UNSELFISH

By

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To the women and girls, the mothers and daughters, may you find equal measures of confidence and esteem, and may we show each other the love that builds both.
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ABSTRACT

“Unselfish” is a work of original non-fiction that seeks to understand how a woman’s worth has been influenced by cultural and personal expectations over time. It examines how self-confidence and self-esteem have been shaped by inherited gender roles and social perceptions of female athletes. It interrogates how the self is accepted and sacrificed in the pursuit of individual and collective greatness, and how competition impacts self-expression and the fundamental need for belonging. These pages are the beginning of a memoir.
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PROLOGUE

You are 32 years old and have never been in love, not even one relationship. This is not a fun fact you share at dinner parties or during class introductions or on Zoom calls to make others laugh or you more interesting; and certainly, never at the bar on weekends when you used to go out. You rarely talk about this insecurity, which feels more and more like a fatal flaw, because it is a vulnerability you never thought you’d ever have, and for the better part of a decade, pretended that it didn’t exist. But with each passing birthday, it has become a source of increasing shame and embarrassment, two feelings that have fashioned a gray paper-like encasement around the muscle beating in your chest, limiting its capacity to show and receive the very sensation you desire most. Your heart is now a hornets’ nest buzzing with anxiety, and you are challenged with the dangerous task of removing the hardened shell while preserving the chambers, valves, and blood vessels inside.

First, you must acknowledge that you have created a false self. The hive is of your own construction, made of things you *think* that other people think of you as well as things you think about yourself. It is built slowly over time, in the quickness of busy moments that occupy your days hustling for success and striving for greatness; acquiring the wealth, power, and reputation that demonstrates that success; accomplishing goals to earn that wealth, power, and reputation; performing tasks to achieve those goals; contending opposition when determining what those tasks are and how to execute them; exerting your will when faced with conflict; and finally, giving your all no matter what. Greatness, ultimately, is potential realized, and everyone has the ability to become.

These abstractions, however, are built on expectations that are personally imagined or socially constructed, or both. They are designed to take you away from the specific realities of
who you are – quirks, traits, characteristics naturally expressed – by encouraging you to select only certain aspects of your totality, based on who you think you need to be. As you step away from your whole self, you step into expectations that rewire your internal operating system; that is, where your heart once sought connection, your mind becomes preoccupied with seeking validation. This shift is subtle but has significant consequences: you become susceptible to losing sight of your own self-worth. Now, more than ever, you understand what happened to you: chasing greatness has led to your unbecoming.

It is the reason why you feel unattractive – you no longer recognize yourself. You are someone who became the work, which began with college basketball, continued with a corporate job, and extended into two rounds of graduate level learning. You fulfilled social obligations, complied with unwritten cultural and institutional rules, and carried out executive functions for the greater good; contributing tiny pieces of who you were to fit the puzzle of everyone else. But this is not the life you imagined. Yes, you have always done the things you wanted to do, but you compromised how you did them, and over time a pattern has emerged: you became less self-expressive and more self-conscious; thinking more and feeling less, all while the doing accelerated. In a short amount of time, and in a machine-like manner, you developed a high level of confidence by accomplishing many things and mastering many skills. You’ve met and exceeded expectations, and in the process of testing your abilities, you began seeking everyone else’s input to either confirm or replace your own value. This is how you became a woman who doesn’t trust herself, who betrayed that instinctive, unquestioning belief in who she is. Imagine that: a woman with high self-confidence and low self-esteem.

You were 23 years old when you first wore this dichotomy, upon completing your undergraduate studies and college basketball career, and it felt like a wound you could neither
detect nor diagnose. Over the next decade, this irreconcilable feeling grew deeper and wider and with each new endeavor, you developed a sense of unworthiness, which showed up so stinging in the absence of love and triggered a cascade of memories that reminds you of all the times you have felt unwanted or undesirable. These echoes from the past have amplified your current loneliness, making you believe that you are not likeable; that is, there is something about you that is romantically uninteresting. Certainly, this lie has fulfilled your law of (un)attraction.

It is smooth like the lightly floral and pleasantly mild mesquite honey you spoon, just once, into your black tea and stir; sticky like the dark amber maple syrup you drizzle onto fluffy chocolate chip pancakes; rich like bacon fat, which liquifies into flavorful cooking grease when heated and congeals into semi-soft lard when cooled; and finally, slippery like the raw egg whites that slime out of broken shells you yo-yo to shake loose into a bowl, where they are whipped repeatedly with the yolk and a dribble a whole milk. *You are unwanted.* Of course, it doesn’t show up in italics, accentuated and dramatic, for if it did, surely you would recognize it. Instead, the sentiment remains hidden by a deliquescent taste, as if your subconscious has silently accepted the deceit like a sous chef responsible for sugar-spice-everything-nice-ing insecurities. That’s what little girls are made of, after all, and for 20 years you swallow this lie like eggs and bacon, pancakes and tea.

The thought, which you do not recognize has infiltrated your mind, nourishes you in the complicated way Whole 30 does, or the keto diet, or paleo: you believe your everyday actions, such as tracking ounces of water and grams of macro nutrients – carbs, proteins, fats – are healthy habits of discipline. For waves of time you’ll even see results: the inches on your waist, melted; the chubbiness in your face, slimmed; the hair on your head, silk; the skin on your bones and the nails on your fingers, clear and firm. The aesthetics make you feel beautiful, but on the
inside, after a little bit of exercise, there are micro-tears in your muscle fibers, lactic acid in your cells, and inflammation in your tissue; all of which show up as soreness, dehydration, and redness, swelling, pain, heat, and – should it ever get so severe – loss of function. It is this last one, which will take place in the mind, that eventually gives away the lie after all those years because you never imagined growing up and being alone. Who made you believe this was a part of your story?

Yet, you chose independence from an early age. You thought you would be an archaeologist like Indiana Jones or a paleontologist like Ellie Sattler in *Jurassic Park*. You dreamed of adventure, not your wedding day, but you begin to wonder if maybe you should have, that surely by now the universe would have delivered the man of those dreams; instead it has given you exactly one drunken tequila kiss with an already married man, six years ago on a December night in Philadelphia. This feels like an unfair trade, where love has been a sacrifice that allowed you to pursue other passions like sports, education, and career. But why did you ever believe that you couldn’t have both in equal measure and at the same time? Because as much of yourself is inherent, there is much that has also been inherited.

History has been unkind to women, assigning gender roles and expectations for two traditionally prescribed life paths: marriage and motherhood, or a profession, albeit limited opportunities for the latter. By the time you are a Little Miss Sunshine growing up in the ‘90s, you are aware that all the mothers you know, including your own mother and grandmother, had given themselves up. They postponed academic degrees or put careers on hold or forfeited their hopes and wishes altogether. Even if they did return to these endeavors later in life, you, a girl wrapped in the joy of self-discovery and driven by the desire to know what she’s capable of, personally felt this was a high price to pay for a husband and children. You were familiar with
your mother’s and grandmother’s stories, and in a way, already knew what the outcome might be for sacrificing your potential in the name of love. You did not want to live with the burden of their unlived lives. And so, you chose instead to sacrifice love, believing it was something that you could come back to at a later date, say, when you are 32. Now that you are here, you realize that you also have an unbearably obvious unlived life.

