the movement. The *Feminine Mystique* was published in 1963. Judy Chicago, a professor at Fresno State College, started a Women's Art program in the spring of 1970. The article, "Judy Chicago and the Practice of 1970s Feminism," written by Jane Gerhard, discusses Chicago's contribution to the movement.

> Chicago's work in the 1970s introduced thousands of nonactivist women to elements of feminism. In her classroom from 1970 to 1972, which resulted in the installation *Womanhouse* (1972), and in her studio between 1976 and 1979, which resulted in the monumental artwork *The Dinner Party* (1979), Chicago practiced feminist ideals of egalitarianism and personal empowerment. (Gerhard 592)

History has placed Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem on pedestals, and rightfully so, but the feminist movement was carried by so many other women. Chicago used women's

history classes to teach about feminism. “Chicago had students read feminist theory by notables such as Ti-Grace Atkinson, Roxanne Dunbar, Simone de Beauvoir, and Anai's Nin; they read the histories and biographies of well-known female artists such as Frida Kahlo and Mary Cassatt and researched lesser-known women artists” (Gerhard 593). I guess the saying that it takes a village to raise a child is a good analogy for the start of feminism. It took a village to start a movement. What I learned is, Feminism is political, but it's also human. It's about healthcare, access to education, safety, and equality. Once I understood this about feminism, I knew I could write on it from my own unique perspective.

Disability theory was a completely new concept for me. The revolution has been evolving and growing since the ADA bill was passed in 1990. Disability theory, justice, and studies have emerged and grown in importance. Recently, there has been more exposure for those with a disability. *Crip Camp: a Disability Revolution* is a documentary (2020) won an award at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival. When I first saw *Crip Camp*, I knew that a shift had happened. Disability had moved past the point of fascination; it was now part of pop culture. Creswell covers this same concept,

> Disability research has moved through stages of development, from the medical model of disability…to an environmental response to individuals with a disability…Viewing individuals with disabilities as different is reflected in the research process, such as in the types of questions asked, the labels applied to these individuals, considerations of how the data collection will benefit the community, the appropriateness of communication relationships. (Creswell 30)

The societal switch from disability as a medical condition to an identity allowed disability to become a part of pop culture. Using Disability Theories in research provides more inclusion in the data collection.

At first, I thought I would struggle to find scholarly articles on disability studies. I knew I could find articles, texts, essays, etc., on feminism. Since the 1960s, feminism has been a significant part of scholarship in gender studies. I already knew many writers who focused on the study of feminism or used it as a theme in their writing. Disability studies was a new field of study for me. Finding *Claiming Disability* by Simi Linton, published in 1997 by New York University Press, felt like reaching the mountaintop. It's one of the only texts from this time that is integral to the field of Disability Studies. Part manifesto, part textbook, this text covers the subject of disability in a way that both defines and opens the door to knowledge, identity, culture, politics, curriculum, and much more. Not only is the text itself well-researched, but there are also many references that I used to continue my research. *Claiming Disability* is one of the best texts I have read in the discipline, and without it, I believe my research would have lacked a true understanding of what it means to write about disability.

As I continued to find more scholarly articles most cited *Claiming Disability*. Simi Linton, a disability rights scholar, is an associate professor of Psychology in the Division of Education at Hunter College (at the time of publication). Linton's goal is to look at disability outside of the medical context that it's often assigned. On the book's first page, Linton defines disability studies as "a location and a means to think critically about disability, a juncture that can serve both academic discourse and social change" (Linton 1). As one of the more well-known scholars of disability studies, Linton defines

the field of study in a precise and simple way. Although the actual study of disability is complicated, the definition is not. Linton continues to describe the type of study in more detail. “It is an interdisciplinary field based on sociopolitical analysis of disability and informed both by the knowledge base and the methodologies used in the traditional liberal arts, and by the conceptualizations and approaches developed in areas of the new scholarship” (Linton 2). Through reading *Claiming Disability,* I began to build a framework for approaching disability, first as a topic of reading and second as a theme for creative writing. Beyond the medicalized version of disability, I learned that there are many lenses to consider when researching or reading creative work. I needed to consider the social, cultural, and political contexts of disability.

Linton’s text taught me about disability studies and its connection to society and the human experience. Although disability is labeled as “other,” it is vital for disability to be a part of society. He explains that disability studies deepen “the historical comprehension of a broad range of subjects, for instance the history of values and beliefs regarding human nature, gender and sexuality; American notions of individualism and equality, and the social and legal definition of what constitutes a minority group” (Linton 118). Disability has been rooted in so many other disciplines, subjects, and fields of study, but as its own discipline, it can combine other subjects to focus on the issues and concepts within this marginalized group. I always knew that disability studies were about identity, individuality, independence, and equality, but gaining a deeper understanding of disability studies has helped me to better define my research process and my creative writing. I am not writing about disability as a subject, I am looking at disability as a scholar and a creative writer.

Although I am writing my essays from my own experience and perspective, I also must consider the foundation of disability studies and the conversation I am entering. Linton also discusses, "A Disability Studies perspective adds a critical dimension to thinking about issues such as autonomy, competence, wholeness, independence/dependence, health, physical appearance, aesthetics, community, and notions of progress and perfection—issues that pervade every aspect of the civic and pedagogical culture" (Linton 118). Before I even began my research on Disability Studies, I had already asked myself questions on autonomy, notions of progress, and society's obsession with perfection. Simi Linton's book was a great introduction to disability as a topic and Disability Studies as a subject. I wanted to go further than Linton's text.

I found many articles written by scholars on the history of disability, the analysis of the ADA, and how people with disabilities were treated, as well as how far society has come in understanding and acceptance. There is still misunderstanding when it comes to disability, but since the ADA bill in 1990, Americans are working towards a more equitable society. In the article "Crips Strike Back: The Rise of Disability Studies" written by Lennard Davis he explains,

> Disability studies got its biggest impetus and rationale from political struggles in the US and abroad. As with the civil rights movement or Act Up, political movements such as protests surrounding the Jerry Lewis Telethon and the Deaf President Now movement at Gallaudet University galvanized interest and created a political context for academic research. These activities first appeared in the US after World War II, when wounded veterans organized for health

> care and social compensation for their war injuries. The first major legislation, the Architectural Barriers Act (1968), required all buildings constructed with federal funds to be accessible to people with disabilities. Several acts through the 1970s and 1980s laid legal foundations for the civil rights of people with disabilities, culminating in the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). None of this legislation would have been possible without the activism of people with disabilities. (Davis 507).

From this article, I gained knowledge of past acts and laws enacted for the protection of people with disabilities. Although the ADA is the most comprehensive bill ever passed in the United States, I was unaware that advocates began working for change as early as the 1940s.

I also learned more about Eugenics and the theories used against those with disabilities. I learned that there are multiple editions of the *Encyclopedia of American Disability History.* There is an ongoing debate between Disability being a medical diagnosis and disability as a societal issue. Many scholars write on both sides of the argument, but it allows for the conversation to ask questions about ethics, morality, and philosophy. This discovery of the literature that is available on disability helped me to frame the topics of my essays and gave me a better understanding of the current conversations that exist within the scholarship of Disability Studies.

With this better understanding of the methodologies of such scholarship, I could apply these concepts to the essays I read. My creative work is the bulk of my dissertation, but the journey to write the essays that would make up my collection had to start with my understanding of writing. Then, I had to strengthen my knowledge of my themes. Then, I

had to study other authors who wrote on my chosen themes. All of this before I could write. My journey was my lesson in how my experiences are connected to the larger societal context of feminism and disability.

The two main focal points of my collection are feminism and disability. Through my research, I discovered how women are shaped by society, careers, motherhood, lack of motherhood, and their male counterparts. I also dove deep into the world of disability and how it affects both men and women. I explored the invisibility of disability and how, although many groups have come a long way, persons with disabilities are still behind in their social awakening. My collection focuses on these two communities in the form of social commentary—feminists and women with drive, and people with disabilities.

Before my creative work, I included a glossary that supplies definitions and explanations of common phrases within the disability community. I used the AP style definitions from the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University as a starting point for understanding how disability is defined, and which words are considered appropriate when discussing disability and disorders. Providing the "Disability Language Style Guide" helped me to understand more terms than I already knew and gave readers a better understanding of terms and topics before they read the creative part of the dissertation. I found so many different resources online that helped me build the glossary. There are many blog posts, articles, and pamphlets created by organizations that define key terms and provide solutions for outdated terminology that should no longer be used. I compiled these resources and created the glossary based on what I felt were the most important terms for my writing and my readers' understanding.

After I learned as much as I could about the different philosophies, paradigms, and worldviews, I focused on find essays to model. As previously stated, I knew the themes of my essays would be coming of age, Feminism, and Disability. I needed to conduct research on authors to read. It was important for the author of the essay I was reading to fall into one of these categories. I wanted to read literature about feminism and essays from feminists. All the creative non-fiction essays I read about disability were written by writers with disabilities. The authorship of these essays was important to me because my study focused on learning about these authors and their backgrounds.

After finding essays written by well-known writers in their category, such as Gloria Steinem and Alice Wong, I decided to blur the lines a bit by intersecting categories. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, one of the authors I read, is a queer, non-binary person with a disability. Kenny Fries is a queer Jewish man with a disability and brings a different perspective to my readings. I believe that putting writers into "boxes" can be a way to deter the reader. If I explain that I'm only reading Alice Wong's writing because she is a person with a disability, then it reinforces stereotypes. But if I describe her as a female writer with a different perspective, because she lived most of her life in a wheelchair, she is now a writer with a unique view. Blurring the lines by intersecting these categories allows the reader to see that the author can bring multiple perspectives to their writing. Kenny Fries writes about being Jewish in a world that isn't fully accepting, but he also shares that view when he writes about being queer. Reading authors with multiple views and perspectives offers the reader a richer and more compelling narrative.

My purpose for this collection of essays is to add more literature to the conversation on disability. With more narratives from the disability community, there is more exposure. I have read works by contemporary authors, along with articles in the scholarly discussion of feminism, societal expectations of women and people with disabilities, and invisible disabilities. During my research phase, I read many essays. Still, I narrowed it down to the works of Judy Brady, Melissa Febos, Molly McCully Brown, Rebecca Solnit, Maxine Hong Kingston, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Kenny Fries, Nichole Schroeder, and Amy Wong to inspire the essays in my collection.

As previously stated, one of the first times I connected with feminist writing was after reading Judy Brady's essay, "I Want a Wife." Her essay first appeared in 1971 in the premier issue of the feminist magazine *Ms.* In the essay, Brady explains why she thinks wives are the best and how she wants one, because she believes it will help her succeed in life. The essay is primarily tongue-in-cheek, but it lists all the duties and expectations of a wife. "I want a wife who will take care of my physical needs. I want a wife who will keep my house clean. A wife who will pick up after my children, a wife who will pick up after me" (Brady 1). These aren't just a husband's expectations for his wife but societal expectations for all women. Years later, these societal expectations in narratives still speak to this theme.

Maxine Hong Kingston's Memoir Woman Warrior (1976) includes an essay titled "No Name Woman," a story of how her aunt was judged and abused by her culture. American-born Hong Kingston intimately tells the story of her Chinese aunt. It's a peek inside the sexism, gender disparity, and the patriarchal value systems of China. By exploring her aunt's story, Hong Kingston can visualize an identity shaped by a male

world. She imagines what her aunt went through, being raped by a man, not being able to tell anyone, and when she became pregnant, he threw her to the side to be ostracized by her village. Hong Kingston focuses on relatable themes, such as identity, the need to belong, and the desire to be loved. One theme, though, that provides an even more intimate look into the patriarchal society of China is through the act of adultery. In Brady's essay, she mentions how wives are loyal to their husbands. This connects back to the societal expectations a woman is to follow.

The sexism in China at the time is portrayed in how her aunt was treated after committing adultery, which was really rape. Women were their husbands' property and were punished for not following the customs in place. After the village ostracizes her, Hong Kingston's aunt commits suicide, demonstrating the stain men can place on a woman's reputation. Maxine Hong Kingston uses the identity of the "No-Name Woman" to tell a story of the oppression of women. Narratives continue to surface in collections and memoirs published within the last decade as well.

In Melissa Febos's first published collection of essays, *Girlhood* (2022), she explores female bodies, sexuality, the journey of discovery that comes with entering adulthood, and the relationship between men and women. In many of her essays, I noticed some specific similarities between my writing and hers. Febos reflects on her early adolescence and how boys were interested in her at a young age. Febos identifies as Bi-Sexual as a teen and then mostly dates women in her adult life. The attention of boys was how she established her worth. Her essay collection is about discovering her identity through her exploration of the need for the male gaze. She learned her femininity and sexuality from the way she felt when men were attracted to her. "I came to better

understand the lessons about my female body, the ones that tell us punishment is a reward, that disempowerment is power. When one of the boys I used to play with wanted to put his hands under my clothes, I did not stop him. Perhaps to let them win was the better way, after all" (Febos 22). Her essays are a great addition to the feminist writing of the early twenty-first century.

Rebecca Solnit began her writing career as a journalist. Although my content matches Febos's themes, Solnit's style matches mine more than any other author I read. My undergraduate degree is in Journalism. My first creative writing lesson was in nonfiction. Feature writing was my favorite style of journalism, and I find that within my writing today, I continue to use facts, figures, and evidence to support my point and engage the reader. Although I never became a journalist, the lessons I was taught helped to shape the way I write. Solnit also skillfully writes like a journalist in most of her essays. Her most popular collection of essays, *"Men Explain Things to Me" (2015),* centers on the themes of feminism, sexism, and gender stereotypes. In her title essay, "Men Explain Things to Me," she explains how, at a party, a man was describing to her a book he had recently read, when she said she had written the book, he said that a man had written the book. The essay explains how many men Solnit encountered over the years of being a writer would try to "explain" things to her as if she weren't intelligent because she was a woman.

This essay and many others in her collection prove how women have come a long way in business, writing, politics, and many other areas, but are still looked down upon by men. Her contributions to the current conversation on feminism are important to the change women need. The country is still run by men, most fortune 500 companies have a

male CEO. Feminism has created the awareness that women can be equal but today the equality still doesn't exist in many areas. Solnit writes to this issue in her collection.

Although Rebecca Solnit's writing is very factual and evidence-based, while Melissa Febos's writing is more of a narrative structure, both are amazing writers who bring feminism and gender equality to the forefront, so it never gets lost among the constantly changing list of hot-button issues. Brady, Febos, Solnit, and Hong Kingston are very different writers and tell different stories, but they all show how societal expectations are placed on women based on gender roles. These essays highlight the mold women are trying to break free from.

In the Introduction for *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century (2020),* Alice Wong writes about community. "I grew up seeing very few images that looked like me in books, film, and TV" (Wong xiv). Since the passing of the ADA, there has been a strong movement for more inclusion of the disability community. Wong writes about how she discovered her community. I understood Wong's struggle; many people with a disability like me struggle to find others to speak with or a movement, a cause. Wong began connecting with disabled writers and activists and created the Disability Visibility Project. The first published work was *Resistance and Hope: Crip Wisdom for the People* (2018). Alice Wong edits all the collections and is responsible for the project. Without her advocacy, there might not be other spaces for writers with disabilities to tell their stories. Wong might be the first voice I read discussing it, but she is not the only woman voicing the need for more advocacy.

One of the essays included in *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century* (2020) by Harriet McBryde Johnson is "Unspeakable

Conversations." This is one of the most mind-blowing essays I have read on Disability Advocacy. She discusses in her essay how she has been to many talks with Professor Peter Singer about infanticide and eugenics, a topic I have always been interested in. McBryde Johnson's essay touched on the idea that some disabilities are better handled by death. It is up to doctors to decide the quality of life the child will have based on the severity of the disability. She also discusses how Eugenics was used to attempt to eliminate certain genes that would cause disabilities. Sterilization was common among the disabled community. Their rights were taken from them based on something they could not control, how they were born. She also discusses the other conversation surrounding disability, the right to die. Some people with disabilities are not born with them but develop from an accident or illness. Some medical professionals believe that those individuals should be able to decide whether they want to live. McBryde Johnson's essay is thought-provoking and forces the reader to focus on the harsh reality that is the relationship between the medical community and the disability community.

The most difficult part of disability advocacy, writing, and reading about it is that there are no right answers. The moral conundrums of these questions can be weighed through ethics, but ultimately, more writing about these ethical dilemmas is needed. The voices of people with disabilities need to be heard, along with research, to improve the amount of information available. Some answers to the questions are in narrative form.

In her second anthology, *Disability Intimacy: Essays on Love, Care, and Desire* (2024), Alice Wong writes the introduction from a new perspective. She reminisces about being a fifty-year-old woman who has never been on a date or been in a relationship. She is vulnerable with the reader by saying, "I struggle to see myself as desirable and can

only imagine how the world perceives me" (Wong xix). Wong brings up a consistent theme that flows through almost every essay: the desire to love but the struggle to accept oneself. In my research, I found that this was one of the topics that was written about the most in the disability writing community. The constant question is, can someone with a disability find love? Wong ends the introduction by saying, "Intimacy comes in many forms, and you are deserving of it, whatever it looks like or means to you" (Wong xx). Wong reminds us that everyone deserves love and that we should remember this wherever the reader is on their acceptance journey.

The first personal essay in *Disability Intimacy: Essays on Love, Care, and Desire* (2024) was written by Nicole Schroeder. The name seemed familiar, but as I began to read the essay, I instantly recognized who had written it. In my essay "A Lesson in Self-Acceptance: Join the Club," I write about Nicole Schroeder. She is the colleague who visited the workshop to tell the faculty about disability studies. Her essay, "Unspooling," is about coming to terms with her diagnosis. Unlike me, Schroder was diagnosed with her disability at nineteen. As an adult, she now had to take the life she knew and watch it disappear as she learned to live a new life full of restraint and change.

I realized that Schroder was an integral part of my quest to discovering Disability Studies and played a role in my decision to write my dissertation on this theme. I started reading more of her writing. I found that she is a very active disability advocate. She speaks on podcasts, television and has recorded a few interviews. In the article "Disability in the Classroom: A Roundtable Conversation" that she was interviewed along with Leni Van Goidsenhoven and Inge Van de Putte. As a panelist, Schroder discusses her experience as a professor with invisible disabilities. She focuses on the

importance of not assuming students in the classroom have an invisible disability but expecting the need for accommodations each semester. As a researcher of Disability Studies and an educator, I found this to be a crucial conversation. Schroeder makes a poignant point when she explains,

> Our goal is to support students, not to force them to publicly claim their disability. The risks for 'outing' students as disabled are very real. There are pervasive and overwhelming stigmas and barriers attached to the disability. It is dangerous for some students to claim the identity, especially those at the intersection of other marginalised identities. (Van Goidsenhoven, et. al.)

One of my essays discusses the internal debate I had about discussing my disability with my fellow educators and my students. Reading this solidified for me the importance of teaching my students about disability.

In the article "Dying a 'Good' Death: Disability and the Assisted Suicide Debate," published on the Disability Visibility Project blog, Schroeder discusses another commonly discussed topic in the disability community, the right to die. She writes, "Many disabled people, though, rightfully worry about flaws with existing laws, future applications/expansions of existing laws, and the persistent devaluing of disabled lives" (Schroeder). In my research, I have come across many theories on this topic. The right to die is commonly tied to terminal illness. In the medical field, it is only used to discuss disabilities when it comes to ending a child's life due to the assumed quality of life. Within Disability Studies, there is a discussion about those with a disability being given the right and the dignity to decide if medically assisted suicide is something that should

be an option. Schroeder advocates for this and explains that many states don't have a clause for those with disabilities.

I have learned so much from reading Nicole Schroeder's writing and from being in her presence. She does not shy away from the topic of her disability. She leans into it and will discuss it with anyone who is willing to listen. She has brought the conversation of disability to Kean University, where I teach, and I have enjoyed working with her to educate others. I am thankful to have the chance to work and learn from her.

Molly McCully Brown's Essay, "The Broken Country," published by the Virginia Quarterly Review in 2020, is a perfect mixture of two of my themes: feminism and disability advocacy. McCully Brown was born with cerebral palsy. Her essay explores the idea of the body, what is expected of a woman with a disability, and her right to sexual experiences. She expresses how she has focused her identity on how people view her whole life based on her abilities. But when it came to the natural desires of a woman, she refused to be told she couldn't have what everyone wanted: to be loved. Her essay is a beautiful testament to her experience with chronic pain and how most of us have both good and bad days. "On a good day, my body doesn't embarrass me. It does what I ask it, lets me walk short distances and do my job. I don't notice people staring, don't trip on my way in to teach a class, sending thirty-five student papers flying everywhere" (McCully Brown). Like Wong's Anthology, McCully Brown reminds the reader that everyone is deserving of love. Some people take longer to open themselves up to love.

Alice Wong, Harriet McBryde Johnson, Nicole Schroeder, and Molly McCully Brown have more in common than just being people with disabilities. They also advocate for the subjects that surround disability. These aren't essays about having a disability;

these essays discuss the issues or problems that occur in life due to having a disability. This is what I want my essays to do: bring awareness and help show that there is more to disability justice than the ADA.