Unselfishness is the legacy women have passed down to each other over time, and while it showed up differently in your generation, it was reinforced by the female coaches you had in sports and the female bosses you had at work. Women, instead of teaching you how to step into your fullness, taught you how to shy away from or dim down the brightness, or that opportunity was reserved for only a select few, one at a time, please, so wait your turn. The lesson taught you to become strategic and competitive, and pick and choose your moments of influence. Being *selfless* was promoted as an admirable leadership quality, but you refused to disappear completely, and this tension has been at the heart of your struggle: showing up every day, afraid to stand in your power and flex your true, natural expression. But now you need to forgive yourself, and others, because you know better.

Worth, you realize now, is directly tied to your ability to give and receive self-love, and you cannot do that unless you first soften the shame around your heart by celebrating who you are, who you have always known yourself to be. This is the gift you have to give to yourself, and so you do.
CHAPTER 1

THE INHERITED SELF

The best part of walking is not the sights or the sounds but the thinking; the best part of
thinking is not the reasoning but the wondering; and the best part of wondering is the boundless
inquiry, the endless amazement, and unfathomable fulfilment of breathing in and out, one step at
a time. It’s six o’clock on a warm summer evening in 1949. Olga has spent the last hour strolling
by the small arms warehouses, aircraft depots, and electronics factories along the Toronto
waterfront. Her bright red pocketbook, which matches her bright red lipstick and bright red beret,
hangs on the crook of her right elbow, as her left arm swings magnificently across her body. She
is a woman who knows exactly where she is going – turning right onto Spadina Avenue into the
Fashion District, right again onto Queen Street to stop by her office at City Hall where she will
pick up and put on her forgotten sunglasses, wearing them while she loops back onto Dundas
Street before finally turning home toward Euclid Avenue – all the while writing in her head the
letter she will send to Leon.

He was the man who danced assuredly to Ukrainian folk songs, shouted “Hirko!” the
loudest after every toast, and ate korovai, that sweet braided bread, all night; who, after enough
vodka, grew serious with his thoughts and emotions, and pressed his hand in her hand and his
cheek against her cheek; the man who whispered in her ear hello. That was three weeks ago at
his sister’s wedding in Freeport, New York. Yesterday she received an envelope in the mail with
the same postmark, and in an instant, her world was different. Writing is an act of love. Ah, what
a man, this Leon! attempting this long-distance romance. It will never work, she thinks, so she
walks, and like a popsicle in the sun, her reasons melt away.

Two years later, she is 20 years old and newly married, and in her matrimony, becomes a
naturalized citizen of the United States. She has given up her job as a stenographer for Toronto’s
City Hall, where she worked for the planning board in the wake of World War II. The city was transitioning from a weapons and munitions manufacturing hub to a metropolis with an unprecedented, ambitious master plan for urban development. Citizens were relying on government-led solutions to design a way of life that incorporated a vibrant downtown, an extensive park system, and accessible roads and railways that connected newly developed neighborhoods to places of interest and entertainment, all while accommodating avid walkers and the soon-to-arrive motor vehicles. Toronto’s push for modernism gave rise to civic planning as a profession, and for nearly two years, Olga kept copious notes of policies and regulations that would revitalize the city and expand the suburbs. She never would have imagined herself living 500 miles away in a village on Long Island, unemployed.

To the American man in the 1950s, a good woman has to be absolute: pure in love, simple in nature, sacred in the bedroom, and flawless in the kitchen. Above all, her certainty of self in all of these things has to be demonstrably clear. It is a wife’s privilege to help her husband endure long days at Grumman Aircraft Engineering Corporation, where he will inhale cancerous toxins, by reminding him not only of the bravery and honor of his U.S. Army past, but also the promise of children, of becoming a respectable working class family. Olga takes a break from rolling pierogis and wipes her hefty hands, covered in flour and dough, on her apron where bits of peeled potato cling to the red fabric. She notices her wedding ring is missing. She frowns, but only briefly, because staring at her finger she realizes she is certain for the first time that she will leave him.

Relations between her and Leon have been disenchanting, blasé as he is about what she likes and doesn’t like; apathetic about her hopes and dreams and wishes. But over the past few days she has been persistent about getting her driver’s license. There is deference in the way he
watches her talk about driving his car to drop him off at work, picking him up, and in between exploring Long Island. And when she presses one night, he laughs. She realizes, in that moment, he has never been an expressive man in person with her; only on paper, or if there is a crowd.

“You think I’m joking?” she asks.

“I think you’re ahead of your time.”

She takes off her wedding ring.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“I think you’re keeping me in the dark ages.”

She throws the ring at his chest, hitting him square on the collar bone. When it hits the floor, he steps on it, picks it up, and says rather calmly, “That’s enough.” She storms out of the room, and sometime later Leon walks down to the basement and hammers a long nail into a ceiling beam, leaving about a quarter inch of metal exposed. This is where he hangs the wedding ring, and on a random day in 1966, their seven-year-old daughter, Marian, will see it refracting sunlight from a nearby window. She’ll keep the secret to herself but will be heartbroken and horrified when her father finally gives the ring back to Olga as a gift celebrating their 25th wedding anniversary 10 years later.

In the kitchen surrounded by pierogis, Olga sighs and wakes herself from the memory of feeling the ring on her finger. While she regrets taking it off, she does not take back the argument she made, but the emotion is weighing, and she needs to tell someone. She walks to the living room, takes a seat on her husband’s worn leather recliner, and picks up the beige rotary phone. She dials her mother in Canada and kicks up her feet, waiting for an answer.

“Mama,” she says.

“Baby!”
There is a long silence, and Anna wonders if the connection is lost.

“Baby!” she says again. “Olga, hello? Are you there?”

Olga, who otherwise looks relaxed with her eyes closed and head resting, is silently weeping. She wipes her nose with the end of her apron, powdering it just a little, shifts her body forward, and with a loud clap, transforms the chair back into its original shape. The phone is sandwiched between her shoulder and ear, and her elbows dig into her knees. Both hands are wrinkling her forehead, as if she is still kneading dough.

“Mama, I want to come home.”

“For vacation?”

“No. Forever.”

“No,” Anna says. Everything inside her body – her heart, her mind, her lungs, her stomach, her instinct – revolts against this immediate refusal to take back her child. She places a hand on her rib and bends over, trying to ease a pain that is suddenly and surprisingly sharp. She breathes in deeply and exhales. “No, you need to be with your husband.” At this, she scrambles for a stool to lean on.

“I don’t want to be married anymore. Leon wants kids, and I want a job. I miss walking. There is no place to walk on Long Island,” Olga says. “Every day I am in this house cooking and cleaning, cooking and cleaning, cooking and cleaning. Sometimes I throw in The New York Times crossword puzzle, but for what? All this work for two people? I can’t even imagine what it will be like with kids, taking care of them. I just – the thought is so overwhelming.”

“That black hole! It has taken all your light!”

“Mama, can I please come back?”

“No. You need to figure this out, find ways to get out of the house!” Anna says.
“I’ve tried.”

“And?”

“And the bus doesn’t go anywhere exciting, only to the grocery. The sidewalks loop into neighborhoods that look exactly like mine; it is a maze to get out of! And once I do, it’s nothing but highways and parkways and expressways, which I will have you know, are different names for the same thing.”

“What about the train?”

“Leon would never give me money. New York City is a luxury I’m afraid I will never know. Besides, it’s no place for a woman to be out galivanting during the day, he tells me.”

“How about a job? Somebody must be hiring for a stenographer.”

“Actually, no one writes in shorthand anymore. Using a typewriter has become a required skillset, and I don’t know how to type,” Olga says. “Even if I did, no one is hiring women. And again, Leon wants children. We’ve been married four years already.”

Anna sits on a stool in her kitchen. The yellow wallpaper has faded and is starting to peel where the sun continues to shine through the window. She loses herself in a daydream, reminiscing on cold nights when Olga would stomp her feet on the stairs, pretending to go to bed, but instead, sneak a second helping of borscht while she played cards with her husband in the dining room. “I know you’re in there,” she’d yell from across the way. “I can hear the pitter-patter of your feet and those small little slurps.” Anna would give anything to hear those footsteps and call her Olga back into her arms, but it wouldn’t be right. Not at this age.

“While you will always be my baby, you are no longer my child. You are a woman now, and you belong with Leon,” she says. “It is up to you to determine your happiness.”

“But Ma, he’s not the man I read in those letters. I’m not even sure he has a personality.”
“Well then, you’re a fool for believing he was something that he’s not,” Anna says. She has found a way to transfer her own sharp and surprising pain to her helpless daughter. “Baby, I have to go. Mrs. Gross and Mrs. Ross need their penthouses cleaned and I’ve already taken too much time for lunch.”

The line is silent again. Love, for most mothers, is a very knotty matter – it can’t be undone. It can’t be untangled, it can’t be straightened out or cut loose; above all, it cannot be discarded, for even the scraps that have no place are sewn into patches that bridge distance and fill silence. Daughters, for better or worse, understand this bond, and sometimes, when it stretches too much, it hurts.

“I love you, Ma.”

“Love you too, Olga. Now go and be.”

She hangs up the phone and rises to her feet. She looks down at her size 11 double wide shoes and wonders whose feet she has. Have they grown swollen from inactivity? She can already feel a bunion forming near her right big toe. She looks out the bay window. Another cold cloudy winter day. The same empty Jesse Street. She places both hands on her kidneys and pushes her chest forward, lengthening her spine and relieving the tightness that has been lodged in her torso. Suddenly, she hears a commotion in the kitchen. It is the sound of slobber and the soft thud of dozens of falling pierogis, flying from the table – either into the mouth of the Bassett hound or onto the linoleum floor.

“Freddy!”

Olga rushes into the kitchen where a black nose and pair of long brown ears are visible beneath a white tablecloth that is actively moving in tight circles, gobbling up as much of the raw potato, cheese, and onion-filled dumplings as possible.
“Eh, eh, eh! Stop that!” She takes a nearby oven mitt and smacks the dog on the snout.
“Get out! Out!” She grabs the tablecloth and smacks him again, this time on the rear, and scoots him quickly out of the kitchen and into the closet under the stairs. The door clicks shut behind her and almost immediately, he scratches at the wood. She winces, knowing there will be claw marks on the other side. She is afraid to return to the kitchen. She doesn’t want to know that of the 60 pierogis she made, only a dozen remains untouched. There is no time to make more.

Later that night, Leon returns home from work. When he learns that his dog has eaten not only tonight’s dinner, but the next day and day after that, he opens the closet and grabs the dog by the collar. This is how he carries him – in one hand, by the throat; paws entirely off the ground. There is no doghouse outside in the backyard yet, just a short five-foot chain nailed to a stake in the frozen, dark brown dirt. This is where Freddy will spend the next three days. He will hear the rain before it falls, smell the sleet before it hardens, and turn his snout away from the breeze before it gusts; and at night he will bury his bones into the earth before the temperature dips below freezing.

“You are not to feed that dog,” Leon says to her. “He’s already had enough.”

Years later, when a similar incident puts Freddy in the doghouse, Marian will be kept awake by his incessant whimpering to come inside. She will not understand her father’s desire for lessons to be learned over and over again; the cruelty. She will wonder, most of all, how her mother could remain silent. No one will tell her Olga tried to kill herself. It happened on a day before she was born. The gravitational absence she so often felt doing mundane things – washing the dishes, sipping brandy, putting on a record, talking to Leon, making potato salad – had summoned her again; not as a reminder of her heart’s deficiencies but as a calling to go away.
She became estranged from a reality she once knew in Toronto, increasingly divorced from her
mother and her homeland, and ultimately alien unto herself. She did not recognize who she saw in the mirror. Whose knuckled hands did she have? Whose thick eyebrows were these? Whose bird nest of brown hair was this? Whose bulbous nose and whose elephant ears? Surely, these were not her own. Yet, an American woman had to be made, so one day she turned on the gas and dialed back the kitchen timer. After 20 minutes, she opened the door to the oven and inhaled, her lungs expanding and contracting rapidly, her heart valves opening and closing slowly, and as the carbon monoxide tightened its grip on the brain, it flooded her eyes with darkness.

All Marian will know is that her mother is not like other mothers; deformed, somehow, and distant. Olga will oscillate between deep depressions and manic crazes; a fact of life she will be unable to help, and a truth her daughter will be unable to accept.

New York City is recovering from the Great Default Crisis of 1975 when, after years of industrial decline and middle-class flight, it ran out of money to cover basic operating expenses. The banks, along with the federal government, refused to bail out the city. On the brink of bankruptcy, the stock market dropped, and the price of gold increased, and noteholders banged their fists on the doors of the Municipal Building to redeem their bonds. The teacher’s union, which had originally voted against using its pension funds to buy the city’s bonds, changed its mind and saved New York from default at the 11th hour. But it was only a short-term solution. The city, in kind, resorted to firing thousands of public workers, including the very teachers that saved it, as well police officers, fire fighters, and first responders. This, along with what was being called a crack epidemic, led to drug-fueled violence and increased homelessness – a
populous that expanded from disabled veterans and white men with alcohol dependencies, to young people and families from minority communities – on street corners, church steps, public squares, and subway cars.

Still, the city is some kind of wonderland, an asylum for commuters seeking relief from their hometown haunts; it is the mere promise of experience, that is all, a job that offers trials and tribulations, of testing competence against common sense, that pulls one into the gauntlet to see what matter their insides are made of. What Marian doesn’t know about herself, what she is willing to find out, will ultimately confront her father’s fear of what a professional woman can be, and still, remain a concept her mother cannot grasp in her own dead-end area of life. But Marian is brave – brave for inquiring about an open interview in 1978, and she becomes a production assistant for the American Broadcasting Company the same afternoon she walks in, unannounced, to 1330 Avenue of the Americas.

After graduating West Babylon High School, she completed one of two years at Briarcliffe Secretarial School in Hicksville. Now, at 19 years old, she commutes 90 minutes one way to ABC Studios, hopping on the Long Island Rail Road at the Freeport Station, where she takes the Babylon Branch to the underbelly of Madison Square Garden, and from Penn Station, rides the No. 1 train to the 66th Street – Lincoln Center subway station. It is not uncommon for men to approach Marian: “Hey Baby, why don’t you slide a little closer?” or “Hey Fancy, whatchu doing later?” Neither is it out of the ordinary to see disabled people without adequate resources to healthcare: a man with no legs will use his arms as crutches to scoot inside the subway doors. Nor is it unusual to get her picture taken: a man sitting across from her will snap a photograph and when she looks up, takes another. She’ll look away and continue to hear the shutter snap. She’ll lower her head and wonder if her face will appear on some other woman’s
naked body in Penthouse magazine. She repeats this route in reverse at 5:30 every weekday night, and this dangerous roundtrip bookends what is otherwise an enjoyable 9-to-5 spent answering phone calls, managing office files, taking inventory of produced content, and scheduling meetings and on-air programming for the local WABC-TV station.