Most of my reading has led me down the path of better understanding "The Other." When it comes to disabilities, many writers try to focus on how it affects their lives. Still, for a reader to understand or even sympathize with the author, they need to know how society is not constructed for people with disabilities. The ableist world forces us to be "the other." We can't go about our day the same way an able-bodied person can. Kenny Fries explains this well in his essay "The Stories We Tell About Disability" (2018). He describes the different barriers that are placed in front of someone with a disability.

> This is one of the stories I usually tell when talking about the social model of disability, in which physical and other barriers cause a person to be disabled. In this model of understanding disability, a disability is not rooted in the body but in the constructed environment in which we live. In this example, my body remains the same; it is the building itself that is the barrier. (Fries)

He discusses other barriers beyond the physical. Barriers such as religion, faith, the medical model, and societal expectations are all barriers for those with a disability.

Fries worked with graduate students on a project called "Disable the Barriers," which focused on changing stereotypes about disabilities. Fries and his students connected with the New York City Disability Pride Parade. He explains their mission,

> Among their discoveries was that they equated disabling *stairs* with disabling *stares*. Stairs are a physical barrier. But stares represent attitudinal barriers within

> us, and within our culture, that disables us from seeing how we are complicit in creating an exclusive society, one which not only physically bars the disabled from full participation but also hinders our discussions about how best to move forward (Fries).

Kenny Fries was one of the first writers to describe experiences like these. He opened the door for modern writers with a disability.

In an interview with Fries titled "Author Kenny Fries on being queer, disabled, and Jewish: How the three identities formed his rather irreverent take on life" (2022), Kathi Wolfe explains Fries's struggle with accepting his disability. She uses the term "the myth of the ideal body." Fries explains it as "Anyone with a body that is perceived as different is up against this myth, Fries said. "Everyone is affected by this myth, even straight white men. They just don't know it as much as we do" (Wolfe). This idea of the ideal body is all around us. We can't escape societal body standards seen in advertisements and in the media. When it comes to ability, the ideal body can include ability, age, weight, and any other measure. This concept is universal, but it is heightened for those in the disability community.

Wolfe's interview also taught me a new concept within the disability community: "coming out." I had assumed that the LGBTQ+ community coined this term, but really, the essence of the term is showing others that one is different from the status quo. "Though he's been disabled since he was born and his disability is quite noticeable, Fries didn't 'come out' as disabled until he was in college" (Wolfe). Fries fascinates me because, even though he is a man, there are many similarities between him and me. I, too, struggled with my identity when it came to my disability. There is this idea of "passing."

There are some people who have a visible disability, while others have an invisible disability. For a long time, I wanted to be someone without a disability. I covered up a part of my identity, but it finally came out when I was in my late 20s. It takes time to accept a disability, and I felt better knowing that Kenny Fries also needed more time for acceptance. When Fries discusses identity today, he expresses himself by saying, “Being queer, disabled, and Jewish – being triply ‘othered’ has emphasized his ‘questioning,’ societal structures and institutions” (Wolfe).

Throughout my reading and dissertation journey, I, too, began to question what all of this means. Why does society place people into “boxes” or “categories?” There is a need to “other” people and to normalize certain human aspects. I began to wonder how this benefits society. What does placing those with a disability in a category achieve? I started looking for answers to the question, is change possible?

The Future is Disabled (2022) by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, is a collection of essays about disability justice. As a person of color and a member of the LGBTQ+ community, Piepzna-Samarasinha is very aware of advocacy and creating awareness for minority groups. In her introduction, she expresses her disdain for always being made to feel that there isn’t a place for her in this world. When she discusses the future, she notes, “In so much utopian social justice-oriented science fiction, it's unquestioned that in the good utopian future disabled people don’t exist” (Piepzna-Samarasinha 17). This collection of essays focuses on why minority groups continue to struggle for justice. Her essays express her daily struggles, advocacy, and why there is a need for people with disabilities in the future.

Leah Piepzna-Samarasinha and Kenny Fries both want people to realize is that no one asks to be born disabled. The life of a person with a disability is more complicated than that of an average able-bodied person. They also shed light on the fact that the ADA was the first and only law that protected this group of people. This is just the beginning; much more needs to be done.

I have brought up the term invisible disability throughout this reflection, and I would like to address this issue here. There are mixed definitions that exist for this term.

> "People often ask us to define invisible disability. In simple terms, an invisible disability is a physical, mental or neurological condition that is not visible from the outside, yet can limit or challenge a person's movements, senses, or activities. Unfortunately, the very fact that these symptoms are invisible can lead to misunderstandings, false perceptions, and judgments. (Invisible Disabilities Association)

It is also defined as an ongoing mental or physical challenge. Although this is an open-ended definition, I believe it's a great start for the disability community. I grew up surrounded by people who downplayed my condition and would try to reassure me that they "couldn't tell I was disabled." In the past thirty years, I have watched the evolution change from my condition being swept under the rug to finding a definition. Every person has the right to define their disability as they see fit, but there is an "advantage" to an invisible disability; if someone wanted to keep it hidden, they could. I did that for years.

Although the definition is loose, some discussions have been started on the subject. In her article "What to Know About Invisible Disabilities," Brenda Alvarez writes for the National Education Association about this in terms of special education.

> Not all disabilities are apparent from the outside. These physical, mental, or neurological conditions—known as invisible, or non-apparent, disabilities—can limit or challenge a person's movements, senses, or activities, and can impact that person's ability to learn or work. Common non-apparent disabilities include cognitive dysfunction, chronic fatigue, and sensory-processing disorders. They also include autoimmune disorders, depression, diabetes, vision impairments, and trauma, among other conditions. (Alvarez)

There isn't an exact list of disabilities or disorders that address what is considered invisible or visible. There is also no list of disabilities recognized by all medical associations, medical journals, and so on. I recently heard a podcast episode where a neuroscientist was discussing the current topic of whether ADHD is considered a disability. Although the medical community has diagnosed more people and has a better understanding of disabilities today, there are still discussions and controversies. As Linton explained, disability is a medical term. We are starting to define it beyond the medical definitions, there needs to be other ways to define it.

I think it's very interesting that disability is not a word with a concrete definition. This could be because disability is a wide range of physical and mental differences. I recognize it as anyone who is impaired in some way. Either an impairment that prevents the person from completing daily tasks, or something that causes pain or discomfort. The term "able-bodies" is used to describe someone without a disability because they are

"able" to complete tasks and not feel pain. After reviewing my research, I realized I was very close to the definition used by the US government. "According to the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) an individual with a disability is a person who: Has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities; has a record of such an impairment; or is regarded as having such an impairment" (ADA). If this is how the definition was worded in the Americans with Disabilities Act, then this is how the judicial system defines disability. There is also a section in the ADA that explains that one can't be asked what their disability is and be forced to explain. If someone expresses a need for accommodations or differential treatment, they should not be judged or mistreated. They should be granted the request without needing documentation or approval. Now, this is easy for some disabilities. If someone is in a wheelchair, they need access to an elevator. Accommodations get tricky when it comes to invisible disabilities. I have students who present accommodation letters to me. It explains what they need from me as an instructor. I also know that the ADA protects them, and I can't ask what their disability is.

Invisible physical disabilities to me can be seen as "passing as an able-bodied person." On the first day of classes, I watch 20 students walk in and take their seats at desks. Just by sight, I can't indicate most of the disabilities my students might have. Most of the time students are doing exactly what I do, which is called masking or passing. Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel, the two leading sociologists on stigmatization, coined the term "Passing." In the article "Passing," Nicole Rousseau states, "The concept of passing originates in popular and legal discourses of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries about relations between black and white people in the United States." Also

known as “masking” or “presenting,” all three terms are a type of stigmatization. In 1968, Goffman published his findings on stigmatization and explained, “Individuals try to avoid stigmatization, which has three distinct dimensions: character blemishes, physical deformities, and personal features like race, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Individuals often try to avoid stigmatization to enhance their social standing” (Rousseau 16). Goffman and Garfinkel created these distinctions to create categories of passing. If someone feels stigmatized because of their physical deformities, they would be more inclined to pass as able-bodied if possible. I am someone who can pass as an able-bodied person. It's the categorization of the stigma that allows us as a society to “other” someone. Groups allow us to say one over the other. As these sociologists suggest, if one group is considered “normal” or more accepted, the other group is less accepted or considered wrong or bad.

In a student thesis for Rollins College, Joy Sandon analyzed Goffman and Garfinkel’s work. Sandon explains, “There are a few key issues worth discussing when it comes to the passing phenomenon. The first is whether an individual passes intentionally, the second is the idea of passing from a marginal group to a dominant or “normal” group and vice versa, and the third is the question of whether the passing was or is successful” (Sandon 4). I have talked to students with learning disabilities, neurodivergence, and mental health issues. All of them have expressed that they initially didn’t want me to know because they wanted to be like everyone else. I completely understood this because if I could “pass” as able-bodied, then I didn’t need to disclose my disability unless it affected the class. But what my students didn’t understand is, if their disability affected

their learning or progress, then I needed to be able to accommodate them. Passing is to feel accepted, but that isn't always the best way to handle disability.

One semester, I had a student who was blind. I noticed right away that she had a disability. She needed a cane to walk and asked for help finding a desk in the front. She couldn't mask her disability; I knew she would need accommodations and patience. She explained to me the first day what she needed and how I could help. This was one of the best experiences I had with a student with a disability. Any other student in the class that semester who may have had a disability but did not disclose it was viewed as an "invisible disability" to me.

> More than 1 in 5 UK adults are disabled. Disabilities that are not immediately obvious are known as 'invisible disabilities', such as mental health conditions, neurodivergences and energy-limiting conditions. Those with invisible disabilities may face challenges due to a lack of awareness and difficulty accessing support and services. It is estimated that 70-80% of disabilities are invisible. (Kelly and Mutebi 1)

To me, this is a staggering statistic. If 20% of the population has a disability, why isn't this talked about more often?

The term "invisible disability" has not been discussed enough. I don't think it's better or not to be considered "invisible." I saw how having a visible disability helped my student get what she needed to succeed. I have also seen neurodivergent students struggle because of the stigma that surrounds ADHD in the college setting. So many students have waited until halfway through the semester to tell me they have accommodations for their ADHD. There needs to be more awareness of disabilities. As an educator, I am not

trained on disabilities and how to handle accommodations or needs of my students. Disabilities are finally becoming more acknowledged and more accepted in our culture. But there is a need for more education, awareness, patience, and understanding. I recently told someone what my dissertation topic is, and he said, “Oh, I hate the ADA.” I was stunned speechless. He must have noticed that I was offended because he explained, “I work in construction. We have to follow so many rules and regulations; it makes my job more difficult. I don’t hate disabilities, I just hate the rules.” I replied with, “I hate being disabled, but it’s not like I have a choice.” That ended the conversation. But this proved to me that we need to continue to have these conversations and spread awareness as much as we can. Hopefully, one day, we can live in a world where disability is a common word and not one people are unaware of.

CONCLUSION

Writing my dissertation was a true journey. It began with my interest in writing a creative dissertation. Once I started the coursework, I began to find my own passions and topics I was interested in writing about. During the Joy of Scholarly Writing, I realized I wanted to deepen my knowledge of the subjects and topics I wanted to write about.

The creative part of this project was knowledge I already had. After completing my thesis for my MFA program, I knew what it took to write a collection of creative work. It was the process of including the research, methodologies, perspectives, and themes to produce the creative work that I had to learn. Through this process, I learned more about research and writing, and I'm happy with the final product.

I learned that Anne Lamott’s essay “Shitty First Drafts” is not only valuable in the classroom. Something I took away from her essay is the revision process. While writing

this dissertation, revision became a large part of the process. My dissertation is a collection of essays written over various time periods. The first essay, “A Lesson in Short-Shorts: How Working at Hooters Prepared Me for the Patriarchy in America,” was something I started in 2019. It has gone through multiple revisions, and I believe that where it is today is the best version it's ever been. Since 2019, I have been working on my essay writing, my style, and my voice. Lamott teaches my students every semester what the shitty first draft is, but I had to learn that it is ok to start with a shitty first draft and progress from there. Learning that allowed me to write the essays I have included in this collection. I'm proud of how far they've all come.

My research had many weaknesses, but not so much in the literature. The essays I found were invaluable in helping me learn more about each theme. I also found the “Disability Language Style Guide” created by The Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University extremely helpful. What was lacking in the literature was more data and surveys. It doesn’t seem that many researchers are making the connection between disability justice and the individual. I couldn’t find sources for many of the essays I read. Most narratives were void of research and focused more on personal experience. This prevented me from finding quantitative research that provides statistics or data.

The strengths of the research process came from the collections I read, which are based on the quality of the writing and material. These writers are well-known; some have multiple published works and have earned awards for their writing. I found it a privilege to read their essays. One of the strengths comes from the authors' content about disability. Kenny Fries created the Fries test, which evaluates the amount of inclusion and

diversity within a piece of literature. He is an active voice within the Disability Community. Molly McCully Brown and Leah Piepzna-Samarasinha are less well-known as writers but are gaining popularity for their writing on disability justice. Another strength lies in the diversity of authors I read. Utilizing well-known authors alongside those who are less well-known, and they all have different backgrounds. Reading the voices of these authors allows me to read the essay for what it is: a narrative—a narrative about disability or feminism, and sometimes both.

I want to add my name to the list of writers with a disability who have an essay published. Alice Wong is doing an amazing job with the Disability Visibility Project. With three published essay collections, she is allowing those with disabilities to write about their personal experiences and share the gift of knowledge with the rest of the world through these essays. The fact that Alice Wong has found this many writers living with a disability proves there is a place for this type of writing within the genre, and many writers are willing to write about it. I believe that if writers continue to write about disability and raise awareness about the subject, we will start to see more of these essays in circulation. The strength lies in the personal accounts that are included in these essay collections. Without these perspectives, I feel that my perspective on disability would be different and possibly weaker as a result.

I wouldn't necessarily call it a weakness, but one thing I realized during my research process is the need for more creative writing about disability to be mainstream. There are plenty of journals that focus on disability, and many writers with a disability are being published. But something I noticed is that disability as a topic isn't always featured in more mainstream journals. There might be a piece or two added for diversity,

but I would love to see more pieces published about disability, which is a form of normalization. I want my dissertation to be an essential addition to the literature on disability.

I mostly found the lack of voices from those with invisible disabilities. The idea of "passing" or "masking" is an interesting concept that I don't feel is explored enough, and this is where my perspective comes in. After exploring invisible disabilities and reading narratives from writers with visible disabilities, I see the gap. Neurodiversity is a term that is becoming more mainstream. I am beginning to see new emerging authors in this space. Tyler Page wrote a memoir titled, *Raised on Ritalin - A Personal Story of ADHD, Medication, and Modern Psychiatry*, about his neurodivergent experience as a child and an adult. Emily Farris wrote *I'll Just Be Five More Minutes: And Other Tales from My ADHD Brain* a personal essay collection based on her ADHD diagnosis. More invisible disability literature is emerging but there is a need for more.

I think there are gaps in the literature that I can fill with my writing. There is a hint of feminism in disability justice writing, but is there enough advocacy in feminist writing? This is where I think I can fill in the gap. As a strong feminist and a person with a disability, I believe that I bring a unique voice to the space. I hope to be one of those writers whose writing can make a difference.

My passion for writing this collection stems from my desire to see more representation. A focus of my dissertation is to examine the importance of social commentary within the craft of creative non-fiction and consider how essays create change, unlike anything else, in the face of societal norms. Through my creative writing,

reading, learning, and reflection, I hope I created a dissertation that expands the conversation and brings a new perspective to what disability means today.

As I previously stated, I was once asked at a workshop, “What feels the most immediate to me? What needs to be written about right now?” This question drove this project: the idea is that the world is missing the voices of feminists with disabilities. There needs to be more stories and narratives about these two subjects. I now have a finished product that stemmed from that question; it is better than I ever imagined.

To conclude my critical reflection, I want to reflect on the actual writing process. Some of my essays came from writing prompts in a graduate class or a workshop I attended. Some of these essays have gone through many drafts that span years. However, all these essays were chosen because of my lived experiences. The collection might not have come into existence if it weren’t for the knowledge I gained through my coursework at Drew University. I am proud of the collection and its transformation over the years. I revised a few essays after conducting my research and wrote new ones with the knowledge I gained during my research. I've enjoyed watching my writing evolve throughout this process, and I'm very proud of what I've created and accomplished.

The title of my collection went through many versions. I have always struggled with titles. Many of my essays had different titles throughout the revision process. I finally landed on *A Lesson in Short Shorts*. “A Lesson in Short-Shorts: How Working at Hooters Prepared Me for the Patriarchy in America” is the first essay I ever wrote. Writing that piece taught me that I loved weaving stories and narratives. I learned the braided narrative technique and knew that the essay would be a crucial part of my

dissertation. Once I realized that it would be the first essay in the collection, I felt it would be a catchy title as well.

I also realized that certain themes kept popping up in my essays. A theme I noticed kept surfacing in my writing is that I am a teacher and a student. Although I had not planned on this being a central theme of my work, I decided to embrace it and utilize it in my titles. That's what helped me decide to name each essay' A Lesson in/on'. By starting each title the same way, I felt there was more cohesion to my collection, and the overall theme of constantly learning is woven throughout the collection.

I was once told that the best teachers are always learning. I have never been afraid to ask a question. I love learning why something happens a certain way, or why something changed, and how. I let that curiosity fire my research and writing. Just because something can be written doesn't mean it needs to be. I ask my students the question "so what?" when they write their essays. I remind them that it is up to them to make their audience care. As writers, it is our job to write something that will matter to others. I teach my students that in class, but I also had to remind myself of it while working on this collection. Life is full of lessons, and I believe it is up to us what we learn from them. That is what this collection is about.

CHAPTER ONE

A Lesson in Short-Shorts:

How Working at Hooters Prepared Me for The Patriarchy in America

"How much would it cost me to buy your uniform?" he asked under his breath as he leaned across the table. I held back the grimace forming on my lips and used the voice the girls had taught me for times like this.

"Well, it's gonna cost you a lot of money, considering I am the one wearing it."

That was when I knew I had to quit my job at Hooters. It was 2012, I was twenty-one, and the daily torture was not worth the money for tuition.

In June 2022, Roe vs Wade was overturned by the United States Supreme Court. This monumental court case allowed abortion to be legalized in the US. When this case was overturned, I was shocked at the misogyny that followed. The battle between pro-life and pro-choice has always been a volatile debate, but the way state governments raced to criminalize abortions was alarming. Many of the states that banned abortion right away without a vote from the people reminded me of why the patriarchy is a problem. I had many run-ins with misogyny before. These were the same men who ordered half-priced wings on Tuesday nights and slammed their fists on the table when they wanted more.

When I began working at Hooters, I knew it as a classic American restaurant, a running joke in movies and TV shows that served wings and beer. However, at the time, I was a college student with debt piling up and interest payment reminders showing up like ex-boyfriends. After applying to every restaurant in the area around my university's campus, I made one last stop. Hooters was a ten-minute drive from school and was the only restaurant in the area that was hiring. As I walked through the front doors, I felt the

Americana nostalgia wash over me. The wood-paneled walls were covered in pictures of past servers and customers. The blue glow from the flat-screen TVs illuminated the room along with the large bulb Christmas lights that were strung across the ceiling.

After filling out an application, the manager sat down across from me.

"Wow, you have serving experience? You will be the first girl here to have waitressed somewhere else." After I picked my jaw up from the table, I was hired on the spot.

A few days later, I put on the tight white tank top and bright orange shorts. The sizes of the tanktops began at XXXS, and I was given a size XXS. The uniforms only went up to a medium; size large does not exist in Hooters world. My manager handed me a package of tan stockings. The burnt orange color didn't match my skin tone, but they kept my legs warm. Legs aside, I was always cold. The shorts would ride up the second I began to walk. As a non- stick-skinny girl like the others, I secretly wondered if they were designed that way. I soon found out this was more desirable than my model-thin colleagues. We couldn't add anything to the uniform and had to come to work with our hair and makeup done like "prom night" (as the manual instructed us). *It's just a serving job,* I would repeat to myself as I drove my car that needed an oil change and new tires to work while applying mascara in my rearview mirror.

I wish I could say the man who wanted to buy the uniform off of my body was the first encounter I had with a man who degraded me. It didn't take me long to realize I was playing a role. Men didn't just come to Hooters for the food; they came for us.

"Oh honey, won't you be a dear and get me another beer?" There were countless, "Won't you be a doll and…." But I was no one's doll or honey. I was there to do a job and

get a tip. Unlike any other restaurant I worked in, tips were not earned by taking orders and serving food.

"You know, you would be much prettier if you smiled," said a man with dark hair, gray strands growing along his temples. His friend laughed as he gave me a wink. They ordered two beers each and a platter of half-priced appetizers.

"Don't you recognize me? You should be able to remember my order by now," said the old Greek man who owned the Olive Garden up the highway. He would sometimes bring fettuccine alfredo for all the girls as a gift. I could make my own pasta, twice as good. But the fact that he thought we should worship him for feeding us made me hate him even more than most customers.