“What do you want to work in the city for?” she recalls her father saying. “There’s guns on every corner, pimps and prostitutes all over Times Square, and homeless people spitting in your face, harassing you for money.” He isn’t wrong, she thinks, but this is television, and working for ABC is like winning the lottery, like a windfall of pennies from heaven that makes her think, for the first time in her life, that she’s worth something. How thrilling to risk the reward, on the daily commute! There are times, however, when fear gets better of her, and she clutches her purse so tightly she could swing it, white-knuckled, across an approaching man’s face. That sensation of imminent danger is an everyday occurrence, triggering a chemical reaction across the amygdala, hippocampus, and pre-frontal cortex, where the memory of unwanted sexual violence – raped, over the course of several months, by her best friend’s older brother when she was nine years old – get reprocessed against her will. For there are moments, walking home from the train station late at night, when she prays her life amounts to more than some desperate man’s uncontrollable desire, and when she wakes up the next morning, returns again to earn her savings.

After brief stints working for the internal audit and human resources departments, she now supports the first female anchor on a network evening news program: Barbara Walters, who is also the highest paid journalist in the industry, making $1 million per year to co-host World News Tonight alongside Harry Reasoner. For the last six weeks, Marian has been “on the desk” where she fields incoming calls from reporters with breaking news and directs them to the
appropriate in-house writers who draft the script that Barbara will read on that evening’s newscast. One afternoon, as Marian sits reading her notes in the open floor plan, the very machine that is Barbara Walters is churning 50 feet away on set. The head talent booker is confirming tonight’s interviews with the producer, while the audio technician is completing a sound check and Barbara talks to her stylist about hair and makeup, yes, but also her wardrobe: what will go best with the coifed bob: the power pantsuit with pearl earrings or the simple skirt and patterned blouse, fastened together with a bold belt and statement necklace? All this time Marian imagines the conversations between them – the fine details becoming confirmed logistics; the logistics, with precision engineering, operating after all because of her, an unnoticeable cog silently doing only what she knows how to do.

“Marian, you got a minute?” It’s Betty, one of Barbara’s assistants.

“Sure, what can I help you with?” Marian says.

“Can you write shorthand?”

“Yes, I can.”

“Barbara is looking for somebody who can write shorthand to join her team. Do you want the job? You’d start on Monday.”

No one has told her about business in network television, and so she must be dreaming, and the newsroom accordingly changes into her living room where her father reminds her later that night not to embarrass the family, and the living room into Lincoln Square, where she sits the next day eating lunch in the sunshine, wondering how good she actually needs to be, remembering how lucky she is to even be there, when a man smiles, and disappears, and reappears suddenly with a camera in hand: “You should be a model,” he says. “Here’s my card. Call me sometime.” All the more strange, she thinks, that she should believe opportunity when it
shows up, to see opportunity as legitimately hers, feel forever drawn to seize opportunity, and to give herself something, though from what miraculous odds and ends, with what slight of divine hand is the real meaning of opportunity, she doesn’t know? She has no sense of what she can do. Her parents never expected her to be anything, so she grew up to become the most skeptical of skeptics, the most distrustful of truths, and the most uncertain of certitude – a lamb following other lambs and avoiding wolves.

Marian feels a pressure she knows she will never be able to live up to or manage, a pressure applied one way, down through the ranks, challenged by the resistance of rising professionals, and is understood as unruly stress and measured by a competence that can only be described as will power alone. There is no way she can take shorthand for Barbara Walters, she thinks, and while she cannot articulate the feeling, she perceives unknown corporate forces at play. From the perspective of ABC, she exists as a hard-working, low-paying, uneducated assistant; as an employee it can replace, or promote. She appears as someone who respects boundaries and bosses, not knowing how to push them, and so she never will. She smiles when other colleagues smile and conceals the internal dialogue that she is a pretender, with an imposter complex, a mental spasm that will eventually, disappear when she settles down into the safety of habit and routine. She considers what dreams other women – women with college degrees – must have to work for a woman at the beginning of what everyone knows will become a legendary career – dreams professional, dreams individual, dreams of equality, dreams of living out history as it unfolds and changing the industry! Had Marian had these dreams, the decision to pursue them would not have been outweighed by the need to survive. Fear seems to her an instinct of self-preservation.
It has been two days since the initial offer, a 48-hour period of living in limbo that Marian describes to Betty as an outer body experience.

“What are my options? If I decide not to pursue the Barbara Walters path?” asks Marian.

“Are you really considering not taking this job?” Betty says.

“I’m considering other options.”

“Is this about wanting more money? You know they’ll never do that. The job itself comes up once in a lifetime, as is. There is no negotiating here. You either take it or leave it.”

Marian’s eyes grow wide and she places a hand on her heart. She feels she has inadvertently crossed a line, and mentally records this misstep as confirmation that she would be in over her head. “No, no, it’s not about the money,” she says quickly. “I just – I’m not sure I’m ready. And I don’t want to let anyone down.” She lowers her eyes and feels Betty scanning her face for a read. Before she can say anything, Marian breaks the silence: “I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry about. I understand,” Betty says, but she doesn’t. She doesn’t understand how someone could pass up this good fortune.

“I’d like to stay on the desk, though,” Marian says.

“Oh, well, I’m afraid that won’t be possible.” Betty looks around the newsroom and once passersby are outside a 20-foot diameter, leans close to Marian. “It’s not public knowledge, so please, keep this hush-hush between you and me. Barbara is leaving World News Tonight at the end of the month.”

“What?”

“Shhh, shhh, shhh,” Betty says. “Apparently there’s tension between her and Harry, but the official story, when it breaks, is that she is ready to advance her career as a correspondent for
She’ll continue to do her special programming, of course, but again, you didn’t hear this from me. I’ve already said too much.”

“Wow. Well, thank you for letting me know,” Marian says.

“If you’re sure you don’t want to join Barbara’s team, there’s an opening at the local station, WABC-TV, to produce public service announcements and religious programming. You can work there if you’d like.”

“Oh yes, let me go there,” Marian says.

“Are you – sure?”

“I think so.”

Betty gives Marian a look, warning that this answer is not something she can revise.

“Yes, I’m sure,” Marian smiles, relieved. “Thank you.”

The next week, she transfers to WABC-TV’s community affairs division, where she now reports to a woman named Sheila, an outspoken member of the National Organization for Women (NOW). Marian, who might as well have been born in a turnip patch, is baptized by Sheila’s spitfire. Not only does she learn everything she needs to learn about television production, her eyes and ears are tuned to a larger movement happening across the country: equal rights. New York was one of the first states to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in 1972, but Sheila is fighting for equality at the highest level of law in the land: The United States Congress. Last summer, she marched with 100,000 people down Constitution Avenue to the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., demanding Congress extend the ratification deadline from 1979 to 1986. The House and Senate, however, only acquiesced three years, pushing the deadline to 1982 – purposely little time to ensure 38 states will vote in favor of the amendment, the minimum number needed to ratify it as a federal law.
One day, Sheila is reflecting in her office. The community affairs division is located in the ABC Studios complex, which covers an entire city block between W. 66th and W. 67th Street, and east from Columbus Avenue to Central Park West. It is a massive building where, along with local and network news, *Live with Regis* and *Kathy Lee* and *Good Morning America* are filmed. Across the way is Café Des Artistes, originally designed to provide meals for the tenants living above, and now is one of the city’s most theatrical and romantic restaurants where diners enjoy an old-world opulence with floral displays, flattering lighting, and pastel murals of bathing beauties. Few people know there is a studio inside the restaurant where Sheila and Marian produce *Interfaith*, a weekly program that regularly features Reverend Dr. Calvin O. Butts III of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, among other religious leaders, who discuss relevant community issues through different religious lenses. It airs before the sun rises at 5 a.m. on Sunday mornings. As she sits in her office, Sheila wonders if there will ever be a show where different types of women discuss global affairs and local politics, perhaps as well, fashion, art, music, and pop culture. That’s a show she’d watch, she thinks, and looks across the room to where Marian is sitting at her desk, planning program schedules for the next few months.