"Now go put my order in, sweetie," said a man in his late thirties who came every Sunday with his buddies to watch football. "And walk slowly for me."

The attention placed on my body at Hooters was not the norm when I worked at Friendly's, a family-centered restaurant that became a spotlight that shined on every move I made. Did I smile enough? Did I twirl around after taking their plates? Did I lean over the table just enough so my cleavage was visible to all who stared? I was no longer a server; I was an entertainer.

Men who didn't get what they wanted didn't tip. Some went as far as getting jealous when they thought I gave another regular more attention than they were getting. "Slut and whore" were used more frequently than I had ever heard before. I was in college, and working hard to better myself and prepare for the future ahead. As a blonde, I was afraid of being considered "dumb." I studied for exams and wrote papers. Instead of being confident in my education, I was more worried about being considered a floozy.

Whenever I heard a derogatory phrase thrown my way, I just had to remember the money, my loan payments, and my bills. The other girls had it figured out. They had no problem sitting in a customer's lap or taking shots of Jack at the bar. I was a better server than all of them, but they got the outrageous tips.

As a twenty one year old, I thought I was an adult. I thought I was old enough to handle these men. I was a feminist; I believed that women could do anything. But looking back, I realize now how was susceptible I was to this treatment. College students are just being introduced to the real world. I was living outside my childhood home for the first time, and learning how to be independent. Instead of being treated as someone who wasn't worth much because I worked at a restaurant catering to these types of people, I should have focused on my self-esteem and the confidence I would need to succeed in the real world.

On the other hand, maybe Hooters was the perfect place to learn what the real world had to offer. These men went to drink beer and eat buffalo wings, but the extra expectation was a "hot" waitress. Even though my cleavage was on display and my butt jiggled when I walked, which was precisely what they wanted. I was still considered a stupid whore who didn't bring out the wings fast enough. Hooters taught me that you can't always make everyone happy. A great lesson to learn; I just wish I hadn't discovered it the way I did.

Before being elected in 2016, the tapes of Donald Trump's interview with Howard Stern were recirculated throughout the internet and media. The recordings were upsetting but not surprising. Trump calls a Miss America contestant a fat pig. "I'm not going to fire

you, but you better get skinny. You better lose some weight.” Some of my friends were shocked when he took office. I never doubted for a minute that he probably received many votes because he said that.

There is already enough pressure on women to be skinny. I always knew that our tank tops were tight and our shorts were tiny, not just to show off our bodies but to remind us to keep our figures. Finding out how our new president felt about the female body solidified society's views.

During a UFC match, one of my tables ordered a couple of shots.

"Honey, please take one with us."

He looked so pathetic. And I needed a drink. I threw it back and smiled. I found a crisp $100 bill on the table when they left. On the receipt, one of them had left their number.

Another night, I watched the girls "ride the stool." I can only explain this action as a demeaning practice to beg men to tip them more. A typical barstool was turned over, and the girls would straddle the legs and squat. With their feet on the stool top, they would move their hips in a circular motion so the stool would spin. Some girls twirled their wrists above their heads and yelled, "Yeehaw!" while others seductively looked into their customer's eyes. Simulating sex for tips was where I drew the line. I ran their food while they played these games and garnered all the attention.

I learned that you couldn't please everyone. One man was disappointed when I walked up to his table. "I wanted her to serve me. She's hotter, shorty." I nodded at Ashley, our resident bleach-blonde model type, and said, "He's yours."

It took me a couple of months, but I slowly learned that the best tips came from lonely men —the solo guy on a business trip, the widow, or the never-married forever bachelor. If I gave them attention, asked them about their day, or had a drink with them, that truly made them happy.

Monday nights became my best shift of the week. The guys that came in were the loneliest. All I had to do was give them a genuine smile, ask them how their day was, and bounce a little when I walked. I had figured out that this was my secret strength. I wasn't one to flirt or make promises. But I could be a great listener and an even better server.

Some weeks, I would count my tips and feel like a contestant who won the big cash prize on a game show. I saved most of my tips, but I loved being able to treat my friends to dinner or buy a round of drinks when we went out. Sunday football shifts were long and tiring, but I could leave with more money than I had made that week. All the men wanted was football, beer, wings, and my ass to stare at.

I always knew misogyny existed; history taught me that. But after the country had voted for our first Black President, Nancy Pelosi was voted House Speaker, and women began to outnumber men in college, I thought there was progress. Then, our country voted for a president who boasted he could treat women like objects whom he could do whatever he wanted with. I was instantly brought back to those nights at Hooters when grown men were hitting on twenty-something-year-olds, some girls young enough to be their daughters. I realized that not much had changed.

Trump's words reminded me that some men thought we were more attainable because we worked for tips. They would touch my arm or play with my hair, hoping I

was a prostitute and this was just my weekday gig. I would politely move my arm or step back from the table, with a smile, to get them to stop touching me.

"When you are a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab 'em by the pussy," said Trump, as he laughed with Howard Stern during an interview. Years later Howard Stern would speak out on his political beliefs. In a 2024 interview, he said, “At the time when Kamala was chosen by Joe Biden, I said, sadly — I hate to say this, because I was a big Hillary Clinton supporter — I don’t think America can vote for a woman. I say this because I know men. I know how men talk behind closed doors” (Kurtz). Even men themselves were aware of the power of the patriarchy.

Every once in a while, a man would get so drunk he would grab my arm and beg me to follow him out to his car. Full of wings and beer, he had forgotten I was their server, not a sex worker.

"How much would you charge for a blow job, cutie?"

It's not enough that we don't make as much as men in the workforce, but they constantly have to remind us what they think our worth is. Working at Hooters also taught me that there is more danger lurking around the corners for women. I doubt most men walk to their cars with the keys between their fingers. In a study conducted by Statista Research Department they found, “In 2022, there were slightly more female victims of violent crime than male victims, with about 1,749,030 male victims and 1,762,840 female victims. These figures are a significant increase from the previous year when there were 1,456,310 male victims and 1,278,390” (“Number crime victims”).

Other times, a newly initiated frat member was being pressured by his "brothers" to get me to go home with them. "Come on; you can stay the night. We have beer and

pizza. You look like a good time." Because the job was based on tips, I had to learn the strategic way to make them think I wanted to but "just couldn't because my boss won't let me leave." Then I had to give them the impression that I was staying late and they shouldn't wait around.

In these moments, my feelings didn't matter. These moments were about not bruising a stranger's ego. I had to learn how to let them down easily because I hadn't been tipped yet, and that consideration was crucial to my end-of-the-night total. This skill came in handy later in life. I went on many dates that I didn't feel comfortable or wanted to leave early, and I knew that making up an excuse that didn't hurt my date's feelings would keep me safe.

Sometimes, they did wait around.

One night, a regular got the courage to bring me flowers and ask me for a date. A kind gesture, but the man was in his sixties. I politely declined, served him his burger and fries, and he finally left after begging me one more time to give him a chance. That night, as I counted my tips and covered my stocking-covered legs with sweatpants, I kept looking out the window.

"He is still sitting in his car," I told my ex-college football star manager.

"Come on, hun. I'll walk you."

As I started my car, my manager held open my door, smiled, and told me to have a good night. He constantly talked about his two young daughters. I always wondered if he saw what happened at work and feared what they would have to deal with one day. He stood beside my car until we saw the headlights of the regular's car turn on as he drove out of the parking lot.

On that drive home, I asked myself why I was doing this. Could I be part of the problem? Women will always be objectified by men; it's a primal instinct. But I didn't have to subject myself to it. I didn't have to allow men to treat women this way.

I wanted a serving job because it had been the only job I had done since I was sixteen. But I didn't have to work at Hooters. I allowed the money that men paid to pretty women to cloud my judgment. I credit the women out there who have the courage to take tips from men like this. We should; men are going to ogle us, and in some way, we should benefit. I understood that, but I couldn't subscribe to it. I couldn't look past my dignity and ego to take the money from men who saw me as an object to control. I could no longer stroke an ego in the name of a tip.

As I pulled my tights down and put on the new set I had bought, I couldn't help tears well up in the corners of my eyes. I pulled my new shorts on over my new tights. I walked out to the sink and looked at myself in the mirror. *It's just a job. You will be able to pay your car insurance this month; it will be fine.* I walked out of the bathroom and handed my tights and shorts to the man at my table. I held my hands out for the twenty-five bucks we had decided on. He gave me the cash, held up my tights to his nose, took a long sniff, then looked me in the eye and said, "mmm, delicious."

I lasted nine months at Hooters. I could no longer tolerate how most customers thought the money in their pockets was all they needed to control me. After struggling with my confidence, self-esteem, and value as a woman, I walked away from what I thought was my last experience with misogyny.

Trump reminded America that just because women have the right to vote, own property, and a spot in the workplace, it does not mean we are seen as equal. His leaked

comments should have been enough to turn away supporters, but they didn't; they fueled the fire. Women have come a long way, but as long as we try to succeed and achieve, there will always be men who believe that we are nothing more than something to control.

In 2020, America put in its vote against misogyny. A new mindset was voted into the Oval Office—a man who wanted a woman by his side, who saw her as an equal. I am not saying that Joe Biden saved the world, but he introduced the change we need; he gave the country a start. Giving women more jobs in his cabinet, promoting diversity and inclusion, and advocating for change was the light at the end of the Trump-era tunnel.

That same woman, Kamala Harris, ran for President in 2024. She lost. The patriarchy, still in tact, proved to be too powerful. According to an AP news article, “46% of women voted for Donald Trump” (Sanders). Although 53% of women did vote for a female candidate it couldn’t combat the 54% of men that voted for Trump.

Today, it is 2025. Trump is beginning his second term as president. I think back through the last four years. Roe vs Wade was overturned, states banned abortion, and other states are considering outlawing birth control or the Plan B pill. I am unsure of how the next four years will be with Trump as President. All I know is this will be the last four years.

It has been over a decade since I have worked at Hooters. Although I have witnessed some change I can’t help but feel that we are still in the same place. We live in a country built on patriarchy. A country that refuses to allow a woman to be in charge.

Today I am a college professor. I advocate for my students to vote. I don’t discuss politics in class but I remind them of the rights that others fought for so they could vote.

My time at Hooters taught me many lessons. I learned the harsh reality of being a young woman in America. Now I try to teach my students these realities. I hope for them that they don't learn these lessons the same way I did.

CHAPTER TWO

A Lesson in Acceptance: Join the Club

I'm sitting in a hard plastic chair, trying to stay awake at another faculty workshop. The course coordinator is speaking about the upcoming semester, and I'm in a seminar room with about thirty other faculty members. Every summer, we sit through workshops to learn whatever it is we need to know to teach a class we have taught countless times.

The course coordinator introduced a woman I had never seen before. She approached the front of the room and said, "Does anyone know what an invisible disability is?"

I did. But I wasn't sure if anyone else did, so I sat back and listened as a few people answered the question.

"If I walked in here with my cane, you all would look at me differently. That's the downside of a visible disability. Our outward appearance decides the assumption of who we are."

I leaned forward in my chair. This woman was speaking my language. A language I tried to shy away from. A part of me I didn't share with everyone. She was asked to speak at our faculty workshop because, this year, the University I work for is inviting a person with a disability to speak in their lecture series. The time had come for my colleagues and I to talk about the elephant in the room.

She was using a vocabulary I had been searching for. Invisible versus visible. Able-bodied versus Invalid. I always took offense to the word Invalid, but I learned from her that the disabled community is taking back the strength of that word by making it

their own. I hung on to every word of her talk. I left that workshop feeling as if I had the strength of the sun.

I was born with congenital talipes equinovarus, also known as clubfoot. About every 1 in 1,000 babies is diagnosed with some form of club foot. Male babies are twice as likely to be born with club feet, so I must be super lucky.

Clubfoot is when one or both of the baby's feet are turned inward, so much that it looks like a golf club; some doctor saw the humor in this and gave the defect its name. Although this is a common problem for new parents, there are varying degrees of the foot's angle, which translates into the treatment of the problem. Casting and surgery are used to fix the misplaced bones and joints, while braces can be used on those less severe.

After my first birthday, I underwent a five-hour bone reconstruction surgery. Every two weeks, my parents had to bring me to get my casts changed. I didn't take my first steps until I was a year and a half old, and I had to get X-rays once a year to ensure my bones remained in the right place. As a kid, I didn't know the difference. But once I started going to sleepovers in middle school, I began to notice I was different.

My friends were fascinated that my right foot is two sizes smaller than my left foot. This would be fine if I were a size eight and a six. However, due to the surgery, my deformity prevented my foot from growing to an adult size. My left foot is a woman's size six, and my right, a child's size four.

"How do you buy shoes?" This is everyone's first question when they find out. I have never had a perfect pair of shoes. Some stores will allow me to buy a six and a five, the smallest size in the women's department. But mostly, I have to select my shoes carefully. I've watched shows like *Sex and the City* and movies like *The Devil Wears*

Prada, where the female protagonist looks over a closet of carefully displayed stilettos and knee-high heeled boots. I am jealous of these women because I have never worn a stiletto a day in my life, and I never will. I have insoles that must be worn to help with my abnormally high arch resulting from the surgery. This limits the styles of shoes I can wear. Let's just say I don't enjoy shoe shopping as much as Carrie Bradshaw.

As a college professor, I like to dress professionally. Having an eye for fashion doesn't make me a better teacher, but I think a level of respect comes with dressing appropriately. Unfortunately, certain expectations of a woman's wardrobe revolve around high-heeled shoes. I have to get every pair of dress pants tailored because they are expected to be worn with heels. When the professor walked into our workshop in orthopedic shoes, I smiled. She wore supportive footwear with a professional dress and made it work. We are judged by our outer appearance, as she mentioned in her talk. In Academia, we are judged by colleagues and our students based on first impressions. I fear that not being able to wear all the clothing items that are expected of me leads to a wrong first impression. This is just one of the many problems that I never expected as a child living with a disability.

I once showed up on a first date, and as I parked my car, the man walked over to me so we could walk into the restaurant together.

"Oh cool, who did you get the handicap placard from?"

"Uh, the DMV."

"No, I meant, who do you know that's disabled? I think it's cool that you can park wherever you want."

"Yea, it's *really cool*."

Needless to say, there was no second date.

But as I said, my childhood wasn't affected. I chased friends in games of tag, climbed trees with my cousins, and rollerbladed with my brother. But becoming a young woman was the first time I struggled with my body. Like any high school girl, I became self-conscious and was jealous of the other girls in my class. Friends wanted to go prom dress shopping, and I knew I could only wear flat shoes; I was embarrassed to pick them out at the store with friends.

Around this time, I also started to develop pain. Running the mile in gym class would leave my ankle so swollen that I couldn't go to school the next day. I would get more sore than I used to, and worried about my ailment, I went to see my doctor.

After an MRI, my lovely male doctor had this to say, "I have never seen an eighteen-year-old with this much arthritis. You have the ankle of a sixty-year-old woman." I must have had a look of shock on my face because he followed it up with, “Good thing you aren’t overweight because this pain could be worse. Just make sure you watch what you eat.”

That’s just the thing to tell a high school girl. Not only are girls that age already on the verge of an eating disorder, but I had the added pressure of knowing the more I weighed, the worse my pain might be. I was worried about my future. He told me to see how long I could take the sporadic aches and soreness because surgery was on the horizon, and he wanted to hold off for as long as possible.

I made it through college. I got a job in Manhattan after graduation. Most days, the ten-block walk from the train station to my office building was fine. But some days, waves of shocking pain would overcome me. I could be walking for a few blocks, and out

of nowhere, the pain would strike like lightning in my foot. I would have to stop, lean against a building or storefront, and take a deep breath. I eventually made it to work, finding ways not to get up from my desk. Once the pain started to happen more than once a week, I went back to my doctor.

Another MRI showed that my arthritis was worse and that I had developed something called bone spurs. This is when your bone splinters from friction, and tiny splinter-like shards hit your nerves and send shockwaves of pain through the affected area. I couldn't delay the surgery any longer; I scheduled it and prepared to not walk for months.

The surgery was six years ago. I was given a nice shiny metal plate to cover most of the bones in my foot and two pins to secure and stabilize my ankle. The bone spurs were removed, arthritis scraped out, and my Achilles was lengthened because it had never fully developed. I felt part transformer and part Wonder Woman when I came out of surgery.

After four months on crutches and six months of intense physical therapy, the pain was gone, but I walked worse than I had before. I can't stand for long periods and can no longer hike or walk on uneven ground. I thought I would be the bionic woman, not a thirty-two-year-old stuck in a seventy-year-old woman's body.

The pain is back. I recently had a CT scan. My new doctor says more bone spurs are forming. We were hoping to get to forty without another surgery. But with all of the scar tissue and joint friction, she fears my only option is a total replacement. When I heard this, I went on a complete Google search spiral.

If I were to get an ankle replacement, the hardware would have to be replaced every ten to fifteen years. I worry that once we replace my ankle, I will have to follow a schedule of one surgery every decade for the rest of my life.

After that day at the workshop, I started to feel as if I had more power over my disability. I had spent years trying to pretend that I didn't have one. I had spent so much time masking and hiding that now that I felt seen, I wanted to be even more visible. I decided to do more research and learn as much as I could about not only my disability but those with other physical disabilities. I found a non-profit, Miracle Feet, that collects donations for underprivileged families all over the world who can't afford their child's bone reconstruction surgery. It only takes five hundred dollars to change a child's life. I donated immediately.

During my internet research, I decided to see if I could find anyone else who was going through the same thing I was. I eventually stumbled upon Reddit. I signed up and found a subreddit named Clubfoot. I scoured through thread after thread of people discussing shoe brands, stores that sell different-sized shoes, and new parents asking for help. I almost cried to see how a group of people struggle just like me and are helping each other. For the first time, I felt that I wasn't alone when it came to my disability. I joined the group and started my own thread to ask who has gone through the same surgeries as me and if they had any advice. I was finally part of the club.

Not all disabilities are visible. Not all disabilities are alike. It's taken me over thirty years, but I finally feel at peace with my situation. No one is perfect, and everyone has their own burden to bear in life. I keep putting my hopes into modern technological advances, and maybe one day, there will be a solution for me, and I won't have to endure

so much pain. But for now, I can walk, and every day I am thankful for that. But if there is ever a day I feel the need to be humbled, I just think about how I am like a piece of Ikea furniture, missing an important screw or hinge, except for me, there is no ordering the piece to fix it.

CHAPTER THREE

A Lesson in Grief

Last summer, I decided to grow potatoes. This was a new vegetable for me. All of my other plants grow above the ground. I watch them sprout, follow them as the leaves grow and the object starts to form. Tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, zucchini, and lettuce grow very well in my garden. I love watching the tomatoes turn from golden to lime green to deep red. The zucchinis and cucumbers start as small yellowish stumps that lengthen and darken over time. I plant the same vegetables every year, so I have established a routine. I clip my herbs weekly and pull the butter lettuce leaves to make a salad. I enjoy watching my garden saplings grow. But this year, I decided to tackle potatoes.

Potatoes are different. They grow underground. They thrive out of view. The damp darkness of the soil is where they flourish. You can’t watch potatoes grow. I read up on how to plant and harvest them. Gardening blogs and articles say that the leaves will grow tall and bright green. Then, the leaves will start to wilt and turn brown. As the potatoes need more nutrients and light to grow, they steal all of the life from the leaves as they get closer to harvest. When the leaves are dead, the potatoes are ready.

It's interesting that potatoes are the root. The green plant lives outside the soil. The potatoes pull the nutrients down through the roots and grow off of the prospering plant. Potatoes need the green stalk in order to grow and live. The leaves breathe in the air for the potatoes and soak up the sun. The spud rests and saves its energy, waiting for the day it's pulled from the ground.

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The day I planted my potatoes Roe v. Wade was overturned. I, like so many other women in the country, had mixed feelings. I was sick to my stomach, but I was also confused by how I felt.

I was one of the lucky ones. I had never had to sit alone in a bathroom with a pregnancy test in my hand, weighing my options while trying not to cry. I've never had to make the decision.

Some women stood on picket lines and shouted reasons they regretted their abortions. Other women shouted from across the wide gap between these camps why an abortion saved their lives. I was confused by how strongly I felt about the right to have an abortion, but yet I had never exercised my right to one.

This didn't seem to matter to men. Men stood next to women at protests. Men yelled "murder" at women as they walked into clinics. Men felt the need to stand next to their wives or girlfriends and give their opinions. If men were so quick to fight for how they felt, shouldn't I as a woman?

When Roe v. Wade was overturned, I was a single woman. I identify as a feminist. I hate how that has become a "dirty" word. Everyone should be a feminist. As I was dating, I noticed that most men I went on dates with liked that I was hardworking and made my own money. But when I used the word "feminist," they would recoil.

"You're a feminist too, though." I would explain.

"No, I'm not." They would say.

"You believe that we should both make money, pay bills, and have equality in a relationship, right?"

"Well, yes." They would admit.

"That makes you a feminist. Believing that men and women are equal."