“Doesn’t it make you mad,” Sheila asks, “that Barbara got fired?”

“Oh, I don’t think she got fired,” Marian says, not looking up. “I think she just wanted to do something different.”

“You don’t actually believe that shit, do you?”

“I – that’s what they said.”

“I know that’s what they said, but what do you think?” Sheila presses. She is the sort of woman who determines aptitude with questions, like a test, but different. It’s more like a playful interrogation into one’s thinking that helps her consider her own. Marian, sitting cross-legged,
swivels in her chair, thinking this is what she most appreciates about her boss: times when the answers manage to pull her along to a greater truth regardless of whether she stumbles and is dragged down by doubt.

“I think you’re right,” she says.

“No!” Sheila points a finger in Marian’s direction. “That’s a cop-out.”

“Wait, let me finish.” Marian says. “I think you’re right that Barbara may have been forced out. And I also think that New York City is a hideous, vicious, cruel, and overwhelming place. Why would ABC, as accommodating and uplifting and wonderful as it has been, really be any different underneath the glitz and glam?”

“Ah, is that why you turned her down?” Sheila asks.

“What? No.”

“Didn’t think I knew about that, did you? You’re kind of a head-scratcher, you know.”

Marian frowns. She’s neither interested in explaining herself nor impressing Sheila. All that decision teaches her is that the uncommon moments people uptalk as life-altering history, does not actually define her, that, on some unspoken level, she knows exactly who she is and what she needs, and that she can empower herself to say “No thank you” at any given point in time; three simple words that make clear she has her own way of being. This is what puzzles people like Sheila who want to immediately seize what is rarely given in order to make large-scale progress, people whose identity is wrapped up in the cause, the fight, the movement. But Marian is an outlier, a wolf in sheepskin, who goes undetected in a crowd because she is nonthreatening. Her instincts change when people overstep, and fear, for her, is an act of self-transformation. She who pushes too far risks knowing Marian at all.

“I know, Sheila,” she says, “that’s what keeps people on their toes.”
“I like you. We’re going to do some great work together.” Sheila opens her desk drawer, takes out a flask of whiskey and pours a little into her coffee. “Here, give me your cup.”

“Oh, no thanks, I’m drinking tea.”

“A hot toddy, then.” Sheila takes the mug from Marian’s desk adjacent to hers and pours a shot. “Cheers!”

For the next three years, the two of them will accomplish great work together, bringing forth public service announcements with Cher, Lee Meriwether, and Gregory Hines. In 1979, terror and panic will strike the newsroom when live feeds of “America’s worst nuclear accident” show reactor No. 2’s partial meltdown at the Three Mile Island Nuclear Power Plant just three hours away near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. In 1980, the United Transportation Union will go on strike against the Long Island Rail Road, disrupting 92,000 daily commuters and 86,000 single fare passengers for nearly three weeks. During this time, ABC will pay for Marian and her colleagues to stay at a Holiday Inn in Hell’s Kitchen, a fun time that Marian, when recalling her career with her daughter two decades later, will remember as a period when she could have easily been led astray. In 1981, Marian and Sheila will support ABC News’ coverage of the Royal Wedding when Princess Diana flubs her husband’s name during the vows, calling him Philip Charles Arthur George instead of Charles Philip Arthur George. “All it did was endear her more to her people,” Barbara Walters will say, “because it was human and understandable.” There won’t be a dry eye for any woman in the newsroom, but especially for Sheila, who will have recently asked out famed meteorologist Storm Fields, only to get politely declined.

Somewhere within these years, the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians will threaten a labor strike against ABC – consistently third in ratings among the networks, but recently emerging as the leader of primetime – and demand increased pay and
improved benefits for camera operators, electronics engineers, producers, news writers, publicity writers, and make-up artists. Negotiations will stall and ABC will prepare its non-essential personnel to produce the news in the absence of 1,700 essential employees. Marian, among others, will be sent to the State University of New York (SUNY) College at Old Westbury every other weekend, for a few weekends, to take classes and participate in workshops based on new roles and responsibilities they might take on. In Marian’s case, in the control room managing live productions as an associate director. That job, she’ll learn quite early, is intense, is, in a sense, aside her 20-year-old personality. The union, however, will reach an agreement with ABC shortly after, and absolve Marian from having to squeeze into someone else’s earnest idea of her. It’s thorny, she feels, uncomfortable and ill-fitting, to receive someone else’s confidence. She mistakes it as deceit. And if deceit can corrupt truth, she struggles to recognize deceit as anything other than unfortunate.

When Sheila says one day that the higher ups have decided to “downsize the department,” Marian does not understand that she’s been replaced; that they’ve hired a young man with a communications degree from New York University, and since they pay him more, Sheila’s budget can no longer support both him and Marian. She doesn’t think to question her boss, a director she has learned so much from, and so she doesn’t hear what Sheila isn’t saying; as a woman who is failing another woman to promote a man.

“I’m really sorry,” Sheila says.

“Oh, that’s ok.”

“The good news is you still have a job.”

“That’s right,” Marian says, “I’m still here.”
If she wished life to be fair, this might be a disappointment; but she knows it to be arbitrary and so she turns her unexpected transfer to work as a secretary for Dick Stubby, director of network operations, into a year-long indulgence of hilarity and hoopla. This is where she meets Edith, a fellow, albeit elderly, secretary for another man, Paul, in the department. She is a woman whose mod outfits, fake eye contacts, and washed out hair highlights are clues Marian uses to piece together whatever wild story explains why Edith is late to work every morning. Punctuality, for most professionals, is a very rigid measure – it can’t be negotiated, it can’t be redeemed, it can’t be excused or pardoned; above all, it can’t be missed. And the only thing that Dick and Paul cannot be late for is their liquid lunches at O’Neil’s Tavern across the street; so long as Edith and Marian are there in time to walk them back to the office before 3 p.m., at which point, they ask, why not stay for happy hour? This is how 1981 turns into a happy year, when Marian and her colleagues will become “round girls” for the Fire Department of New York’s inaugural “Battle of the Badges” boxing fundraiser hosted by Lieutenant Manny Fernandez at Madison Square Garden. Her brown wavy hair will flow beneath her firefighter hat and she’ll saunter around the ring in a short, red pleated skirt and tight white tee with a boxing glove on it, holding up a “Round 4” sign to a sell-out crowd.