As I watched their faces change, I realized that they didn't understand what feminism actually meant. I felt disappointed that men were *against* the word feminist. They wouldn't use that word in a sentence when identifying themselves. The definition has been lost over time. Feminists have been painted as angry, unattractive women when really Feminists are simply people who want equality for both genders. Somewhere along the way, men saw the word feminist as an attack, like we thought they were better than them. When in reality, we just want equality.

As a feminist, I felt that I had the right to feel this deep loss as the government overturned a decades-old rule. I felt that I was doing enough. I am always defining the word feminism for those who are unaware. I teach advocacy and awareness in the classroom on diversity and inclusion. I am a woman who thinks about the suffragettes every time I cast my vote in a voting booth. But why hadn't I been out there fighting on those picket lines? Maybe it was because I had never needed an abortion. I have never felt the desperation a woman feels when she isn't ready to be pregnant. Or maybe it was because I live in New Jersey. I knew that the state government wasn't going to take away that right in a blue state. Once again, I was one of the lucky ones.

I am scared for the women who will now sacrifice their jobs, freedom, or life to get an abortion. According to the World Health Organization, "about 42 million women with unintended pregnancies worldwide choose abortion each year. Nearly half, 20

million, are unsafe. Annually about 68,000 women die from an unsafe abortion" (Hadadd and Nawal). I am scared of what this means for women because of the men we put in power. I am scared that this chips away at the division of church and state and what that means for this country's future. This wasn't just nine people in black robes making a decision; this is life-altering. And for women in this country, life as we know it changed that day, and I am unsure if we can ever come back from it.

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A few months later, I met a man who not only believes it's a woman's right to make her own decisions with her body. He is a man I see myself spending the rest of my life with. This changed the way I saw things.

One night, we were watching *Love Is Blind*, a Netflix reality show that I must admit I am obsessed with. I am not a fan of reality shows. I am not knocking them, but I usually get anxious from the drama, and I am unsettled by how people treat each other. But *Love Is Blind* is different. I love the hopefulness of the people who go on this show.

Men and women spend hours dating each other in "pods," small rooms connected by a wall. The daters can hear each other, but they can't see each other. During their pod time, these couples discuss their upbringing, values, family, and what they want for their futures. After days of talking for hours, these couples fall in love. I am so intrigued by the science and psychology behind how we choose a partner.

One brave woman brought up her ideology when it comes to having children. She explained that she didn't want a child with a disability. If they had the chance to find out, she told the man she wanted to marry that she would terminate the pregnancy.

When I heard someone on television talk about this, I was shocked and relieved. This is a topic I have agonized over before. I paused the show, turned to my partner, and said, "I think I feel the same way."

He gave me the same look the man on the show had. Most women don't plan an abortion or have set parameters for their future child. But, like this woman, I had insider information. She worked with children with disabilities. She explained the struggles she saw with these young kids, with their parents, and how it strained marriages.

I told my partner that I worried about the same thing as someone born with a congenital disease. I wouldn't wish my disability on anyone. My partner listened, and when I was done, he looked at me with concern and asked, "Does that mean you think your life isn't worth living?"

This gave me pause. I don't know any other way to live, but I don't think my life isn't worth living. I meant it more like I don't think I could have a child knowing the struggles they would face. But this got me thinking: how can I advocate for people with disabilities but yet say I would abort a fetus if I knew it would have one? I started to think about what this meant for who I was as a person with a disability. *Who was I as a feminist? A woman? A human*?

I began to think about all of the knowledge I had pertaining to this situation. I was born with talipes equinovarus, also known as clubfoot. This is a disorder that affects the ligaments, tendons, and muscles in the feet and calves. The foot tilts inward and upward

at the ankle. I had ankle reconstruction surgery when I was a year old. I developed many complications over the years. Built-up scar tissue, bone spurs, arthritis, and lacerations in my Achilles tendon have all caused me pain and mobility issues. I have had and will have multiple surgeries throughout my life. I am also more likely to have a child with clubfoot because it is a genetic condition.

My parents struggled when I was a child. My dad worked many jobs to make sure we had health insurance because they knew my care in my early years would be expensive without coverage. My mother had to take me to doctor's visits and scans to make sure my bones and ligaments were growing as planned. Anatomically I have some abnormalities but overall my health was as expected at these visits. The specialists and frequent visits were not cheap.

My friend is an occupational therapist and works with children who have cerebral palsy, deformities, and mental disabilities. She vents to me about how expensive care is and how most mothers have to stay at home to be full-time caregivers to their children. She often holds back tears when she talks about the children and their quality of life. There are also times that she is told she can no longer see a patient because the funding was eliminated or the Insurance doesn't cover in-home care. Usually, it's up to the parents to be physical therapists, occupational therapists, and nurses.

Up until the Americans with Disabilities Act was signed, people with disabilities didn't have much protection. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) became law in 1990. "The ADA is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life, including jobs, schools, transportation, and all public and private places that are open to the general public" ("What is ADA?"). The

purpose of the law is to make sure that people with disabilities have the same rights and opportunities as everyone else. 1990 was the first time Americans with disabilities were acknowledged and given rights. It's been a long time coming for those of us with disabilities. This act also reminds us that this world was not built for people like us.

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Then, I began to think about those I know with a disability. A family I used to work for owns a restaurant that caters to the special needs community. Their son, LJ, was born with Down syndrome. He is unable to care for himself, and his mother quit her job early in his life in order to take care of him full-time. He is one of the sweetest people I have ever met. He remembers little things about you that others would overlook. He would remember the silly song I would sing to him and ask me to play it on my phone. Or what movie I saw last night and would ask me what it was about. Everyone loves him, he has many friends, and he is never not smiling.

Someone like him makes me question if I was wrong. Who is to say his life isn't worth living? He lives a very different life than others, but how can we measure the quality of his life when the way he lives is all he knows? The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in 2011 estimated "the frequency of Down syndrome in the US is 1 in 700 live births. My birth defect, club foot, occurs on average in every 1 to 1,000 babies" (Akhtar and Bokhari). This means that my fear of having a child who would struggle is even more common when it comes to Down Syndrome.

I am not the only one who fears the complications that come with disabilities. A 2012 review of just United States data and termination rates following a prenatal diagnosis for Down syndrome estimates termination rates from 1995 – 2011 were about 67%. I'm sure every woman within that 67% had their reasons for why they terminated their pregnancy. But how can any woman make that decision if they live in a state where abortion is against the law? No parent wants to watch their child struggle; all we can hope for is their health. But without the option to choose, parents will be forced to watch their child live with a disability.

This forces me to imagine how my parents felt when they were given my diagnosis. My father saw my foot the moment I was lifted out of my mothers c-section opening. He grabbed me from the doctor and ran me down to the orthopedic unit. This story used to make me laugh as a kid. Now I realize that it was an action fueled by fear. He knew something was wrong and he wanted answers. The first year of my life the doctors followed the Ponsetti Method which is a series of casts and braces which has a great success rate of fixing the impairment. But this process didn't work for me. I can't imagine how my parents felt the day they were told that my only chance to walk was surgery.

I don't think my parents thought for a second that my life wasn't worth living. I'm not sure I had ever considered it before my partner asked. He is an able-bodied person and hasn't dealt with the pain and discomfort of surgery and recovery. I wonder if my parents had known that I would be going through many surgeries in my life if they would have thought differently. Medicine is always evolving and changing, I'm sure there are better outcomes for newborns today with my disease.

I'm not sure I can answer the question of whether my life is worth living or not. Every morning when I wake up, I limp to my slippers and sit on the side of the bed while I slip them on, shoes help with stability, and I deal with soreness and stiffness for about the first hour I am awake. Mornings are painful, but when the soreness wears off and the pain is gone, I forget how I feel. Until the next morning when I go through it all again.

That's what disability is like. While I'm dealing with the daily struggle that is my normal, I wonder what it would be like to just get out of bed and walk. But as long as I can live my life to the best of my ability, I do believe it's worth living.

My disability allows me to "pass." This is what we in the disability community call an "Invisible Disability." During my daily routine, if anyone were to look at me, I don't look disabled. I don't walk with a cane or a crutch. I keep my pain hidden from view and most days I walk without a limp. Rainy days, are the toughest to walk without swinging my hip to avoid the stiffness in my ankle. "Passing" allows me to go through my day without judgment or looks of pity. This made me wonder about those with disabilities that are not invisible.

Over the years, I have had many students with different types of disabilities. One young woman walked into my classroom on the first day with a cane and asked to walk around to get to know the room. I had never met a blind person before. I felt under-equipped to help her. She had a brail word processor. I was fascinated with how she took notes and couldn't wait to participate in discussions. She was born blind and didn't know a life with sight. I would make sure to say hi when I saw her on campus. I would tell her who I was, and she would always smile wide and say, "Hi, Professor!"

She taught me more than I ever could have taught her that semester. She is someone who wouldn't let anyone get in her way. She was motivated and hardworking. She amazed me. But it made me wonder if those qualities came from her disability or if it was built into her personality.

I don't believe those with disabilities "overcome them." That is an insensitive statement that most able-bodied people use. Disabilities are not defects that we need to overcome. Greta Thunberg explains this when she talks about how she views being someone on the autism spectrum, "When haters go after your looks and differences, it means they have nowhere left to go. And then you know you're winning … being different is a superpower" (Farmer). We learn how to live with our disabilities. We struggle not to let our disabilities define us. We live in a world that isn't built for us, so we must evolve and adapt.

Who knew that a Netflix reality show would be the start of a philosophical journey?

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All of these thoughts and feelings came to a head recently. I woke to blood on my sheets. Spotting, I had thought. My cramps worsened throughout the day. By evening, I was doubled over in pain, and I had no appetite. The next morning, I realized that I had a miscarriage.

We weren't trying. It wasn't planned. But it still hurt. I had no idea I was pregnant, and I felt responsible for this thing inside me. This thing I was supposed to nurture and care for. But my body had rejected it. I wasn't given the choice. I didn't have to make a decision. The decision was made for me.

The guilt I felt hasn't fully gone away. I'm not sure it will. My partner reassured me that it was not my fault. We didn't know I was pregnant. It's not like I knew and made bad decisions. But what I can't share with my partner is that, as a woman, I feel like I should have known. As women, we know our bodies; we have our periods tracked; I feel so guilty for not knowing.

Miscarriages, or pregnancy loss as it is now known, isn't talked about. It has a negative connotation in society. Even the term, miss-carried, as if something we did was wrong. Whether a woman is trying to get pregnant, doesn't want to get pregnant, or simply has no choice, a pregnancy loss is out of her control. An abortion on the other hand is a choice. What both of these experiences have in common is the masking effect they have on women. We can walk around with a mask on that allows us to "pass." No one needs to know we had an abortion or a miscarriage, we can paint a pretty smile on our face and pretend that nothing happened.

I haven't even told my closest friends about my experience. Because at the end of the day, the loss is only felt by my partner and I. We are the ones who grieve and we will mask that together because we want to avoid the stigma of what a miscarriage means. Loss.

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Last fall, it was time to harvest my potatoes. Summer was over; my juicy red tomatoes stopped growing. The zucchini flowers had dried up, and the pepper plants stopped producing. I had moved all of my herbs into pots inside for the winter.

I walked over to the area of my garden where I had planted my potatoes. I bent over the side of the garden bed and stabbed my spade into the soft dirt. It had been raining for days, so I knew that the ground would be soft and easy to sow. My spade began to dig up little brown spuds. I pulled the stalk up from the ground, and the little bulb was in my hand. The large green stalk stood tall, the instrument used to send the goodies the potatoes needed to grow below the ground.

I picked up my spade to dig into a new hole when my male German shepherd-hound mix dove into the garden bed with me. He saw me digging and decided to help. As dirt was flung in all directions, I jumped back and covered my face from the flying soil and leaves. He was not only digging up my garden but kicking at the potatoes I had waited so long for. I tried to get him to stop by yelling his name, and when he realized that what he was doing was wrong, he cowered away in shame.

It was too late. The garden was covered in unearthed vegetables, leaves, and roots. I sifted through the debris and collected what was left of my harvest. I salvaged what I could, and I discarded the rest.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Lesson On Being A Woman

The hot embers of the fire crackled as I sat by the firepit. Sitting in an old folding chair in a friend's backyard, I watched as he made everyone burgers and hotdogs on the grill while children played in the grass. The girlfriends and wives busied about setting the table and unwrapping bowls covered in tin foil. We all worked together in our teens and early twenties at a restaurant. Some people might remember the chain *Friendly's*—the one with the red fake leather booths, hot fudge sundaes, and cheesy decor. Most people smile when they find out I worked there, always telling me a nostalgic story, a family memory, or their favorite ice cream flavor.

That night, we were discussing the people we used to work with. My male friend, as he manned the grill, said, "Those were the good old days; I miss that place sometimes."

"Really? I miss working with you, but I don't miss working there," I said.

"Come on; things were much better and easier back then."

I worked in the restaurant industry for sixteen years. It taught me many things, but most of all, it taught me how men in service industries viewed women. I learned this at a very young age. I knew my place in the rickety wooden ladder that is life; I was never allowed to make it to the top.

When I was sixteen, I scooped ice cream at *Friendly's,* a family-centered restaurant. Working at an ice cream place seemed like the perfect after-school job; free ice cream, and there were many people my age. That first summer, I was learning the

ropes. I tried every ice cream flavor and topping. I got excited about every dollar bill placed in the tip jar. I made friends with people I still know today, friends whose babies I've held, and friends who take me out to dinner for my birthday each year. *Friendly's* was a fun place to work, and I worked hard.

One night, I walked to the walk-in freezer to grab a box of ice cream. The creamy butter pecan or savory mint chocolate chip everyone knows and loves comes in eight or ten-gallon cardboard boxes. They are heavy and awkward to hold. The freezer door opened as I tried to wiggle the box off the shelf.

"Hey sexy, want help with that?"

I pointed to the ice cream, too shocked to speak. The line cook, a large, overweight man old enough to be my father, lifted it off the shelf and handed it to me.

"Anything for a hot little thing like you."

I slowly snuck past him and pushed the door open. He had a daughter around my age, whom I learned about later on. I remember the hot flush that took over my body at that moment. I was in the freezer. I should have been shivering, but the heat it created in my stomach and chest warmed me with fear and rage. I knew I had to let it go so I could finish my shift.

That wasn't the end of the harassment. He found ways to corner me in the supply room, threatening not to let me pass without a kiss. He chuckled when I whined for him to let me go. Every shift with him was torture. The only resolution to the situation was not to complete my side work. He couldn't talk to me if I stayed on my side of the restaurant.

It wasn't that I didn't want to do my job; I was trying to prevent any issues. Eventually, my General Manager called me into the office asked why I stopped doing my side work and left early every night. I broke down and told him about the cook. He listened to me and was patient while I cried. When I calmed down, I noticed he was writing something in the red book; it was being documented. He told me he would have a meeting with him the next time he was on shift and that this would be handled.

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In 2017, the #MeToo hashtag went viral. I spent hours reading Instagram posts, tweets, and articles about women who had been harassed, assaulted, and shamed for being attractive or just existing. I remember feeling heartbroken by these stories but also relieved.

According to RAINN (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network) "every 68 seconds, an American woman is sexually assaulted" ("About Sexual Assault"). As I read the encounters that women had faced, some while they were minors, I was surprised by the weight it held. Hollywood and celebrities were speaking out and explaining their pain.

RAINN also explains that, "Sexual abuse is a spectrum; not every girl is raped, but many are groped, verbally harassed, or emotionally tormented" ("Types Sexual Violence"). There is a vast array of violence that women go through. The rules and exceptions for these perpetrators come from the establishment of the patriarchy.

As a sixteen-year-old girl, I did not understand the power of the patriarchy. That men have run this country since its inception, and the fact that society breeds a culture of

violence against women and rarely consequences for the men who perpetrate this violence. As a thirty-three-year-old woman, I now understand the ways in which women are oppressed and tied down by the constraints that the patriarchy has created. I look back at that sixteen-year-old girl, and I am jealous of her ignorance but also saddened by the way in which I learned how the world works.

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The harassment didn't end. I wondered if he had ever been spoken to. I dealt with it for months until one night, after my shift, I threw an empty ice cream box against the dumpster and screamed. I had no idea my shift manager was outside smoking a cigarette. He asked me what was wrong, and I told him.

"I was told by the GM that we can't tell corporate. They will make us fire him, and we can't afford to lose our best cook."

The heat was back, my face flushed, and the fire burned through my chest and into my stomach. I never knew that rage mixed with fear could feel like lava burning underneath my skin.

"So you are just going to let him stay here and work with me?"

"No, we talked to him, and he said he will stop. I will also make sure he doesn't bother you again."

At the end of my next shift, I was cornered in the walk-in refrigerator while restocking the hot fudge and caramel sauce.

"I heard you told on me."

"I heard you were asked to leave me alone."

"You better not say anything else because I have a kid to feed, and if you get me fired, you will be scared."

This time, I waited for him to leave first. I feared I would cry and didn't want anyone to see me upset, so I figured the fridge's cold air would help me hold back my hot tears.

Eventually, the cook moved on, and I thought I did too. I never told anyone outside of the restaurant walls what was going on there. I did my best to keep work at work and to suppress the feelings of insecurity, rage, and fear once I took my apron off.

Other co-workers hit on me, but once I turned eighteen, I was what men like to call "fair game." That situation taught me to have thicker skin and not get upset when men called me sexy, hot, or good-looking. I learned how to internalize it and use it as fuel. I worked harder, earned more money, got promoted to a server, and paid my way through college. The people, the scratchy carpet, and the sizzle of the grill were always reminders of what happened within those walls. When *Friendly's* was starting to change and new management took over, I left.

When I think back to the beginning of the #MeToo Movement, I can't help but think about the women who were victimized by R. Kelly, Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby, Jefferey Epstein, and every other high-powered creep out there. Those women were worried about what these men could do to their status, careers, and lives. The fear prevents women from speaking out, standing up, and protecting themselves. I understand that fear.

After leaving *Friendly's*, I knew I wanted to continue serving and thought that my next adventure should be at a place that served alcohol. Little did I know that I was now mixing alcohol with ego.

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I loved working at a bar. The conversation around alcohol interested me much more than ice cream, and the tips were better, too. I loved when customers asked me about whiskey and wine, and I took the time to learn about the aging process and what is worth waiting for.

But once again, I applied to a place with all male managers. At first, it was great; they were young and didn't care so much if you had a drink during your shift; they took shots with us after closing time. But the alcohol was what made it worse. My General Manager was sexually frustrated and took it out on me that I had a boyfriend and was not "fuckable." One night, I was grabbing more wine from the wine cellar, and he followed me down to help with the load. He rubbed against my butt while he moved around boxes. At first, he seemed helpful and caring, but I knew better. After I walked to the stairs to carry up the box, I realized there were no wine bottles in his hands.

Another one of my managers, who was drunk at the bar, off duty after a shift, tried to get me to go home with him. I laughed him off so he could keep his dignity, as women do. He grabbed my arm and warned me not to be a tease. I told him I needed to tend to my customers and walked away. We never spoke of it.

The line cooks would pull my ponytail and grunt, the dishwashers would always smile and say my name as if it were a dirty secret, and my managers gave me the best

shifts and complimented my body, hair, or smile often. Most men believe that this is pleasant and that women enjoy this treatment, but we don't. It's already hard enough to be a woman fighting for a place in this world while serving others and giving in to the stereotype that this is what women are meant to do. I was working late nights to pay for my Master's degree. I was using the restaurant industry just as much as it was using me. But in the end, I was the one who was chewed up and spit out. Nothing about me was memorable, just some girl that used to work there.

The difference is that it's all memorable to me. I've lost count of the number of times a man complimented me in a way that felt more invasive than kind. I stopped counting the amount of guys who had touched my arm, my hair, and my lower back as a gesture, but what really was a sign. If I accepted the gesture, they were *in.* Most men don't realize how creepy it is to put a hand on a woman's lower back and whisper, "Where are you going after this?"

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Not much has changed about the restaurant industry. Most establishments are run by men. Male managers, male chefs, and male owners. Most women are bartenders or servers. Their pretty smiles used to bring in customers and prey on tips.

Restaurants portray a man's perfect world—a world where women are servants to men. Housekeepers, mothers, cooks, and wives are the ideal job titles. Now, I am not saying most men feel this way. But we need more allies. We need white men, men of color, gay men, *all* men to stand with women and fight for what is right. Because at the

end of the day, it's not about gender; it's about oppression. Progress is slow. I remain optimistic that it will get better, but it won't be anytime soon.

Some nights, when I reminisce about bartending, I miss the adrenaline hit of the dinner rush, the stack of cash I would stuff into my pocket at the end of the night, and the camaraderie of my co-workers. But my mind always wanders back to the times when I was afraid. *What if I say the wrong thing, and this man gets mad? If I don't give him what he wants, will I get fired?*

I wish I could say that things changed once I left the restaurant industry. Unfortunately, some things never change. At thirty years old, I came face to face with another man who thought he had autonomy over my body.

It started out like any other date. He picked the restaurant, he got there first, and he got a table. He was dressed nicely, made me laugh, and complimented me as we sipped our drinks and made small talk. It felt like forever since someone had asked me about the books I read. The guys I am used to dating don't read or watch documentaries, and we began to discuss our favorites. Time flew by, I was having fun. I hate first dates as I am usually nervous and anxious about what the other person is thinking.

After our two rounds of drinks, my date and I left the restaurant. He walked me to my car, and I couldn't help but think what a nice thing to do, especially when I didn't know where he had parked. As we reached my car, he said he had to call his Uber.

"Parking is a bitch in this town, I rarely drive, and the Uber is usually cheap since I am so close," he explained.

"We can sit in my car while you wait; it's really cold out," I offered.

I started my car and turned on the heat. My fingertips and nose were tingling from the late February cold.

"I had a good time tonight, did you?" He said as he leaned over to my side of the car.

I wasn't exactly sure I wanted to kiss him. This was how every first date I had been on ended. It seems when a man pays the bill, he expects something in return. I don't like kissing on the first date. I like getting to know someone a bit better than the small talk you have over drinks. I wouldn't mind if a man asked me if I wanted to be kissed, but for some reason, no one ever did.

He was nice, but I didn't really feel a spark while we talked. I wanted to feel something, especially because he was one of the nicer guys I had been out with recently. So, I figured it couldn't hurt to give the guy a shot. I leaned in to meet him halfway, and our lips touched. The kiss was nice at first, slow and tender, but then he pulled me closer to him. His hand slid behind my head, and I felt him pull me closer, more aggressively than I would have liked. Suddenly, his hand was at my waist, and he struggled to shove his hand down my jeans. His fingers began to grasp me, and he clawed his way inside. I gasped and pulled away from him.

"You like that?" He whispered as he fingered me harder, in a way that hurt.

"I think this is too much; I just met you."

He laughed, the way men do when they think they are doing you a favor and you're not appreciating it.

"Well, if you want me to stop, then make me."

I felt frozen as the car felt like it was floating. I was no longer cold, I felt nothing. I looked at his broad shoulders and tried to calculate how much more than me he weighed. I knew at that moment it was safer to give in. I let him keep his hand there, and he dug into me harder and harder. I remained quiet, hoping he would notice, and eventually, his phone vibrated on the dashboard.

"Oh, the Uber is here."

He kissed me one last time and told me he would text me when he got home. He opened up the car door and waved as he crossed the street.

I wasn't sure if it was the shock of what had happened or the frustration of this being the second date who had shoved his hands down my pants without asking first, but I just couldn't hold it in anymore. I started to cry. Huge sobs escaped my chest. My shoulders shook, and the tears streamed down my face like a dam had just broken wide open. I had no tissues in the car, so I wiped my eyes with my sleeves, put the car in drive, and started in the direction of home.

I looked down into my lap. My pelvis throbbed from the pressure and violation I had just experienced. Once again, I had let a man do what he wanted because I feared him. As I looked out my windshield into the cold, dark night, I made a silent wish, hoping to find a man who not only respected women but protected them as well.

He never texted me.

At the BBQ, one of the guys brought up the Me Too Movement. He was worried about his stepdaughter and was surprised by how bad things had gotten. At this point, Bill Cosby had been set free. Jeffrey Epstein had hung himself in jail. Harvey Weinstein, the only triumph for women, had his day in court. His victims got a chance to tell their

stories while he couldn't even bear to look them in the eye. R Kelly was awaiting his day in court.

"Yeah, I wish more people back then knew what we know now," I said.

The guys looked at me and shook their heads. "What do you mean?"

"If we took sexual harassment more seriously back then, maybe things would be different today," I explained.

"You mean with us? No, come on, things weren't like that back then."

I chuckled and nodded, "Yeah, you're right, not us, not back then."

CHAPTER FIVE

A Lesson On The Self: Disability Edition

I recently saw a new TV show on CBS, “Tracker.” In the pilot episode there was a double amputee walking with double prosthetics. As a character, he is a computer whiz who can hack and find information on the dark web. After this scene, my boyfriend and I, the viewers, looked at each other.

“I wonder if he was in the military,” My boyfriend said.

“They might add it into the story somehow,” I replied. I was expecting at some point in the next few episodes that we would be told a story of how he lost his legs in active duty, a car accident, etc. They never mentioned what happened to the character and, in this instance, the actor.

I was delighted that the show didn’t feel they needed to explain the character's “flaws” or “differences” from the rest of the cast. I searched for the actor online and learned that his name is Eric Graise. He is an actor and a director and has appeared in a few movies and TV shows. I was very impressed to see a double amputee act as a regular character, not as a token.

This is a perfect example of the unsolicited disabled body. The viewers are probably used to being given a story. A reason for why this character stands out from the others. But for the first time, it wasn’t given, and I had no reason to ask. I didn’t care. It doesn’t change who the character is or the role they play in the story. But as a society, we expect a reason.

The first time I ever noticed a character that was different from the rest of the cast was in *A Christmas Carol.* Tiny Tim was the reason scrooge wanted to change his ways. This poor child who walked with a crutch was to be pitied. Since then I have noticed countless characters in which there is an impairment or difference that makes them the "weaker" character.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data shows that "around 27% of US adults have a disability. In the top 100 films of 2022, only 1.9% of characters were portrayed with a disability" ("Disability & the Media"). While the TV industry has tried to diversify the characters seem on screen the film industry is lacking in this area. The IRIS Center has a cataloged list of every film with a character with a disability. Their website states,

> "The ways in which individuals and groups are portrayed in popular media can have a profound effect on how they are viewed by society at large. This tool represents an attempt to catalog the representation of people with disabilities in motion pictures. Many of those representations are accurate, many are inaccurate, and some are even offensive. Their inclusion in this tool is intended to stimulate discussion and should by no means be considered an endorsement of their accuracy or appropriateness" ("Film Portrayals").

Films with such characters normally were not played by actors with disabilities. Tom Hanks played Forrest Gump, a man with an assumed disability. He won an Academy Award for Best Actor for *Forrest Gump*. Sean Penn was nominated for an Academy Award for his portrayal in *I Am Sam*.

When I saw Forrest Gump, I was honestly surprised that a kid in leg braces was portrayed on the big screen. It was progressive, and I was happy to see that I wasn't the only one out there who wore braces as a child. But looking back, I realize now that we need to see actual disabilities portrayed on screen.

I was a kid who wore a leg brace. I was born with congenital talipes equinovarus, also known as clubfoot. About every 1 in 1,000 babies is diagnosed with some form of club foot. Clubfoot is when one or both of the baby's feet are turned inward, so much that it looks like a golf club; some doctor saw the humor in this and gave the defect its name. Although this is a common problem for new parents, there are varying degrees of the foot's angle, which translates into the treatment of the problem.

The process begins with casting. Casting can slowly mold the bones into the desired shape. Every two weeks, my parents had to bring me to get my casts changed. My father called me Thumper because he said when I started to crawl my cast would hit the floor and while I moved around on the hardwood they always knew where I was because of the soft "thump, thump," sound.

When that doesn't work, the doctor will switch to bracing. My parents wrestled me into my braces each night for a couple of months. I would see the braces in their hands and I would scream. My mom cried every night for the first week.

When those procedures fail, surgery is the final option. After my first birthday, I underwent a five-hour bone reconstruction surgery. I didn't take my first steps until I was almost two years old. I had to get X-rays once a year to ensure my bones remained in the right place. As a kid, I didn't know the difference. But something I noticed was my parents didn't talk about it much. I was a child with a disability. The year I was born, the

Americans with Disabilities Act was passed. I see the irony in this statement. People with disabilities had more protection than ever, but my parents still kept it hush-hush. They wanted me to live a "normal" life.

I spent my teenage years and my early twenties trying to mask the fact that I was born with a disability. I had spent most of my childhood around friends and family, not being able to answer questions about my body because I didn't understand my own disability. In my mid-twenties, I underwent another five-hour corrective surgery. I finally began to do my own research. Not every child born with clubfoot is as lucky as me. Some have more severe deformities. What I also learned is that there is another group of children that, with casting and bracing, become completely healed and live a life without a disability. I landed on the disabled side of this possibility.

Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel, the two leading sociologists on stigmatization, coined the term "Passing." In the article "Passing," Nicole Rousseau states, "The concept of passing originates in popular and legal discourses of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries about relations between black and white people in the United States" (Rousseau). Also known as "masking" or "presenting," all three terms are a type of stigmatization. In 1968, Goffman published his findings on stigmatization and explained, "Individuals try to avoid stigmatization, which has three distinct dimensions: character blemishes, physical deformities, and personal features like race, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Individuals often try to avoid stigmatization to enhance their social standing" (Renfrow).

Goffman and Garfinkel created these distinctions to create categories of passing. If someone feels stigmatized because of their physical deformities, they would be more

inclined to pass as able-bodied if possible. I am someone who can pass as an able-bodied person. It's the categorization of the stigma that allows us as a society to “other” someone. Groups allow us to say one over the other. As these sociologists suggest, if one group is considered “normal” or more accepted, the other group is less accepted or considered wrong or bad.

In a student thesis for Rollins College, Joy Sandon analyzed Goffman and Garfinkel’s work. Sandon explains, “There are a few key issues worth discussing when it comes to the passing phenomenon. The first is whether or not an individual passes intentionally, the second is the idea of passing from a marginal group to a dominant or “normal” group and vice versa, and the third is the question of whether or not the passing was or is successful” (Sandon). I realized that I began “passing” as a child unintentionally. I didn’t want to be different from the other kids. I wanted to run around the playground and play sports. I had limitations, but with my friends, I could pass.

As I got older, passing became more difficult. I couldn’t wear certain shoes. I can’t wear a pretty pair of heels to a wedding or special event. I can’t wear shoes without ankle support. My senior prom dress was long enough to cover the fact that I was wearing sandals. I had to become more strategic with my desire to pass. I wanted so badly to be like everyone else. I just wanted to be normal.

Like gender, sexuality, and other things, disability is a spectrum. There are levels of disability, and there are different distinctions. Someone who is sight impaired or lives most of their life in a wheelchair is what we call visibly disabled. Invisible disabilities are a completely different category. Passing as able-bodied is less talked about. Most days, I

walk without a limp. The pain I feel is internal and can't be seen by others. For me, passing is a normal day-to-day approach. Sandon also explains,

> "Similar to both racial and gender/sexuality passing is disability passing, an idea that has only become prevalent in recent years. There are only a few critical texts as well as journal articles that describe disability passing in terms of the closet/coming out, almost passing, and hiding any deviation from the normal. In a critical article on almost passing and disability, critic Julie-Ann Scott states, "Disability, unlike race and gender, is not based on 'predictable and observable traits' but on a deviation from what we consider normal" (Sandon).

I pride myself on being able to "pass." I am one of the lucky ones.

What I didn't expect was for Disabilities to become a huge topic of discussion. Last year, the college I work at, Kean University, used a disability text for their common read. The discussion spread across the campus, and as students read about a physical disability, I found myself jumping into the conversation to help explain or fix a misconception. I had included myself in the conversation. This required me to explain my credibility. I was someone who tried to pass for so long that I asked myself what my ethos was. Who was I to speak on disability?

What I realized was I should be that someone. I had every right to talk about disability because I lived with one. This didn't change the fact that I felt like an imposter. The more I began to read about stigma the more I understood my need and the need of my parents for me to "pass." In society we want to be accepted. Those who don't belong to a group that is normalized is considered on the outside or not socially accepted.

In “A Cartography of Passing in Everyday Life” Daniel Renfrow analyzes Goffman’s work from 1963. “Goffman’s work on passing concerns situations in which individuals transgress the boundaries of highly stigmatized identities by hiding information about who they ‘really’ are. Masking discreditable identities with more socially acceptable ones through passing offers individuals the potential to escape the expectations others impose on them because of their group membership and its related stigma” (Renfrow). As a sociological concept, “Passing” is actually a survival technique.

We all want to be accepted. It's also a primal instinct. If we aren’t accepted, we might not have the opportunity to be a part of the society. It is a performance that one must give in order to “fit in.” Renfrow explains this using Goffman’s research, “A performance is ‘socialized,’ molded, and modified to fit into the understanding and expectations of the society in which it is presented. . . . [An] important aspect of this socialization process [is] the tendency for performers to offer their observers an impression that is idealized in several different ways” (Renfrow). I had to decide whether I wanted to “perform” for the rest of my life or accept who I am and hope to be accepted by those around me. I chose to take a walk on the road less traveled.

The ironic part is that my time as a college writing professor started with my disability. On my first day of teaching, I was in a boot, on crutches. I had recently underwent a surgery to reconstruct my achilles tendon and add hardware to my ankle for structure and support. My surgery had taken place in May but by September I wasn’t fully healed. There were complications with my healing and physical therapy wasn’t helping as much as expected.

I crutched my way through the campus with my heavy black Addidas backpack full of teaching supplies. As I waited for the elevator doors to open, my palms started to sweat. *What will these young adults think of me when I walk through the room?*

At twenty-five I looked young, the security guard asked me when I walked in if I needed help looking for my classroom, and I saw it on his face that he thought I was a student. The elevator doors opened on my floor, and I glided down the hall to my classroom, opened the door, and crutched my way in.

I couldn't mask my disability. As I stood in front of the class I hadn't prepared what I would say or if I should explain. If my students were surprised by my appearance they didn't show it. They listened, we discussed the upcoming assignments for the semester and I got to know their backgrounds and their worries about college. I made a point of making the classroom a safe space, not just for my students but for me. I was struggling with beginning a new career and recovering from ankle surgery. This was a procedure I had been putting off, but I needed to fix my deformity before it got worse.

Once the crutches went away and I could walk without the boot, my students never mentioned my surgery again. I slipped right back into my habit of passing. Most people had forgotten I was on crutches, but most importantly, they never remembered why. I was just someone who had surgery, not someone who lived with a disability.

Once I stopped focusing on "passing" and I began to discuss my disability, I became obsessed with spreading the word. Disability has been a taboo word for me for over 30 years. I shied away from any talk of deformities or abnormalities. I want to share my story. I want everyone to know that I live with a disability. My job as an educator is

to teach. So, in my daily life, if I can teach one more person about disabilities, I will go out of my way to do that.

I believe the reason I focused so much on passing my whole life is the unsolicited part of it. I never asked to be born this way. My parents never asked to have a child who required so many health-related issues, doctor appointments, procedures, and bills. Also I don't have to solicit myself to the world. I don't have to explain myself.

Once, when I was walking on campus, a colleague was walking behind me and said my name so I would turn around.

He pointed down and said, "Those look like really uncomfortable shoes."

I was surprised, and I answered, "Really? These are my favorite because they are so comfortable."

"Well," he said, "They don't seem to fit, so I just assumed they hurt."

I realized what he meant. I was wearing slip-on loafer-style sneakers, and every time I walked, the back of my heel came halfway out of the shoe because my foot is two sizes smaller than my other foot.

As we walked towards the parking lot, I explained my condition. He felt bad. Then, it was my job to make him feel better. After I told my story and he asked his questions, we both went our separate ways.

This is the part I struggle with most. I want to educate others. I want someone one day to say, they know about club foot. Instead of constantly having to explain this medical issue like I'm a doctor. I don't walk normally. I am often asked if I am ok or why I am limping? Physical therapists love me because they always point out that I swing my

hip ever so slightly. I lack the confidence of just walking into a room because I don't know who can notice my subtle differences. Sometimes, passing is just easier.

Passing provides a person with a disability to act as someone that is able-bodied in order to experience something they wouldn't have the chance to. Or it can help that person learn something new through a different perspective. But passing isn't always the safest way to move throughout the world. Passing is also affected by appropriation.

How can I educate others if I have decided that passing is a better way for me to live? If I am appropriating able-bodied life then who am I to teach others about disability? Daniel Renfrow writes, "Some passing practices are shrouded in fear. Individuals fear other people will reject them because of their stigmatized identities, and once they successfully pass, they are in constant fear that others will discover their 'real' identities" (Renfrow).

I am finally seeing others like me on the TV screen. The FX TV show *Breaking Bad* had a character played by RJ Mitte. He is an actor with cerebral palsy. *Atypical* is a series that focuses on the life of 18-year-old Samuel "Sam" Gardner (Keir Gilchrist), who is autistic. *Speechless* is a show about a child with cerebral palsy, and the main character is played by actor Micah Fowler, who was born with cerebral palsy. *CODA* a film about a seventeen-year-old who is a child of Deaf adults (or for short: CODA) and the only hearing member of her family. In 2021, Troy Kotskur won Best Supporting Actor at the Oscars, making him the first Deaf man to win an Academy Award. Forrest Gump achieved greatness and overcame adversity throughout the movie. Tom Hanks allowed this character to be accepted by society so that Eric Graise, RJ Mitte, Keir Gilchrist, and Micah Fowler could eventually play a character on TV. But it's these characters

That allow for more understanding and acceptance of disability. Hopefully, more of us will feel that we don't have to focus on passing and that we can just focus on living. After all this, it is easy to say that my decision to lean into the unsolicited disabled body was a complicated one, but one I was more willing to make. Becoming more aware of disability studies and disability in media has allowed me to focus more on what is important. Spreading the word of my disability and educating others has become a big part of my life. But I can't take full credit for my decision. Society has changed, allowing me to come out of

CHAPTER SIX

A Lesson in Lipstick: How My Father Taught Me to Be A Feminist

My newest obsession is watching women do their makeup on TikTok. I wish I didn't enjoy it as much as I do, but I find it informative, educational, and relaxing. I have to say I am surprised that I enjoy it. I am studying feminist theory for my dissertation, and I often teach my students about the Suffragettes and the gender gap. But I guess I shouldn't be too surprised because I have a different kind of relationship with femininity.

Something I inherited from my mom that I didn't notice until I got older was her style. When I was younger, I saw it as vanity. My mother never left the house without her hair done, her makeup perfect, and her cloud of perfume. I didn't see it until my twenties, but I see the resemblance when I look in the mirror. I don't have the same chestnut hair, and I don't wear the same shade of mauve lipstick, but I have the curse of vanity too.

When I was younger, I was fascinated with how my mother primped and prepped herself for the day. To this day, I have never seen another woman take care of her body the way my mother did. My mother had this large three-piece mirror in her room that sat atop her dresser. I would follow her to her room after she showered. Through the crack in the door, I would watch her take off her robe and begin her routine. The fluffy white cloud of baby powder she would pat on her chest floated around her while she combed her wet hair. I never saw her apply any product to her hair, but she always kept it tangle-free by constantly brushing it. She kept a small travel brush in her pocketbook for last-minute touch-ups.

After applying her powder, she took an elegant jar of cream and rubbed it all down her arms and legs, around her stomach to her back, and up to her breasts. She would rub the lotion into her breasts as she watched herself in the mirror. On top of her dresser was what I used to call her potions. After getting dressed, she would spray her perfume onto her clean, dry chest and always a dab on her wrists. She had the bottles with the squeeze puff on the end. When she wasn't looking, I would hold them up in the mirror and pretend to squeeze them, afraid to apply the perfume to my body and be caught by the aroma.

The last step was her makeup. I would stare in amazement as she took her time applying blush, eye shadow, and layers of mascara. Lastly, she would lean close and stare in the mirror as she applied her lipstick and blotted with a tissue. I rarely saw my mother without lipstick.

As I grew older, I was plagued with acne-prone skin. Over the years, I learned how to conduct my own nightly regimen. I bought my elixirs and potions, and filled my medicine cabinet just as she had filled the top of her dresser. I take my time in the morning applying my skincare and makeup; I follow some of the routines I have learned from TikTok. These are my only tutorials because although I watched my mother apply her makeup, she never taught me. My mother left when I was 12. She decided that she no longer wanted to be a mother.

This is why I spend hours watching videos of women explaining their haircare or skincare routine online. I appreciate the value they bring to women like me. I had to teach myself how to braid my own hair; I learned the hard way that I could over-pluck my eyebrows and that bleaching my hair will lead to less hair over time. My relationship with

my femininity is something I struggle with because it isn't something I felt comfortable with as a young woman.

After my mom left, I was raised by my dad. As a single father, he did an amazing job, and I wouldn't have wished for it any other way. My dad was the first feminist I ever met.

My dad told me at a young age that I could be whatever I wanted. He explained that if people work hard, they can achieve anything. He never made me feel as a woman that I couldn't do something. Jo Ann Arinder explains feminist theory as,

> "Feminism is concerned with the constructs of intersectionality, dimensions of social life, social inequality, and social transformation. Through feminist research, lasting contributions have been made to understanding the complexities and changes in the gendered division of labor. Men and women should be politically, economically, and socially equal and this theory does not subscribe to differences or similarities between men, nor does it refer to excluding men or only furthering women's causes. Feminist theory works to support change and understanding through acknowledging and disrupting power and oppression" (Arinder).

My dad never went to college. He didn't study philosophy, sociology, or even know what feminism theory is, but my dad lived these principles without ever studying them.

"I graduated from the school of life." He often repeats with pride. He applauded the loudest at my undergraduate graduation and again at my graduate graduation. He never once thought I couldn't accomplish something I set my mind to. My dad didn't see the difference between my brother and me. He wanted both of us to succeed.