It is about this time she meets her future husband, Jim, at an empty Long Island bar on some rainy Tuesday. The two of them remember that night very differently, and often share the memory with different groups of people. Jim, typically at family holidays or dinners with fellow basketball parents, when someone inevitably drawn to his and Marian’s dynamic, asks about their origin story, he describes what she was wearing: a see-through blouse and a high-slit leather skirt. He draws a line with his finger from his knee to his upper thigh. He explains that it was her sparkling porcelain skin and ruby red lips that shimmered under the low-lit bar lights. Then, he
pretends to light a Marlboro, sucks in his cheeks and slowly exhales, and says to anyone listening, they should have seen the way she smoked a cigarette.

Marian, on the other hand, when their 18-year-old daughter asks again about their meet-cute, says, “I thought he was interested in Joanne. He talked to her all night while I sipped my Jack and Coke. Well, he talked to both of us, but it wasn’t clear, and honestly, I was tired of guys approaching us for one-night stands – that was more Joanne’s idea of fun, so I let her lead the conversation. It was only as we were about to leave that he asked me for my number.”

“So why did you give it to him?” her daughter asks.

“I don’t know. He seemed nice.”

“He seemed nice? He didn’t even talk to you!”

“No, he was talking to both of us. It’s possible I was just shy.”

“What did he say?”

“He asked if he could see me again sometime. And I said sure.”

“What did Joanne think?”

“IT didn’t matter what Joanne thought,” Marian says. “I knew your Dad was different, and what I knew for sure was that he wasn’t interested in what she was interested in. He wanted something more, something that would last, something significant. But even when I gave him my number, I had no idea if I would ever see him again. He didn’t call for another three weeks, but I wasn’t holding my breath. I was commuting back and forth into the city all week, living my life. And that’s what you have to do: live your life!”

When Jim finally does call, they will go out a handful of times, and a few months later, he’ll propose on Halloween. They’ll eat at a restaurant he cannot afford and sip champagne bubbles that will churn inside his empty stomach and only make him more nervous. He’ll ask,
trick or treat? and get down on one knee. When Marian smiles, he’ll open the tiny box and there, inside, will be a black plastic spider ring, and before he loses her forever, will grab one of her wrists, and talk about how they met and fell in love. She will look at him patiently as he dabs his forehead with a handkerchief, and listen to things a man has never said to her before, things he has never said to woman before, and the two of them will melt there together; she looking into his hazel eyes and he looking into her brown eyes, both believing that what they are speaking and hearing for the first time has the sustenance to last forever. Their souls will be nourished, and when she sees the diamond, says yes.
CHAPTER 2
SELF IN RELATION TO OTHERS

The year is 1996, and you are eight years old. The Spice Girls have released their debut album Spice, which features 40 minutes and four seconds of “girl power” anthems promoting female friendship and assertiveness. They sing repeatedly about what they want, what they really, really want, but you do not understand what zig-a-zig-ah means, and this troubles you. All you see in their “Wannabe” music video is five young women dressed specifically for their caricature – baby, ginger, posh, scary, and sporty – running through an upscale party and making a mess of the whole scene: ripping up the reservations book, dancing on the grand staircase, kissing random men (who are with other women), back handspringing across the dining room table, high-kicking in the hallway, and drinking champagne from glasses that are not their own. They are attempting to undermine high society by mocking it, but in this scenario, it is the Spice Girls themselves who are wannabes, especially Sporty Spice.

In real life, Mel C. has never played a sport, and this feels cheap to you; as if accessorizing her body in a sports bra, track pants, sneakers, and a ponytail is more valuable than the physical strength, agility, stamina, and endurance that an athlete actually embodies. But she is nothing like Michael Jordan or Ken Griffey Jr., who are role models for the sports you like to play: basketball and baseball. You even prefer fictional heroines like Dottie Hinson and Kit Keller, who can hit home runs and throw fast balls in A League of Their Own, because even though it is a movie, at least you know their stories are based on real women who played in the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League. Sporty Spice, however, does not inspire you to play sports; your father, mother, and older brother do. Instead of accurately representing female athletes, her inauthenticity pressures you to also be an imitation – softer, synthetic – in order to fit in with girls who are cute and petite, sassy and dramatic, fashionable and chic, loud
and wild. While you are brazen and adventurous within the rules of a game, you are also shy and sensitive to unwritten social dynamics.

One day, the doorbell rings. It is your next-door neighbor, Emily, who always competes with you.

“Do you want to play hockey?” she asks.

“You hate hockey.”

“I’ve been practicing.” She points to her driveway, where goals are set up at either end, and in the middle, a handful of scattered street pucks and a pile of gear.

“Grab your roller blades,” she says, and skates down the driveway, across the sidewalk, and into her territory. A few minutes later, you meet her there donned in knee pads, elbow pads, and wrist guards. Your stick is scratched and worn from the summer afternoons and late evenings you’d play with the neighborhood boys, including your brother. By now, your wrist shot is quick and controlled and hard to detect; smooth like butter, you often trash talk, but won’t do so today, not with Emily. She smiles and reveals a neon pink mouth guard. She must’ve heard about Carli, a quiet girl who loves music and lives on the next street over; a girl who hangs outside often but remains on the periphery and never joins any pick-up games. Last week she had the courage to jump in, a move you welcomed with reassuring words and high fives, but silently bemoaned dissatisfaction: you had to play less rough, at least with her, accommodating a weak link in a chain that had otherwise been forged together with every bruise and cheap shot to the shoulder, every pass and goal scored. The squad has a history, and unfortunately, that day she was on the receiving end of your wrist shot, which sliced through the air and split her lip wide open, blood gushing down her chin like water flooding from an open fire hydrant, before she burst. Her wails of pain signaled the end of the first quarter. Her mother, upon hearing the alarm,
rushed into the street, where you watched the two of them hustle into the house for gauze, out to
to the car in a hurry, and peel away toward the hospital for stitches. You felt terrible, but you also
felt relieved. The game could resume at its normal pace.

You try a gentler approach with Emily and suggest practicing skating backwards or
dribbling through cones.

“I’ve already done that,” she says. “I’ve been out here for the last hour practicing. I’m
ready to play.”

“So you want to play one-on-one?”

“Yep.”

“Against me?”

“Yep.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, Kristen. What’s your problem?”

You grin and bend down to strap your blades tight, and when you stand up straight,
buckle your helmet and pat your head. “Ok then. Game on.” You skate around her in circles and
drop the puck at her feet. “You can have it first,” you say and glide toward the opposite end of
the driveway, where you idle patiently in front of the net.

“What are we playing to?” she asks.

“Eleven.”

“Eleven! That seems high.”

“It’ll go by fast.”

She takes a deep breath and slowly begins to skate from behind her net, alternating the
puck between the convex and concave sides of the hot pink blade. When she gets to the middle
of the driveway, she winds up and shoots, wildly missing the net and hitting the garage door with a thud that barely leaves a mark. She slaps her stick on the concrete and groans.

“You need to get closer.”

“Don’t tell me what to do.”

“You’re too far away.”

“I can make it from here.”

“Yeah, but you need to challenge me. Make a move that gets me off goal, so you have a clean shot.”

“Stop your stupid head games!”

“I’m not—” you sigh. “Here, let me show you.”

You retrieve the ball and charge ahead with a speed that startles Emily, whose feet are confused and attempt to shuffle backward, turn to the side, and move forward all at once. The wheels get caught and as she stumbles and falls, you coast by and casually slide the puck past the goal posts.

“Like that.”

“Show off.”

“I didn’t even make move, I just made you react. That’s all you have to do.”

“So basically, I have to be mean.”

“Mean?”

“Yeah, you’re being really mean right now.”