I expected to be taught how to be a woman by my mother. When she left, I wasn't sure how I would learn about the complexities of the female body. My dad did his best to take care of what she never did.

On the surface my dad doesn't seem like the kind of man to teach his daughter about being a feminist. He is the stereotypical blue collar uniform job kind of guy. After my mon lft he had to pick up a few extra jobs. He wasn't always around after school or on the weekends. My favorite memory from my childhood is his continued support. Showing up to my dance recitals and recording my routines on his video camera. Based on the little red light shining from the Sony camcorder, I always knew where he was sitting. Teaching me to ride my bike. His big, cracked, and blistered hands held the seat tight while I peddled along the sidewalk. Those same hands changed my diaper and built the roads we drive on. He was a hard worker. He worked just as hard at being a dad.

Each job had a different uniform. When he delivered oil on the weekends, it was brown pants, a gray shirt, and a dark brown jacket. When he worked during the week, it was navy utility pants and a light blue shirt with a matching navy Carhart jacket. When he worked nights, it was a black suit and slicked-back hair; the funny chauffeur hat always made me laugh. My dad never liked wearing a suit but his customers who he drove into the city expected it.

So many years have passed since the nights as a kid waiting for dad to drive the limo home and fighting back sleep so I could sit in the back seat. But I still remember the excitement as he would drove around the corner and let me play with the lights and the electric divider. Some weekends he would have to work instead of coming to my softball

games, and he missed most back to school nights, but I always knew where he was going based on the uniform he was wearing.

There were times when there wasn't much work and he could pick us up from school and take us to our activities. He would make dinner and help us with our homework. One night he fell asleep while he was boiling water for spaghetti. I never thought someone could "burn water," but he sure found a way to make the house smell for days.

Along with all the different work uniforms; he also wore different hats. He wore his coach hat at my brother's baseball games. He placed his proud dad hat on when he came to my girl scout events. The mom hat was thrown on when I got my first period, and I hadn't had "the talk" yet. But my favorite hat was the fun dad hat. He knew my brother, and I were competitive and hated to lose, so he would let me win in *Candy Land* and help my brother win in *Sorry!* Those were his best uniforms.

In high school, I made the Varsity Swim team. My meets were in a heated indoor YMCA pool. The highlight was standing up on the sturdy diving block, looking out into the sea of parents, and always finding my dad. In his dirty work boots and layered clothing, just getting off a truck, he would sweat through his shirt by the end of the swim meet.

After my mom left I fell in step with a uniform also. My mom loved to put me in dresses and matching sets of sweaters and skirts. My dad, unaware that he was supposed to guide me when I shopped let me buy whatever I picked out when we went to the store. My new uniform became a tom-boy version of myself. Light pink and baby blue track

suits along with jeans and hoodies were used to conceal my growing chest. I also liked to include sweatpants and basketball shorts that were bought from the boys section. I had no experience putting together outfits from the clothes in the "Juniors section" and eventually I grew out of all of my dresses, and I decided that I didn't want to buy more. My dad, unsure of how to guide me let me always choose my style over the years.

In high school I finally figured out how to wear a bra and hip-hugging jeans and my dad embraced my becoming a young lady journey. He warned me if a skirt was too short or that I needed to put a tank top on under a sheer shirt but he never tried to change my style. The day I emerged from the bathroom, as blonde as Marilyn Monroe, he shook his head and followed me into my room.

"You know your hair is going to fall out if you keep dying your hair."

As a middle-aged man trying to teach his teenage daughter about her appearance must not have been easy for him. He was concerned with me doing damage to my body.

"Stop blow-drying your hair, it will fall out."

"Stop popping your pimples, they will get infected."

"Stop curling your eyelashes, they will break off."

He had many opinions of the female self-care routine. He always told me I was naturally beautiful and I didn't need makeup or to dye my hair. But as a teenager, I didn't accept my appearance, and I wanted to look like everyone else.

My dad grew up in the summer of love era. Women wore their hair natural and wore less makeup or none at all. The Summer of Love and the discussion of sexual freedom led to the 1970s which opened the door to more conversations of freedom. In her News Decoder article Sue Landau explains,

> "Contraception became freely available, and laws on abortion and divorce were liberalized in many Western countries. Also in the 1970s, sex discrimination was outlawed, and the principle of equal pay was enacted. These reforms brought droves of women into the labor force in a booming economy that needed more workers, particularly in service industries. Some argue the changes were motivated only by economic and capitalistic logic, not women's rights" (Landau).

He had lived through the start of the Women's Liberation movement in the 1970s and watched the evolution through the 1980s. When I was born in 1990 he had a log history with feminist and women's equality.

But he also knew that this was my journey and I needed to travel it alone. Without a mom to teach me that if you don't time Nair just right it will burn your skin, I learned these lessons on my own. He guided me through things when he could but he never overstepped his dad boundries. He did his best to teach, not control. To this day I appreciate his approach. Feminist theory explains that,

> "Gender socialisation is the process of learning what constitutes gender-appropriate behaviours and attitudes. Gender socialisation begins at birth and is intensified during adolescence and adulthood through social structures, such as families, peers and communities, and institutions, including cultural and social norms, media, and political structures. The idea of gender as deeply rooted in stereotypes about the appropriate behaviour, roles, and values means that these ideas are pervasive and absorbed even if people oppose them" (Verroya et al).

Although I went to high school during a pre-social media world there were still many influences around me that showed the expectations of a young woman. Movies,

TV, Magazines, and the girls at school all followed the stereotypical societal expectations. Over time I fell into the trap of wanting to look like everyone else. My dad didn't get why I had to have the newest Abercrombie & Fitch jeans or why I begged him to drive me to the mall every weekend. He would remind me to be my own person and not follow what everyone else does. Today I wish I had listened. I was too weak to fight off the influences around me. But today, his lesson replays in my head. I am proud to say I think independently, finally.

I eventually adopted my own uniforms. Because my dad was a single father, this meant I would not be given money for college. I worked hard to get scholarships but waitressing helped pay my tuition. At sixteen, I traded in my childhood for an apron. I didn't want my education to be my dad's burden. I wanted to earn my degree not only in the classroom but by being able to afford the bill.

This required working late after school to scrub the milkshake machine and working weekends to serve families ice cream sundaes. I started to understand why my dad worked so much when I was younger. Most Saturdays were spent on my hands and knees, mopping up milk some toddler had dropped with a rag covered in maple syrup and ketchup. I didn't mind that my job was messy and sometimes degrading. I was working hard, and when I was handed my tips at the end of the shift, I felt I had truly earned them. Every penny I saved went to pay for books and tuition. After a long shift, my feet would ache, and my back was sore, but I had money in my pocket.

Like my dad, I still have two jobs. I am an educator; my college degree got put to good use. But now that I am furthering my education, I am still wearing two uniforms. During the week I wear dress pants and a blazer. Every Saturday and Sunday, I wrap my

worn apron around my waist and continue to clean up spilled milk. After sixteen years of waiting tables, I thought I would be done by now, living the better life my father always wanted for me.

"You have to go to college; I don't want you working multiple jobs like me."

Only if he had known how much life would cost in 2025.

I moved out of my childhood home, and I bought a house. The second job helps to pay for my education, while my primary salary pays for my mortgage. My dad tried his best to teach me how to fix things so I wouldn't have to hire someone or how to shop smart at the grocery store.

But what I learned most from my dad is that life is not cheap, and to enjoy it, you have to learn how to cut corners with certain things. Turn the heat off when you leave the house, even if it kills my house plants. Turn the light off when you leave a room. Take a quick shower because hot water isn't cheap. My dad was able to take us on a few vacations during my childhood, and I always wondered if I rushed through my showers if we could go to Disney world that year. Money was always tight, but I wouldn't change it. It taught me the value of a dollar and how hard one needs to work for it.

My dad is retired now and spends a lot of his time fixing things up at my house. He no longer comments on my hair but instead asks me if I used mollys when I hung the shelf in my room. He will always be the parent, the only parent, and over the years, he has learned what that entails. Most daughters I know prefer to spend time with their mom, and at times I envy that. But I get to spend time with my dad doing everyday things. We landscape and garden together, build outdoor furniture and fix all of the broken pieces of my house.

I can't quite imagine what my life would have been like if my mom had stayed. Would I have made fewer mistakes when it came to dating? Would I have chosen a different career path? I don't know what a "normal household" looks like. My mom didn't make dinner while my dad mowed the lawn. Feminist Gender socialisation theory suggests,"The portrayal of gender-roles and stereotypes by parents, for example, males performing outdoor work and jobs while females conduct household chores, can program the mindset of children who further internalize biased norms" (Verroya). I see it as a gift that I grew up without gender stereotypes set by my parents. I do wonder if I would have a different outlook on life if I had grown up in a nuclear family. I don't know the answers, and part of me doesn't care. The only question that matters to me is, would my dad still be my best friend? That's what matters most to me because I wouldn't trade that for the world.

When I moved home from college, I noticed that my dad had traded in his stained work pants for dark jeans and new sneakers. His shirts were tucked in and void of rips and tattered hems. He had plans on the weekends. As he emerged from the shower, I could smell the *Irish Spring* soap he had used since I was a young girl; it curled under my door through the gap and filled my room. Mixed with his cologne's spicy musk, this was a signal that my father was once again changing his uniform. He was going out on dates. After years of focusing on his two children, my dad was ready to open up his heart to someone new. I was happy for him. I thought I might feel jealous or territorial. I had his attention for all of these years; I might not want to share it. But once I met his girlfriend, I felt none of those feelings. I was proud of him, and I instantly loved her too.

My dad will turn seventy this year, and although I worry about this, I appreciate the maturity of our relationship. He is wise in a way that isn't preachy; I am always picking his brain for knowledge. But I am also more mature too.

He reminds me that he won't be around forever, and that's the moment I dread the most. I soak up as much of his sunshine as I can. We text almost every day, along with a weekly phone call. But my favorite moments are when I'm sitting at his girlfriend's dining table, eating a home-cooked meal, drinking a glass of wine, in my comfortable sweatpants, outside of my usual work uniform.

He always sits across from me wearing jeans and his never-white New Balance sneakers with a plaid shirt or long sleeve crew neck pullover. He has let the gray grow out in his beard, his blonde hair is thinning, but he looks better than I have ever seen him. He looks happy.

I have found someone myself. Someone that allows me to be the feminist I am. He loves that I work hard. He is a hard worker too. He is as or even more hard working than me. Sometimes at night we compete over who is more tired. We just bought a house together and I get to do all of the things I did with my dad in the first house, now with him.

Although I know he doesn't expect it I like to dress up for him. Over the years of working a full time job I have established a style that consists of dresses, sweaters, and dress pants. I have found comfort in my femininity and I dress in what feels most comfortable to me. I still enjoy sweatpants and wearing my hair in a ponytail but for date night I make sure to look my best.

The TikTok videos have taught me how to wing my eyeliner and fill in my thin eyebrows. But I don't forget my earliest lesson. I take my time when I get ready. I don't like the smell of baby powder but I use lotion to moisturize my body after a shower. There is a visceral feeling in my gut when I smell any Avon perfume, which is what my mom used to wear. I have chosen scents with notes of warm vanilla or fresh honeysuckle instead. I don't have a three piece mirror or a vanity to get ready at but I have my makeup and skincare organized well.

There are many things she didn't teach me. There were times I thought that and so I missed out by not having a mother in my adolescent years. But I do take the lessons I do have with me. I learned how to work hard and not let anyone tell me what I can and can't do from my father. Every morning as I lean over into the mirror, I remember my mother. I check my hair and makeup and apply my lipstick; I always blot with a tissue.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A Lesson for Tomorrow

If I moved my head just right, the dark red Coca-Cola can shone like a lighthouse. As it sat under the street light, I saw it as a beacon of hope. I sat with my knees up to my chest, hugging them close while I hid behind a bush. Our dead-end street was quiet on a warm summer night.

The aluminum can called to me, but I had to be patient. I wasn't a fast runner like the others, so I couldn't tease the person who was it and race them to the can. I played the game on defense, sitting and waiting in a bush.

I saw a quick flash of a yellow shirt. Looking through the branches, I saw my brother running towards the Coca-Cola can.

"Kick the can on Missy!" My brother shouted.

I stood from my hiding spot, disillusioned and annoyed. As I walked toward the street lamp's spotlight, I folded my arms in front of my chest.

"I saw your pink shirt through the bush. You are usually easy to spot." He explained.

It was now my turn to be it. The worst position in the game because everyone knew they could beat me to the can if I was far away. A slow runner is easy to beat.

I recently started looking for a doctor to perform my ankle replacement surgery. I had bone reconstruction surgery in 1991 to correct the deformity that was caused by club foot. After this surgery, I went on to live a mostly normal life for over twenty years. When I was twenty-five, I needed a second surgery. My Achilles never grew to its full

length, which is a side effect of club foot, and I had arthritis and bone spurs that needed to be cleaned out. I was given a longer Achilles and some bolts for stability.

Almost ten years later, I am beginning to plan another surgery. This time I am walking into the exam room with more information. Ankle replacement surgery is very advanced and has allowed many patients to live a normal life. But I am not a normal patient. My ankle was reconstructed over thirty years ago. I am worried that even with this new technology, an implant won't be compatible with my body.

I began my search for a specialist. Coincidently, while I googled surgeons, I started reading the novel *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow* by Gabrielle Zevin. *(Spoilers ahead)* In the story, a young boy is in a car accident at ten. His foot is crushed, and most of his bones are beyond repair. He goes through multiple surgeries to save his foot. Not much is discussed about the surgeries, but he is in and out of the hospital and mainly uses crutches. Later, the boy is in college and uses a cane. In 1997 the boy attended Harvard. Although the ADA has been passed, he is placed in a dorm without a properly working elevator, and he leaves an hour before his class starts to make sure he can walk there in time. He never complained to the school.

I understood this character. I am this character. Gabrielle Zevin was speaking to me. Of course, Sam, the character's name, wasn't making a big deal out of his disability, I had spent most of my life doing the same thing. The same girl that hid in the bushes during Kick the Can, Hide and Seek, and any other run and hide game was so I wouldn't be seen. Sam wanted to be like everyone else, he didn't want his disability to be seen.

Later in the novel, Sam deals with complications from multiple surgeries. The rod that was placed in his foot for stability had shifted and began to tear up his foot. Three

days after my surgery, I turned to my partner at the time and told him, “I can feel the bolts.” He laughed because I had been on pain medication and sleeping for most of the day. I wasn’t high on pain meds, I could feel them. The two titanium bolts in my ankle throbbed, telling me they were there. They were sharing space with bones and ligaments. I had to accept that this was their new home and I was their host.

I have never met anyone else with club foot. If I ever do, I have a list of questions for them. I want to know if they feel the things I feel. Sam is the closest I have come to this, and he is still just a character. Gabrielle Zevin wrote him well, but she couldn’t write the character in the way of understanding. She can’t explain what it feels like to know that there is something foreign in your body. While in the hospital due to complications with his foot, Sam is told by a doctor that the best thing to do would be to amputate.

I had to close the book and place it in my lap. I was immediately brought back to a college party. We were sitting around in a living room at some house off campus. A few guys lit up a joint while I sipped on boxed wine.

“I would much rather lose my arm than a leg, " one of the guys said. The movie *127 Hours* had just been released, and it was all these guys could talk about while they were high.

“He really just digs in and rips through it, it's crazy.” The other guy answers.

My friend who brought me to the party nodded her head next to me. Then her boyfriend spoke up.

“Why an arm over a leg?” He asked.

“Can you imagine not being able to walk? I would hate that.” He replied.

I wanted to speak up. I remained quiet and sipped my overly sweet wine.

What most people don't realize is that as someone with a disability, I think about losing my foot all of the time. I have dreams that are so visceral that I wake up and rip the covers off just to make sure my foot is still there.

I once had a dream that felt so real that I was crying. I had woken up from surgery and the doctor stood over me and apologized. "I'm so sorry, but we couldn't save it." I looked down, and where my foot had been was only bandages. I woke to tears streaming down my face and my heart racing.

I like to believe that this is a normal occurrence for those with disabilities. I wouldn't know because I don't know that many people like me. Reading *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow* gave me a sense of belonging. Although Sam is a fictional character, there have to be others out there. The novel spoke to many themes that I deal with in my daily life. Sam's disability affected his confidence and his sense of worth. He strived to be smarter than others, he worked harder than those around him, he went to Harvard, and he became a self taught game designer. He was ambitious and motivated. I related to Sam because I do the same.

There is something that sets me apart from others. A part of me that I can't control. Because of this, I do my best to control everything else. I strive to be the hardest-working person in the room. I want to be defined by my work, not my shortcomings. In an interview with Oregon Public Broadcasting, Gabrielle Zevin explains Sam as a character, "in the case of Sam, he wants to be in a body that works perfectly all the time. If you think of the first scene of the book, he's in a train station and it's really difficult to get through the train station for him. And in a sense, for Sam, real life is difficult, video games are easy" (Van Wing). There are so many parts of Sam that I relate to but also

speak to disability and identity. Mobility, control, confidence, sense of self. I question often, *am I who I am because of my disability*? Or *who would I be without my disability?*

Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow is a New York Times best seller. It became instantly popular upon its release, and Amazon named the novel the best book of 2022, as well as a Goodreads Choice Award winner in Fiction. I am just getting to read it now in 2024. I can't help but wonder if Gabrielle Zevin missed an opportunity. I am not saying that she began this book with the idea of writing about disability. I'm not sure if it would have been a commercial success if it was written in the third person from Sam's point of view. But I can't help but wish she had given more insight from him. She did her best to open the door to someone's journey with a disability. I am happy that more writers feel open to writing characters with disabilities.

I like to think the little girl who hid in the bushes would like the version I am today. I no longer hide. I am an educator that stands in front of the room and addresses each student confidently. I now present at conferences addressing Disability Studies. I walk proudly with a limp and explain my condition when asked. I've come a long way from the girl who hid in the bushes. But a lot has changed since then. I was born the year the ADA was passed. The world has become more accepting of disability.

I can't help but think what would have happened if I had been born much earlier than I was. I think about how people believed that babies that were born like me didn't deserve to live. I have to remember that for some time, Eugenics was legal, and people with disabilities like me were sterilized. In the article "Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities: Eugenics," authors Ingrid Grenon and Joav Merrick explain the start of eugenics,

> "In 1883, Sir Francis Galton, cousin of Charles Darwin, coined the term 'eugenics.' Galton loosely defines eugenics as 'the cultivation of race,' or 'the science of improving stock.' Galton's new science spread like a wildfire in the United Kingdom and the United States and in 1907 Indiana passed the first law allowing 'undesirables and defectives,' such as the 'mentally retarded,' to be involuntarily sterilized. This is considered to be the first such eugenic 'law' to be passed in the world" (Grenon and Merrick).

Although eugenics laws would only cover the right to sterilize me and prevent me from having children with deformities, there were other options to remove disability from the world. Infanticide in infants with disabilities is a difficult topic to discuss and research. Not much research is available because euthanasia of infants is illegal worldwide. But this doesn't mean it doesn't happen. During President Ronald Reagan's presidency, a law was passed to protect more infants born with disabilities.

> "The Department of Health and Human Services and Surgeon General Dr. C. Everett Koop believed that the infants were being discriminated against due to their mental handicaps, resulting in their deaths. Dr. Koop began advocating for a law that would ensure standard practices and procedures for treating seriously ill and mentally handicapped newborns, even if it ran counter to the preferences of the parents. This led to passage of the Child Abuse Amendments of 1984 which established specific criteria and guidelines for the treatment of sick and disabled newborn infants. The amendment was passed in October 1984" ("Chronology Ronald Reagan").

Infanticide due to disability is, unfortunately an ongoing debate. The legalization of physician-assisted suicide is passing in European countries and is legal in three states. The disability community has been an integral part of this debate. Some disability advocates fight for the right for those with disabilities to be included in those who are able to decide when they can be assisted in their death. Others believe that by opening the door to this there could potentially be a problem with the euthanasia of those with disabilities.

Those in the disability community believe that it is the ones with the disability that should have a say. How can we create reform, protections, and laws without first understanding the needs of those that live with disabilities. Philosopher Susan Wendell, author of *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability*, provides a rationale for the disability perspective:

> "Not only do physically disabled people have experiences which are not available to the able-bodied, they are in a better position to transcend cultural mythologies about the body, because they cannot do things the able-bodied feel they must do in order to be happy, 'normal' and sane.... If disabled people were truly heard, an explosion of knowledge of the human body and psyche would take place" (Wendell).

Although Gabriele Zevin is not a person with a disability, she opens the door to understanding the life of someone with a physical disability. She shines light on the debate of quality of life and how far a doctor goes to save a part of the body when they take an oath based on the idea of do no harm. She tackles this critical issue in an

understandable way to those without a disability and uses a platform such as a contemporary novel to spread this story.