At this, you decide not to help her up, and instead say, “Winners, keepers.” For the next 15 minutes, you don’t let her even touch the puck, scoring goal after goal after goal, and when she begins to cry, score half a dozen more in quick succession. The biggest challenge for you is
keeping your mouth shut; you ordinarily hurl smart jabs and insults, but because this moment is painful enough, you resist, and learn there is great satisfaction in letting your game speak for itself.

Emily’s inability to read you is unsettling – she can’t tell whether you are bored or thoroughly enjoying this – so she takes your advice and, in an effort to make you react, gets physical. She bangs her stick against yours, hitting it harder and closer to your hands each time. She smacks your rollerblades and it becomes clear she is no longer concerned with obtaining possession of the puck, but rather, more invested in finding creative ways to hurt you, like slashing your shins or spitting in your face. On the one hand, things have finally gotten interesting, but on the other, you don’t appreciate her intention to harm. Doesn’t she know you are a green belt in karate? You are ready to drop wrist guards at any time in self-defense. But you do not want to fight, and your mission, at this point, is to end the game as quickly as possible.

Before the final goal, she checks you hard. You have six inches and 20 pounds on her, but more than that, your dad – a former high school footballer – has taught you how to accelerate upon impact. “So you don’t get hurt,” he tells you one day before you rush outside to play hoops with the boys. “Collisions are going to happen. That’s part of the game. But if you are the one initiating the contact, you are the one who controls the power. So don’t be afraid of it, have fun with it.” This formula will serve you well throughout your sports career. It will save you from many injuries, except the one time you don’t do this as a senior in college, when you brace yourself instead and end up with an AC shoulder sprain. But now is the perfect time to test your dad’s advice. What does it feel like to accelerate upon impact, you wonder, and when you see Emily’s beady brown eyes darken under the shadow of her furrowed brows, you use the opportunity to find out? She barrels down the driveway with a rage you’ve seen before, when she
answers a question wrong in class or doesn’t get an A on a test or when her grandfather buys her the wrong Barbie dream house. It is an anger that surfaces when entitlement is denied, and you – a girl who practices every day to develop her skills, who is battle scarred and knows defeat, who is resilient and knows victory – absolutely rejects the Sporty Spice skating toward you.

She drops her shoulder and you squat, lowering your center of gravity. It is here you close your eyes and imagine harnessing your energy like a superpower. You lean your weight onto your back skate and a second before impact, strike quickly with a force that knocks the wind out of her lungs. She falls to ground and panics for air. It feels as if you’ve conducted lightning, and in the flash that was, torched her while touching nothing at all. To end the game, you score one final time, and skate to where she lies motionless against the cracked blacktop. She is breathing, but withdrawn and curled into a C. You stand over her and look down.

“That’s being mean,” you say, and skate down the driveway, across the sidewalk, and onto your home turf. You take off your gear and throw it in the garage. It’s 4:30 p.m. and inside the house, your mom is boiling hot dogs and in a separate pot, macaroni and cheese. Sweaty and disgusted, you sit down at the table. You’ve already missed 30 minutes of Oprah.

Later that night, there is a knock at the door and your mother, fresh from completing a Tony Little workout in the living room, answers.

“I’d like your daughter to apologize to Emily.”

At the kitchen table, you are out of sight but within earshot, and over the next few minutes, hear her father’s voice growing louder and louder. Your own father is away on business.

“Jack, I’d really like you to leave now,” your mother says. “I’ll talk to Kristen and the girls will work it out. Have a good night.” She shuts the glass door and locks it, and shuts the
steel door behind that, and locks that too. She watches from the box window as Jack marches over the flower bed and across the front lawn and disappears into the darkness. She closes the blinds.

“Kristen,” she calls sternly into the kitchen. You pretend to be calculating long division, chewing hard on the end of a pencil, but really, you are busy computing the probability she will make you apologize. As she walks into the room, concern crosses her face. “Are you being mean to Emily?”

You freeze for a moment, lower your head, and gaze into your workbook.

“You freeze for a moment, lower your head, and gaze into your workbook.

“Kristen, look at me.”

The math adds up, but it doesn’t make sense: this is absurd. Suddenly, you find the accusation amusing, precisely because it is accurate. She called you mean, and you owned it. You are shamefaced, but you are not sorry, and when you lift your eyes, the edges of your lips curl. You open your mouth to say something objectionable, but your mom, knowing the history of your complicated friendship, nods an understanding, and you let it go. Behind her glasses, there is a twinkle of admiration for the young girl she is raising, and in this mother-daughter moment, you are filled with the esteem of being unapologetic. She kisses your forehead. “I love you, baby doll.”

That night in bed, you lie awake mulling over the day’s conflict. It sticks in your mind like an adhesive, as if it has become a molecular force attempting to unite two unlike emotions: pride for standing up for yourself and shame for hurting your friend’s feelings. Both make you self-conscious, that is, excessively aware of your own being, and of being observed by others. If you have to choose between losing a friend or apologizing for winning, you decide to lose a friend. Here is the first taste of a lie that offers a false choice. It goes down like cherry-flavored
Robitussin, that soothing bright red liquid that suppresses everything unpleasant, annoying, and disruptive. In this case, she not only represents an envious and unwelcoming “girl power,” but also all of those demeaning things you hear when people say, “run like a girl” or “throw like a girl.” Emily is that girl, and she is less than, not equal, to you.

A pang of grief strikes just then, not because you are giving up on the friendship, but because you begin to see her as someone who has never supported you. She has challenged you every day since kindergarten, mocking things you say and do, and contesting things you wear. You wonder if she opposes you because she cannot accept how good you are at the things she is not, even though from your perspective, you enjoy her company because she doesn’t play sports. Bonding over *Toy Story, Lion King*, Beanie Babies, and tamagotchis, while feigning love for Jonathan Taylor Thomas when you’re really crushing on Devon Sawa, lets you live in a world free from competition and full of imagination. With good humor and great delight, you respect that she could care less about the Chicago Bulls beating the Seattle SuperSonics in the NBA Finals, and that she only knows Michael Jordan as that dude from Space Jam. This is what you begin to grieve, the loss of these little things.

“Athlete” now becomes an elevated part of your identity. It allows you to escape a girlhood that grounds and instead, dream beyond societal norms because your demands are different. You expect to do everything that Jimmy can, and perhaps because he is older, the bar he has set has always felt superior, and thus, more rewarding. Afterall, “athlete” is a highly prized moniker in the world, and the men who have it are idolized. Dedication, hard work, discipline, and sacrifice are admirable qualities built and tested in the arena, a convenient metaphor for capitalism’s survival of the fittest, and competition is the currency that determines winning and losing one’s worth. No matter the situation, athletes are seen as leaders who
understand teamwork, that is, the value of coordinating efforts most efficiently in pursuit of a singular mission. The intangible skills they obtain over time are transferrable to any endeavor, which contributes to high levels of self-confidence and self-respect, two things often described as unteachable – you either have it, or you don’t – and perceived as rare and exemplary. Above all, athletes are attractive, and society will pay a premium to elevate sports like an economic trophy.