Zevin also uses games as a metaphor for living with a disability. I didn't tell the guy at the party that I believed he was wrong. I wouldn't want to lose an arm over a leg. I know what the difficulties are of not being able to walk. I can handle that, I have the strength to learn a new way of getting around. Sam understood that too. But for Sam, he had a release. He used games to live a life he could not live in the real world. Games allowed him a different reality, one with second chances and opportunity. Games are childlike and allow us to be creative and strategic. Games can also be freeing. Zevin explains in the interview, "It's about this guy, Sam Mazer, who transforms so many things he dislikes about himself into art, and so many things that are unfair also become art" (Van Wing). Zevin's novel speaks to the childlike gamer in all of us. We all have a memory of childhood that we look back on; games are what hold the two main characters together. Games speak to childhood innocence; we can all relate to that.

Art is an interesting tool for those of us with disabilities. As a writer, I am lucky that my disability does not prevent me from writing. My disability fuels me. Just like Sam, who used his disability to fuel his art, he added the things he wanted to see in his reality to his games. His art became the world he wanted to see. Thank you to Gabrielle Zevin for creating a world that I wanted to see.

I am hoping to see more disabilities portrayed in books, movies, and TV. I hope to be a writer who shares stories of disability. There needs to be more voices of the disabled shouting their stories. We need more narratives so we can understand better. There is a part of the novel where we find out why the novel is titled *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow,*

and Tomorrow. One of the main characters in the book is cast in the play *Macbeth*, he describes a soliloquy given by the character Mabeth who recited the following:

> "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
> To the last syllable of recorded time;
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
> And then is heard no more. It is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing" (Shakespeare).

I have a more positive outlook on tomorrow. I don't believe that life is meaningless. We shouldn't all be creeping towards our imminent death; we should be looking for the opportunity of tomorrow. Tomorrow is a new day. Tomorrow can be a day without pain. Tomorrow can be a day that brings more hope and understanding. Tomorrow can be a new start or a beginning. Tomorrow can lead to a brighter future. Yesterday or today is just that, but tomorrow is a possibility.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A Lesson on Learning to Say No

(unread) - Subject: Syllabus Due

(unread) - Subject: Assessment Due

(unread) - Subject: Committee Meeting Schedule

(unread) - Subject: Classes start next week!

I recently told my boyfriend, partner, that only half of my job is teaching. In college, the professors spend less time in the classroom and more time working on curriculum, assessment, committee meetings, and advising.

A college Professor's inbox is like the emergency room of a hospital. Everyone wants to be considered important, but it's up to the doctor to figure out who gets cared for first.

I love my job, I'm not complaining, but my favorite part is teaching. I don't know if anyone becomes a teacher to get excited about assessment and curriculum reform. Everyone I know is in it for the mentoring. The summer is supposed to be a relaxing time for a teacher, this is when the college professor works on their syllabi, lesson plans, builds their courses in a Learning Management System, and prepares for the fall advisement load.

I like to think I am a go-getter. My friends and colleagues would prefer I call myself a workaholic. I sleep better at night knowing all of my emails are answered, my to-do list is checked, and I have a new to-do list ready to go for the next day. I have a dozen tabs open at all times on about five different browsers. My mind struggles to

compartmentalize all of the tasks, and my true secret is if I don't do something right away, I will forget. As emails pour into my in-box and my to-do list seems endless, I struggle with managing it all.

I recently learned that these are considered to be signs of ADHD.

Growing up, I always thought those who had ADHD were hyper. I recently learned that it doesn't just mean the body, but the mind can be hyper. I have a hyper mind. In the DSM - Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, ADHD is defined as

> "Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a common neurodevelopmental condition described in diagnostic classification systems. It is characterised by difficulties in two subdomains: inattention, and hyperactivity-impulsivity. Three primary subtypes can be identified: predominantly inattentive, hyperactive-impulsive, and combined presentations. Symptoms persist over time, pervade across situations and cause significant impairment" (DSM).

For years I have struggled with trying to do too many things at once. I have been working on slowing down and giving myself time to work on one thing. It's a struggle, but I am getting better. What I found to be the most difficult is not allowing others to prove my worth.

I have always been a people pleaser. I didn't realize that this is also a symptom of ADHD in women. My Neurodivergent journey began when I one day could not take it anymore. I was working from home and I couldn't stop walking in and out of rooms trying to remember why I was there and prioritize my tasks. I had been dealing with lack of sleep, and my tiredness led to indecisiveness, and I couldn't get my tasks done. Finally

my partner mentioned that I might have ADHD. I laughed it off at first, but then that night I stayed up late doing my own research.

Everything I found felt familiar. An article on UCLA Health's website gave symptoms and an explanation. It read,

> "Symptoms include: Disorganization, distraction, fidgeting, forgetfulness, losing things, mental health issues, including depression or anxiety. As girls with ADHD mature into women, their symptoms continue. And without treatment, they can lead to difficulties handling adult responsibilities and interactions. Years — even decades — of living with untreated ADHD can also take a toll on women's self-esteem and mental health. They may feel like failures or blame themselves for being too lazy or too disorganized to cope with all that adult life demands of them" ("Recognize ADHD in Women").

Once I had read about ADHD, I was convinced I needed to see a doctor. By that time I had been taking anti-depression and anxiety medication. I didn't feel that my anxiety ever went away but I assumed the medication helped. I began my search for a doctor.

The first psychiatrist I met with came very highly recommended. He sat me down in his fancy armchair in his well-decorated office. He asked me questions and we chatted about my life. At thirty-three years old, I had never met with a psychiatrist.

"Melissa, I find it very hard to believe that you have ADHD like you think you do. A woman your age with multiple advanced degrees does not get to where she is by having ADHD. Your doctor was right, you probably suffer from depression and need a higher dose of medication to calm you down."

I left his office feeling so defeated. How stupid I was for thinking I had found something that finally made sense. After telling a friend what happened, she offered her psychiatrist, she believed me, and she thought I should seek another opinion.

When I first met my doctor, I was immediately impressed by how she listened. After I answered many questions, she told me I had ADHD. The medication I was on was actually making my ADHD worse, she didn't believe I had anxiety, and by taking anxiety medication, I was making myself more anxious.

I wondered how it had taken me this long to realize that multiple doctors were wrong. My doctor explained that most diagnoses at a young age were of boys because the hyperactive term was taken as physical energy. Not many young girls can explain their hyperactive brain. She also explained that, "more women are diagnosed later in life. Women are ten times less likely to be diagnosed with ADHD under the age of 30." I am one of them.

I finally felt like I had all the answers I needed. I stopped taking the anxiety medicine and within two weeks I felt better. I started taking a medication specifically for ADHD. When I take my medication I have more confidence, I have more control over my time and memory, and I am more focused.

Over summer break, a colleague was suddenly placed on medical leave. Her schedule had been set, her classes were full, and there weren't many extra instructors available. I volunteered to take one of her classes. She is not only a colleague, but a friend. I was happy to help. Or was I? Was this my people-pleasing mind taking over? Was this my overwhelming desire to help and feel useful taking over?

As a people pleaser, I have always prided myself on being useful. Helping others was part of my personality. It's how I felt most like me. Now with the understanding of my neurodivergence, this made more sense. I always felt like I needed to be the smartest person in the room, or I needed to include my input on a subject, because that's how I could make people like me. Girls with ADHD suffer from a lack of interpersonal connection. As a child, I don't think anyone would have said I struggled with that. But they didn't know that in my head I replayed every interaction I had that day before I fell asleep. I made a mental checklist of thoughts. *Did everyone still like me? Did that thing I said at lunch hurt anyone's feelings? Do they think I'm weird?* Now I know why I cared so much.

(Unread) - Subject: Can you share your syllabus?

(Unread) - Subject: Borrowing a lesson?

(Unread) - Subject: Will you look over my Proposal?

(Unread) - Subject: Letter of Recommendation for a Student?

Some days, I spent more time helping others than getting my work done. I finally reached a breaking point at a workshop at the end of summer. I was surrounded by colleagues who were worried about recent curriculum changes.

"Can you share your slideshows?"

"Will you help me with my weekly lesson plans?"

"Can I get a copy of your syllabus?"

"Would you add me to your canvas course so I can see how you teach?"

I snapped. Not in front of them. But later, in my car. I slammed my fists on the steering wheel and yelled, “No!”

I had gone from the person who desired to feel useful, needed, and relied on, to someone who felt used and taken advantage of. I was proud of the lessons I had created, the information I had shared over the years, but I was done. I had reached an exhaustion I had never felt before.

My new medication gave me a level of confidence I hadn’t experienced. Although I was more in control, I was still overwhelmed by the many tasks I had to finish before classes started. My inbox was full of unanswered emails, my to-do list was long, and caused me to procrastinate. It got to the point where getting out of bed and getting dressed felt like an accomplishment.

I made an appointment with my psychiatrist. The ADHD diagnosis was such a relief. But I hadn’t learned how to stop blaming myself for shying away from tasks for fear of not completing them. I procrastinated because I hated coming to terms with the amount of focus something needed and knowing I couldn’t do it. My doctor asked me in our session, “what is the worst thing that could happen if you said no?” She was right. My mind stopped racing. My confidence began to rise. I thought people pleasing was who I was. But I didn’t need to be that person. I could say no, so I could focus on my needs. I could do things on my terms.

I responded to almost every email in my inbox with a very professional and respectful version of NO!

When the semester started, I made a promise to myself. Keep your head down and focus on your work. Don’t offer anyone help that doesn’t ask for it. There is more on

your plate this semester than ever before. Do only the work you need to do. Focus more on your students and just get through this semester. My doctor had helped me find ways to handle my stress and manage my focus, but it was up to me to keep my promise to myself.

I am someone who has lived with a disability my entire life. What I didn't realize was I have two different forms of disability. I am physically disabled. But I am also neurodivergent. In the DSM it is defined as "Neurodivergence is a term used to describe people whose brains process information differently from what is considered 'typical.' It's often different from mental health conditions, like anxiety or depression. Neurodivergent conditions, include Autism and ADHD, along with learning disorders such as Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, and Dyscalculia" (DSM). I had been confused by my diagnosis of anxiety and depression when I was in my early 20s. I just assumed that because depression ran in my family that it made sense. Once I learned more about my new diagnosis, the more it made sense.

I don't see my disorder as a disability, I see it as an opportunity. I know myself better than ever. I also want to use this diagnosis to help others. I have almost a decade of teaching experience, and sometimes, I don't believe it because I still feel like a student myself. I am constantly learning and try to better myself for my students.

Of course I knew why I was a people pleaser all my life, but I couldn't help but wonder if there were other reasons as well. In my time in higher education, I have learned so much more about what it is like to be a female in the profession.

Many of the women in my department are exhausted. We tend to be the first at meetings to volunteer for things. We are the majority of committees and task forces. We

teach and advise the same amount of students, but there is a level of comfort a student has with female professors. A Gallup poll found that, “Burnout levels are higher among female teachers than their male counterparts; however, this is consistent with all workers nationally. Female teachers in particular are especially burned out, at 55%, with male teachers following at 44%” (Marken and Agrawal). Without trying, we have a maternal quality that they gravitate towards. I have always noticed that female students want to be my friend and male students see me in a motherly manner. I asked a male colleague once if he kept a box of tissues in his office and he replied, “why, should I?”

> In an article published in the Frontiers of Psychology journal, studies found, “Women and men both differ in the way they are exposed to stress and in their response to stress. Causal factors include differences in working conditions, social role behavior, role conflicts, gender stereotypes, and related differences in advancement opportunities, among others. For women, however, the probability of work-family conflicts and emotional exhaustion increases when they have to work longer than desired, i.e., they suffer from over-employment” (Kreuzfeld and Seibt).

Compassion fatigue or empathy exhaustion is not a new feeling for me but it is something I am struggling to deal with. Compassion fatigue is defined by the Canadian Medical Association as, “is the cost of caring for others or for their emotional pain, resulting from the desire to help relieve the suffering of others. It is also known as vicarious or secondary trauma, referencing the way that other people’s trauma can become their own” (CMA). Now, I am not a psychologist or a nurse, but there is a burnout that happens with teachers as well. The National Education Association cited a statistic from a RAND study conducted in 2022. “73% of teachers reported job related stress due to teaching in 2022”

(NEA). I am always the first to raise my hand when someone is in need. Recently an email went out explaining that our department needs a new chair for the community life committee. It took much restraint but I did not answer that email. “In adulthood, psychoeducation and interventions should continue to address core ADHD symptoms, executive dysfunction, comorbid conditions and dysfunctional strategies. However, specific attention may be required to address the more complex situations adult females may face, e.g. multitasking occupational demands, home management and family/parenting responsibilities. It is important to encourage the patient to identify and focus on their strengths and positive attributes rather than solely on perceived weaknesses and failures” (Young et. al.). Now that I am finding myself pulling back and saying no more frequently, is there a lesson here for my students?

A student recently came to me because I knew she felt comfortable and told me she was having trouble getting to school. She had to take multiple buses, Uber, or sometimes she could get a ride, but her transportation was unreliable. I looked into this young woman’s eyes, and for the first time, I didn’t feel disheartened about the situation she was in now; I felt worried for her future. I always focused on the problem in front of me. I gave her contact information and resources to see if there was anything the school could do to help. But, in the back of my mind, I knew that this was only the beginning. Only the beginning of her life as a woman. Having to deal with the added struggles that come with it.

Women in many fields will struggle with burnout and will be overworked by employers and at home. Women have been overlooked for years in the medical community and not much is different in other industries.

> "Over 30 years ago, Berry, Shaywitz and Shaywitz warned that girls constitute a 'silent minority' in ADHD, with more internalised behaviour making them less likely to be referred for assessment. This does not appear to have changed. Females with ADHD remain more likely to be unrecognised or mis-identified leading to lower than expected rates of referral, assessment and treatment for ADHD. Whilst this has been attributed to the higher rate of internalised and inattentive only presentation in girls, this omission is remarkable, given that the predominantly inattentive subtype of ADHD has been endorsed by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, a key diagnostic tool, for many years" (Young et. al.).

Since I began teaching, I have had many empty boxes of tissues in my office. Young women come to me because they feel safe. Students have told me stories of heartbreaking breakups, financial issues, complicated family dynamics, homelessness, and even once, a student of mine was raped by a classmate who sat right next to her in my class.

I have listened, let them cry, given them the resources I have, and told them to return any time. The one thing I have not done, and now I regret, is to warn them. This is only the beginning. The life of a woman is about giving. Giving everything you have until the one day you find the strength to say no.

Some of us will never say no. But when we do, what will happen? That's what I am finding the strength to do, to find out. Like my doctor said, what is the worst that can happen?

CHAPTER NINE

A Lesson in Needles and Ink

I don't have tattoos, I have scars! - Marina Abramovic

"Let's get Tattoos!" My friend Abby said to me as I was cooking eggs.

"What should we get?" I asked.

"Idk, I'll think about it." She answered back.

We had booked an Airbnb in Ocean City, Maryland, for the weekend. Abby, Tamara, and I all work together, but we became fast friends. Last summer, we decided to have a mini writing retreat, and we spent the weekend in a condo on the beach.

Abby was the wild child with the crazy ideas, and Tamara and I were always bringing her down a peg.

"Do you want them to be matching tattoos?" Tamara asked.

"Yea, they should be the same, like a friendship tattoo," Abby said.

I laughed; matching tattoos was such a childish idea. But I had always secretly wanted someone to love me so much that they wanted something on their body to match something on mine.

"Yeah, let's do it! Let's get tattoos!" I said as I served them eggs and toast.

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I pulled my scarf up to cover my mouth and tightly tied the belt around my coat. The air was frigid as we walked along the street. Ice had formed on the gutter pipes that hung from the building. My new leather boots were not the best shoes to wear on a day like this. We walked up to an alley, and I hesitated.

"It's this way, I promise," my brother explained.

I felt that the lack of lighting didn't help the situation, but I followed my brother into the dark alley. I could hear my footsteps echo off of the two buildings on either side of us. We reached a red wooden door, and he opened it. Light burst through the doorframe, and I was greeted by a young man behind a counter. He asked what he could do for me. I looked around at the art on the walls and the catalogs on the countertop. I looked up at him and said, "I am here for a tattoo."

This wasn't my first, but it would be the most meaningful one to date. My brother had told me about this place. He had already gotten two tattoos from here and loved their work. I trusted him. I followed the tattoo artist into the well-lit room. He looked to be around my age, early twenties. I sat on the table while he sat in a desk chair. We talked about the tattoo, and I described what I saw in my mind. Loopy script and minor capitalization were what I imagined, and as I spoke, he wrote with a pencil on a thin piece of paper. He handed me the scrap paper and asked if I liked the lettering. I nodded and smiled at the beautifully drawn letters in front of me. He asked me to check the spelling, but I stared at this quote long enough to know that he had written it perfectly. Just knowing that this wasn't a printed font from Microsoft Word made it all that more special. I then explained the area that would be inked, and he told me to lie down on the

table. I used my folded coat as a pillow and began talking to my brother, who sat in a chair beside me, about the art covering the walls.

He followed the procedure of cleaning the area and putting on gloves. I lay still on the bed while he wiped the area clean with an alcohol pad. He then removed a small plastic package with a blue backing. As he ripped it open, I saw the lone needle that would cut into my flesh. The black ink was pulled out of a drawer, and he was now ready to begin. I lay my head back and stared up at the ceiling. As the needle touched my skin and I heard the gun turn on, I braced myself for the slow-burning that would crawl on my skin. The sensation was overwhelming, and I cringed from the pain. I measured my breathing by the low buzzing of the gun. I struggled to keep my breaths slow and steady while my heart raced. My brother laughed because he knew exactly how it felt. I relaxed my face and closed my eyes. Although the pain was unbearable, I knew it would all be worth it.

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We walked down to the beach, and Abby ran down the sand and straight into the water. The ocean was still warm at this time of year. I took my time and walked slowly as my feet sunk into the sand with each step. Tamara walked slowly with me.

“I hate sand, but I love the beach. Tell me how that makes sense?” I said.

Tamara laughed. She knew what I meant as I stumbled through the walk to Abby’s towel she had plopped on the sand during her run.

“I think you like the idea of the beach but not the actual ritual of going to the beach,”

She had nailed it. I had never realized it before, but that’s how I felt. When you had a metal plate in your foot and two metal pins in your ankle, it made sense not to enjoy the beach. I had to walk slowly and take precautions with each step. My foot barely flexed anymore after multiple surgeries. I had good and bad days on asphalt and concrete. Sand was a whole different story.

I once thought I would get married on a beach. Back before, my ankle throbbed from arthritis and bone spurs. Before I heard the doctor tell me I would need an ankle replacement before I was 40. I do love the beach, but I don’t get to enjoy the beach as much as most people.

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The artist took a break between each word. I believed that I needed the break more than he did. It was a silent compromise between us. He looked down at the body part that he was tattooing and squinted. He grabbed a tissue, and as he wiped the blood from my foot, he asked the question I knew he had been holding back behind his lips since he began. “Where did you get that scar?” I looked over at my brother and rolled my eyes. Our little inside joke. He had heard me tell this story hundreds of times.

I turned back to the artist and said, “I was born with club foot. It’s a birth defect that I had to have surgery to correct. The scar is from my bone reconstructive surgery.”

He told me that it was my battle wound and that I should be proud of it. I nodded my agreement, and he started on the second word. I went back to cringing and squeezing my brother's hand.

I grew up a little differently than most children. I was born with a birth defect that affects one in every one thousand children. I was born with Club Foot. This is a disease that affects the way the bones are arranged in the foot. My dad noticed right away when I was born that my one foot didn't look like the other. I was taken away and an hour later when I was brought back to my parents I had a small cast on my foot. This began my treatment. I later learned that what I went through is called the Ponseti method. This is classified as having the ligaments, joint capsules, and tendons stretched under gentle manipulations. A plaster cast is applied after each manipulation to retain the degree of correction and soften the ligaments. The displaced bones are gradually brought into the correct alignment with their joint surfaces progressively remodeled yet maintaining their new shape.

This was done over the course of a year. Every two weeks, my mother brought me to the doctor. They sawed off my cast, stretched my foot, and placed a new cast. Once I was a year old, they realized that the Ponseti method wasn't working. I went through a 5-hour bone reconstructive surgery to correct the alignment of my foot and ankle. Another cast was placed on my foot for the recovery process. Once I was healed, I could then learn how to walk. My father tells a funny story to people when I talk about it. He explains that he was never worried about where I was in the house once I started to crawl. He says that because of the hardwood floors, my cast would hit the floor and make a banging noise. Like a dog's collar, I always announced my presence.

As I grew up, I had yearly doctor appointments to track my foot's progress. When I was 12, it was announced that both of my feet were probably no longer growing. I was going to be left with a size six and a size four. An adult size and a child's size, this I had to live with. I was in middle school at that time. 7th grade is hard enough for a preteen girl; my situation only made it worse. I never wore open-toed shoes at sleepovers, I always kept on my socks, and I had certain restrictions when it came to sports. The large scar on my foot always reminded me that I was different, and I felt ashamed. Most of my friends never seemed to notice, and I ensured that if they did, I would defend myself from ridicule.

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Tamara and I sat on the blanket we had brought down to the beach, and we watched Abby jumping in the surf. She looked so childlike, so happy. She had a weekend away from her three kids and husband; it was probably the happiest I had seen her in a while. She held her arms out to her sides and soaked in the sun as a wave crashed towards her. She jumped, and as she did, she spun around to look at us. She waved with a huge grin on her face.

"I kinda want a tattoo like the one you have on your finger," I said to Tamara.

She lifted up her left hand and held out her middle finger. "You mean this one?" On her finger, in typewriter font, said the word "Poet."

I am not a poet. I barely consider myself a writer. After getting an MFA and as I am currently a candidate for my Doctoral degree, I still don't consider myself a writer. There is something about calling yourself a writer. We are all writers. It's a hobby and a career, but never both at the same time. I have never been paid for my writing, but I have been writing for as long as I can remember. I'm not sure if I have earned the title quite yet.

"You should get Writer," she said.

"I don't know, I don't feel like I connect with that enough. Besides, it's not matching; you have poet, not writer."

"Same thing, you and Abby get Writer and I keep Poet."

"No, I want them to be the same," Abby yelled as she was walking back from the ocean. She must have overheard our conversation.

"Ok, then we have to think of something to all get," Tamara said.

"I know! FTP!" Abby shouted in excitement.

"What is FTP?" I asked.

"Fuck the Patriarchy!" Abby yelled.

Tamara and I looked at each other and instantly broke into laughter. This was a common phrase we recited to each other. Any time something with administration happened at work, we would say to each other fuck the patriarchy. Our little motto got us

through rule changes, contract negotiations, and our process of reapplying for our jobs every year.

"FTP, I like it," Tamara said.

After I finished laughing, I agreed. Abby was soaked from swimming in the ocean. I looked at my two beautiful friends, who were glowing from the sun and fresh salty air.

"Ok, ladies, should we get to writing now?" I suggested.

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After the second word was completed, the artist took a long look at my foot.

"The size, is that from the surgery too?"

I then explained that my feet were two different sizes. I was a women's size, 6, and the one he was working on was a size 4. I was used to being looked at with disgust on someone's face. I was used to feeling like a science experiment and being asked multiple questions. I was also used to feeling different and feeling bad for being different. But his reaction was something I had never seen before. His eyes widened, and he smiled. He actually seemed amused by my freakish defect. He looked me straight in the eye and said, "My sister has the same problem."

It was my turn to be shocked. I asked him how.

"Her one foot just stopped growing at a certain age. She wasn't born the way you

were, but she has two different sizes too, a size and a half difference. She finds it very hard to buy shoes."

At this, I laughed because I knew that struggle all too well. He went back to his work to finish the last word. I closed my eyes, but I smiled this time because I had never met or heard of anyone like me.

He finished up his work and used a clean, wet paper towel to clean me up. He looked down at the tattoo and asked if he could take a picture of it. I said yes. He pulled out his phone and snapped a picture. He told me that he was going to send it to his sister.

"Take a look," he said, and I glanced down at my now throbbing foot. In perfect script, just like on the piece of paper, it said, "Imperfection is beauty."

My eyes welled up, but stubbornly, I held back the tears. I held out my hand for him to shake, and I sincerely thanked him.

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As we sat in the condo and wrote, I couldn't stop thinking about the tattoos. We had made an appointment for the next day. FTP didn't feel right to me. I felt that our matching friendship tattoos should have more meaning to them. Trust me, I hate the patriarchy but its not something I wanted on my body.

I looked down at my right foot, the one that was tucked under my legs and I turned it slightly so I could see my tattoo. Almost ten years later, a bit faded, I still loved the loopy script that young artist drew for me. "Imperfection is Beauty" was a quote that I had read on the internet that seemed to be have said my Marilyn Monroe. Growing up I

idolized her because she was the only icon I knew that had a beauty mark on her face just like me. Years later I found out that barely any of the quotes that are linked to Ms. Monroe were actually known to be said by her.

It didn't matter, it was the quote that I had loved. This imperfection was a constant worry throughout my life. I hid it from people and I wanted to keep it a secret, my weirdly shaped small foot. But as a thirty year old woman, I know its a part of me. My partner loves to wrestle and tickle my feet. He is always careful to check first which foot he grabs, doing his best to save me from unnecessary pain.

"I always look to see if there is a tattoo. Your good foot doesn't have the tattoo so that helps."

I came up with the terms good foot and bad foot. It just helped when I was growing up. If I went to the doctor with an issue I would say, "This times its my good foot." Or if my dad asked about my daily pain I would say, I'm achy in my bad ankle and my good hip. Everyone knew what I meant.

But as I looked down at my tattoo, the one my doctor had to cut through for my most recent surgery I stared at the ironic imperfection that was added to the phrase. A think white scar cut through the M and P in the word imperfection. I honestly couldn't have planned that better.

"I don't think we should get FTP tattoos. I think we should get something aspirational or motivating," I said while we all sat in the living room writing.

"I like that, its more positive," Tamara agreed.

“Ok, I agree, but what?” Abby asked.

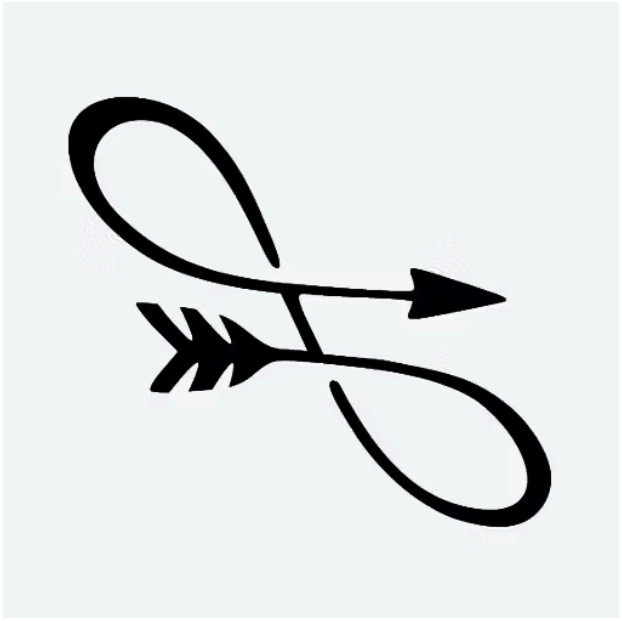
“It can be anything we want,” I suggested.

The next day, Abby got her tattoo. On her right ring finger, she got the word Write in the same typewriter font as Tamara. I was ready to get into the chair after her and get the same tattoo, but something stopped me.

I thought about the tattoo on my foot. I thought about how, up until now, I had hidden my disability. I had been ashamed of it. I saw the scars as “imperfections,” something that made me different. But what I needed was something to remind me that it's okay to be different. I am where I am today because I was able to accept myself for who I am and be proud.

I got a different tattoo. One that I had been waiting to get. I sat in the chair as the artist sketched an image I had found on my phone. A Malin. This Swedish symbol had been on my mind for some time. The Malin is a symbol of life. It's a twisted arrow; it looks like a figure eight, but it's not connected. The lines loop backward and then forward to the tip of the arrow.

The Swedish believed this symbol meant the difficulty of life. I see it as the philosophical theory of the arrow; you must be pulled backward before you can go forward. The Swedish believed it was used to say that life has its difficulties and that you have to accept them to move on. This symbol felt like a definition but also a motto to live by. My life hasn’t been easy. No one with a disability has an easy life. But I need always to remember that when life pulls me back, it is doing so in order to propel me forward.



CHAPTER TEN

A Lesson in Dating: Forty First Dates

As I crossed out the two and replaced it with a one on the creamy white reply card, I wondered if I would have to do this forever. This is the seventh wedding I will be attending alone. Always a bridesmaid, never a bride is the adage, but why isn't there a saying for women who are stuck attending weddings alone?

I am thirty-two years old and have been on forty first dates in the past three years. There are times when they decide not to go out again and there are times I don't want to go on a second date. But I always tell the truth instead of ghosting them. However, Ghosting seems to be the trendy thing to do.

I am honest. This is a quality that is rare in the dating world. Pictures on dating apps are mostly airbrushed. Men post pictures of them with hair only to show up on the date and find that they are bald. I'm not shallow; I'm fine with dating a bald guy. But when I show up and the guy doesn't look like his picture, I instantly see this as a red flag—a lie.

Honesty is a tough quality to look for in the internet age. Some men rely on movie quotes they can look up on Google or trivia answers they can find in seconds. All of us can pretend to be genuine and charming on our phones. But in real life, this is when the truth comes out. This dating style goes against everything I was taught about dating from TV and movies. There is no meeting anyone in real life anymore. We meet in the virtual world, and hopefully, that person is someone you still like in the real world. Gone are the

days of meeting someone in a bookstore or a coffee shop. I had to form a new perspective, reprogramming to let go of what pop culture taught me.

When Lisa Kudrow on *Friends* sings “Smelly Cat” to an audience at a coffee shop, her voice and pretty blonde hair attract a man from across the room. He saunters over when she is done singing and asks for her number. And you guessed it; they dated for almost a whole season.

Gone are the days of men walking up to women with a witty comment or lame line to ask for their number. Today, double-tapping a picture on Instagram equals the flirty look you would give someone at a party.

Hilary Burton, another beautiful TV blonde, used her artistic talent to gain a guy’s attention. On the show *One Tree Hill*, she loses her sketchbook, only for it to be found by a handsome man who realizes it's hers, returns it, and falls in love with her drawings and, of course, her.

Today, the closest thing to meeting someone this way is posting a picture of a particular talent on my Hinge profile. I could hope that a guy would like that over my full-body shot.

I once started a conversation with the question, “What is one thing that can instantly make your day better?” I thought, how cute, how clever of me!

Only to get the reply, “You, in lingerie, on my bed.”

That was the end of that conversation.

I realize that with my TV show examples, I support the idea that interesting girls get the guy. But dating today is about swiping, not similar interests. Mere seconds decide whether someone is “hot” or “not.” Daters rarely want to know about hobbies or interests.

I would love for a man to be interested in my writing or any part of my education, for that matter. I have never had a partner ask to read my writing, and it just makes me cringe when I see an actress in a show get “noticed” for her article in the school newspaper.

When I tell a man that I am in a doctoral program over a dating app, their first question is, “Well, how much time would you have for us?” As if they can’t shake the idea that women are supposed to cater to their partner in a way that doesn’t allow them to focus on personal growth and progress. It's 2024, and I thought by now, a man would be happy to date a determined, goal-oriented woman who wants to better her mind. But no, men still want women to succeed as long as it doesn’t prevent them from building a relationship where he is the provider and breadwinner of the pair. Wait until I tell any future boyfriend I am keeping my last name; that usually makes them run for the hills.

Dating was much easier in my twenties. My twenties were a time to experiment, grow, and figure out what I wanted out of life. Now that I am in my thirties, I am meeting many men who fear a woman who knows what she wants.

“You’re not on a timeline, are you?” A recent date asked me.

“What does that mean?”

“You know, you want to get married tomorrow, you already have the dress, and you want kids in a year.” He said with a straight face.

I sighed. Honestly, I was just tired of going to Trader Joe's alone. Every time I go there, someone stops me in the aisle to ask me where they can find something. Are there no single people in Trader Joe's?

Instead of answering, I changed the subject. I’m not on a timeline, but any man who thinks every woman can have a baby after the age of thirty-five needs to read more

books about female anatomy. I have spent a few nights alone in bed with a glass of wine, searching for articles on how much it costs to freeze my eggs.

Pop culture has taught me that the beautiful blonde character in the show is meant to have a storyline based on a relationship. In most shows, the woman/girl is the supporting role. The blonde's job is to have a relationship with the show's protagonist and play a temptress and damsel in distress character. While other times the blonde is dating the antagonist, the jock, or the bully, and they are seen as the nice middleman between the villain and the hero.

I am the blonde woman in my own story. Pop culture has taught me that blondes have more fun, blondes are the cheerleaders and the "good girls," and that if you are blonde, you will most likely get the guy. Betty and Veronica is the only version of this story that debunks this truth. Betty, the blonde, does get Archie, but once Veronica shows up, the beautiful brunette lures Archie away. I never thought I should get a man *just* because I am blonde, but growing up with so many examples of who I should be, it felt wrong to have to go on so many dates just to find someone I clicked with.

There are outliers to this theory. Sometimes, the blonde gets to be the hero. Shows such as *Veronica Mars* and *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* tested the golden-haired female lead archetype by showing a different side of the ditsy blonde. Although these characters focused on being badass women, they still needed a significant other to be likable, relatable, and, in some cases, "saved." Veronica Mars, played by Kristen Bell, was a teenage detective who solved small crimes in her town. She didn't care about the boys at her school, and even when someone became interested, she chose her journey over a relationship. I would love to be friends with Veronica Mars.

In college, I couldn't help but find myself in situations I would have laughed at if they were on the TV screen. Frat parties where guys thought if they poured me a warm beer from the keg, I owed it to them to sleep with them at the end of the night. None of them wanted to discuss the Philosophy paper I was writing or the article I had written for the University's newspaper. They wanted the blonde cutie they grew up watching in TV shows and movies.

Where is the movie about the Blonde who buys a house for herself or goes to grad school to make more money to invest in her future? Ok, I realize this would be a boring movie. Who wants to watch an hour and a half about interest rates and escrow? But the badass female lead is still being figured out. Because without a partner, most Hollywood producers portray the woman as a bitch or too aggressive. A female executive is a workaholic and is shown to be too driven and independent to be lovable. Unless a woman has caretaker tendencies, she is created to be a party girl or unattainable due to a character flaw.

When a man blows up buildings and shoots strangers, he is badass, not an asshole. After his day of crime-fighting, it's exciting when he "gets the girl." But when a woman juggles child care, a career, and a husband, she is not considered sexy. On the other hand, when men are portrayed as good caregivers, loving, and an equal partner in the household, they are applauded.

I used to want to be Lauren Conrad. She was one of the first reality stars I thought was sort of, normal. She was on a TV show called *Laguna Beach* in high school. Then she moved on to a show called *The Hills.* This chronicled her time in college and her internship at the magazine *Teen Vogue*. Lauren was a California Blonde. She had

beautifully straight white teeth, sun-kissed cheeks, and an adorable laugh. I wanted to be just like her. As she was turning twenty-one, I was a senior in high school.

I was so determined to be the girl on my TV screen. I went as far as majoring in Journalism and scoring the coveted internship at *Teen Vogue*. Only to find out that Lauren Conrad didn't actually do what an intern was expected to do. She didn't grab coffee for her department as I did. She didn't spend hours sitting on the scratchy carpet, putting older issues into chronological order and placing them on a floor-to-ceiling shelving unit for archival purposes. She wasn't responsible for keeping track of everyone's birthdays and ensuring the cake was ordered, and the card was distributed for signing. Or my all-time favorite, being asked to fix the copy machine as if I was going to college for Information Technology.

I asked my supervisor if he had ever met her.

"Yeah, Lauren and a camera crew flew out here to get some tape of her working in the New York office. It was weird watching people follow her around. It was annoying because she didn't know how to use the copy machine; I had to show her how."

When it came to my internship, I realized that I was actually learning. I learned how to edit images in Photoshop and design the pages of the magazine. I looked at each issue with pride and accomplishment. I realized that this was something Lauren Conrad couldn't do. Just like every TV show I had grown up watching, Lauren Conrad was just another TV blonde.

Lauren Conrad, who?

(She became a very successful fashion designer and credited her time at *Teen Vogue* for inspiring her. So I guess she could be asking, *Melissa Libbey, who*?)

After graduating college, I pulled out a DVD of an old classic, *Legally Blonde*. My epiphany was that I wanted to be Elle Woods. Reese Witherspoon's character, a beautifully manicured blonde, applies to law school after her boyfriend dumps her for a brainy brunette. This move solidified my every thought of how men viewed blondes. Determined to win her boyfriend back, Elle applies to Harvard Law school, gets in, and not only surpasses her ex-boyfriend in classes, exams, and internships, but she realizes by the end that she doesn't need a man to succeed. All she needs is her determination, persistence, and brain. This was the woman I wanted to be. On my first day as a college professor, I wore a hot pink blazer as I stood in front of the class, doing my best to channel the Elle Woods confidence I had admired.

I wish I still had that blazer. I could wear it on my dates and channel the Elle Woods confidence as I sit at a barstool, squeezing my lime into my drink and nodding my head while some guy talks about boating regulations and complains about how expensive it is to dock a boat for the winter. But I have to admit that my pretty blonde hair and straight white-toothed smile only get me so far. My confidence is not Elle Woods level; it's more like Phoebe in *Friends* when the man she met at the coffee shop dumps her to move to another country for his job. After about twenty of those first dates, I started to lack the self-esteem needed to keep pushing forward in the dating world.

Dating apps were created so singles of all ages could find love without leaving their home. I never thought dating apps would be used in order to boost confidence and fuel egotism. A guy friend told me that most guys swipe every single girl in order to make the decision on who to talk to based on who likes them back. Dating has become more of a game of strategy rather than what we see in romantic comedies.

On a lonely Sunday night I opened up my dating app while watching TV. I watched *Parks and Rec*, another TV show with a courageous Blonde, Leslie Knope. Now she was someone to aspire to. A small town government worker who wanted to change the world, one town park at a time.

I looked down at my dating profile inbox. It was full of faces, faces of men I had never met, some I never would. Their names organized in a list glowed from my phone screen like an itinerary. *Michael messaged you*, the screen displayed as I rolled over in bed. Rows of names, pen-pals, I called them, flashed as the questions pile up one by one.

Some men are looking for a hook-up, while others believe they want to go on a date but, in reality, just want someone to talk to. These apps allow people to find a connection but most never act on it. A small few actually want to find a lasting relationship, but it's rare. Life is lonely, and waking up to a good morning text is enough for some men. I have realized that they are afraid to be vulnerable, so they just chat and build up their confidence, and when they are done, they stop talking to you. Remember when I bought up ghosting? I am now a ghosting recovery champion.

I click on a name. A man who had been persistent and charming. He wanted to take me on a date and when I used the "I'm busy" line on him he didn't give up. I had to give him credit I am more interested in men who know what they want and who don't hesitate to ask me on a date. But this is becoming less frequent these days. I am starting to wonder if I have met all of the men out there who are ready for a relationship.

"Wait a couple of years, and all of the men that got married young will be divorced." A friend recently said to me.

I knew she was joking, but it hurt to think that all I was good enough for was someone who had already accomplished what I wanted. Is it wrong to want someone to go through everything together for the first time?

I looked down as my phone lit up, *message from Anthony.*

Today, pop culture's expectations of pretty blonde women still follow me. Most TV shows or movies aren't like *Legally Blonde*. But I am not the only one who still feels the effects of pop culture. Most men expect me to be obtainable and also a "good time." Every time I walk into the classroom, I enter a restaurant for a first date, or walk down the street, I hope I am seen for my mind and what I can bring to the table, over my body and my sexuality.

I said yes to a date with Anthony. He made the plan, he was fifteen minutes early, I was ten minutes early, so we were already off to a good start. As I walked towards the table he stood up, took off his sunglasses and greeted me with bright blue eyes and a hug. As his arms were around me I felt like I was home.

Cheesy, I know. But all of my friends told me, "You just know when you find him." I finally knew what they meant.

Some might say that forty first dates is a lot. I used to think that I would never find anyone. I used to think my male German Shepherd mix was the best man I would ever meet. He cuddles with me when I am sad, watches any movie I want, lets me vent about my day, and jumps all over me as soon as I walk in the door. I get so excited to come home to his energy and unconditional love. But I soon learned that any amount of dates wouldn't be too much as long as it led me to where I am now.

Why Anthony, over everyone else? He's honest. The honesty that spilled out of us on that first date was the most refreshing feeling I ever had. We told each other secrets, vented about family, complained about dates, and by the end I knew I had to see him again. I'm so happy he felt the same way.

The promise we made to each other over a year and a half ago was that we would always tell each other the truth. It's not always the easiest thing to do but I know its the right thing to do for our relationship. Sometimes during a fight he will ask me, "Do you want the truth?"

Every time I respond with "always."

The best thing about Anthony is that I don't have to change who I am. He loves that I am ambitious, and he pushes me to be my best self. We motivate each other to be our best selves. We have a lot of the same values and morals, too.

I don't regret the time I spent being single. We all need time to become who we want to be before we share our lives with someone else. Anthony became successful on his own, and I built a life for myself. But we are now working together to create a life for us. He cuddles with my German Shepherd, who loves him so much he follows him around. We watched some of the TV shows and Movies that built my understanding of relationships.

The other night, as we sat on the couch, I scrolled through Netflix. I stopped on a familiar image, a woman with bright blonde hair, a magazine writer, Andy Anderson.

"I love this movie," Anthony said.

How To Lose a Guy in 10 Days was my favorite movie when I was younger, and I couldn't believe he loved it too. I clicked on the movie, and we watched as this

Hollywood Blonde did the opposite of what most blondes did in movies. She tried to be unlikable; she worked on ruining the relationship. As we sat side by side, finishing lines together and laughing before anything funny happened in anticipation, I smiled. Once again, another blonde gave me hope.

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