The next morning, you wake up at 6:30 to the low base vibration of music playing from the boombox in your brother’s bedroom across the hall. He is a year away from high school now and changing, responding to academic, social, and athletic pressures that suddenly, somehow, feel heavy to you, as if he has become weighed down by emotions he either doesn’t understand or is afraid to express, or both. He is growing in a weird way, at a peculiar rate. His hands and feet are long and wide while his legs and arms are lean and lanky; and his torso, shredded with a six-pack, is tight and compact, waiting for his spine to shoot him up to 6’3”. Until then, he will look uncomfortable – apprehensive to move or speak – in his own skin, which will grow hair and break out, and you get the sense that growing up is a miserable process where people you love can get lost in shaggy haircuts, XXL polos, and baggy jeans. He is unrecognizable from the brother you knew yesterday, or the day before, and certainly nowhere close to who you idolized five years ago in preschool, when you made a request to your teacher: “Call me Jimmy.” It was a brief 24-hour phase that only your mom remembers because that public ask was prompted by the previous day’s personal demand at the J.C. Penny family photo shoot.

“I want gel in my hair,” you said.

“Kristen, we’re going to be late. Your hair is already done,” your mom said, brushing her fingers through the golden-brown baby curls at the base of your neck. You were comforted, but not convinced.
“Jimmy has gel in his hair,” you argued.

“Jimmy has a different hair cut than you.”

“I want gel in my hair,” you said again. “I want to be like Jimmy.”

Looking at her watch, your mom decided not to resist. Instead of spiking the tops of a buzzcut, as she did for Jimmy, she brushed your bangs down and hair back, and squirted a dime-size dollop of gel in her hands, making sure to spread it all over her palms and fingers to minimize how much actually went in your hair. She ran her fingers along the sides of your head, over your ears, and back. She left the curls untouched, natural. When she saw how happy you were, she realized it was not about having the same look, but about having the ability to do the same things. When you look at your brother now, you see less of a likeness. You try to understand him by the music he currently listens to: Beck, Puff Daddy, the Beastie Boys, DMX, and Rage Against the Machine. But they all speak too fast and yell about things you don’t yet know. You preferred when he listened to Billy Joel, and the “River of Dreams” was something you could air piano and sing out loud together. His door is cracked a few inches and inside, he is planking above the floor, pushing his body up and down.

Downstairs, your mother is sipping tea and watching Eyewitness News with Roz Abrams and Bill Beutel. Your father starches his white button down and irons out the wrinkles. Next, he will polish and shine his black dress shoes and determine which blue tie to wear. You pour a bowl of Cheerios and drown them in milk, half asleep. This is your routine: wake up early and sleep-eat breakfast, rush back upstairs and jump in your parent’s bed. At 7 o’clock, you will yell for your mom, and again at 7:10, and again at 7:20. She finally arrives at 7:30 when she crawls into bed and snuggles until 8:15, at which time she will drag you to your room to get ready for school. During these 45 minutes, your father and brother will leave, and you and your mom will
chat about life’s most concerning mysteries: the water cycle, recess, multiplication tables, Halloween, and the spring concert. You ask endless questions.

“Why would Danielle try to break her arm by jumping off the monkey bars?”

“Is Jimmy going to forget me when he goes to high school?”

“Why am I the last person in class to turn in my quizzes?”

“When should I start wearing a bra?”

“Who sings the Friends theme song?”

“Do I have to get dressed up for Katie’s birthday party? It’s at Discovery Zone.”

Each of these things have the potential to make you anxious and unsure about yourself, but doubt and curiosity are two strands of the same braid, and your mom is the central thread, the trusted voice that weaves them together and apart, assuring you that the complex pattern you are, is beautiful. She answers your questions patiently and makes you laugh your worry away, and when that doesn’t work, she rubs your back and strokes your hair, calming your active mind. Your head rests on her chest, rising and falling with her breath, and eventually you fall asleep to the sound of her heartbeat. For the rest of your elementary school years, this A.M. routine will serve as your daily affirmation.

When you get dressed, you put on one white Wigwam sock at a time, stretching the fabric all the way up before scrunching it down into those wonderful crew sock wrinkles. You slip on your Adidas, walk into the hallway, and stand in front of the mirror. Your oversized gold t-shirt – with the white “Eatontown Recreation Basketball” lettering on the front and a number 5 on the back – is neatly tucked into oversized white checkered Umbro shorts, where you tug just a little bit, so it billows over the waistline. Your brown bangs are lifted underneath a white headband and the rest of your shoulder-length hair frame your freckled, sun-tanned face. Your shoulders
are broad, your legs are skinny, and your chest is just starting to develop. You mistake the small, firm breast buds as muscles beneath your shirt. In a few months, you’ll convince your mom to buy you a training bra, but in this moment, you pinch your shoulder blades together, stand a little taller, and watch your chest expand with a deep inhale. You lift your biceps and flex. Your crooked teeth beam. This is what an athlete looks like, you think.

In this moment, the admiration you feel for yourself is in equal measure to the gratitude you have for a brother who picks you first, every time, to be on his team. He has given you a sense of your own self-worth simply by choosing you over his friends. “Dolly’s on my team.” You are not just a sidekick, you are the quarterback in football, the point guard in basketball, the center forward in hockey; a passer, shooter, and scorer. You are a teammate and decision maker. Your competitive spirit, physical nature, and quick wit fuel your ability to rise to the occasion, unafraid, and test your talent among boys who are not only older, but more skilled. You have Jimmy’s confidence. He believes you are a fundamental piece to winning whatever game the group is playing, and after learning over time lessons in defeat and joy in victory, you begin to understand your impact on the game. It is something you believe to be true as well – you are essential. Your brother has given you, his kid sister, public validation among his peers. You will forever cherish this sense of belonging and seek it out as you grow older and play for different teams in various organized sports, but nothing will ever come close to this: someone you look up to and admire equally admires and looks up to you.

There is something he trusts about you, and perhaps he finds comfort in the fact that you know him beyond the Jimmy Dalton reputation he has in the community as a straight-A all-star and spelling bee champion. In fact, you know him as Vapor Boy, the superhero created with your cousin, also known as Starlight Boy, and you, Magic Girl. With your powers combined – the
storms, the sun, and the supernatural – the three of you have imagined epic adventures and
defeated many villains like Dr. Robotnik, as if immersed in a Sega Genesis video game inside
your collective consciousness but played out in backyards and playgrounds and basements and
parks; wherever you can find hidden treasures, crack numerous codes, build forts, climb trees,
fire Nerf blasters, launch water balloons, jump over lava, and race your mountain bikes home to
defuse the bomb just in time for pizza and a movie.

But you’ve also watched him drop to his knees to pray during a thunderstorm and seen
him run, screaming from the house at the sight of a spider. You’ve noticed that he cleans his
room and organizes his closet without being told because by the time he is told, it is too late – the
germs have spread everywhere. He is someone who, in his pursuit of perfection, likes things neat
and orderly, and while you respect the fragile space in which he operates, you are more than
willing to antagonize his seriousness with questions that challenge his idealism. Why do you
triple knot your sneakers? Why do wear a scapular to bed every night? Why do you floss? Why
do you like only one spoonful of sauce on your spaghetti? These quirks tickle you, and your
goal, through some back-and-forth banter, is to make him laugh too. These giggle fits can last
five minutes at a time, starting with his concentrated effort not to give in to the silliness, as if his
scrunched eyebrows, squinty eyes, and tight-pressed lips can shield the emotion from revealing
itself. And then, a glint in his brown pupil or a quiver in his bottom lip or a dimple in his cheek
gives him away, flooding the space between you with a delight. Smiles burst, and like fireworks
from the mouth, chuckles explode in rapid succession. The sound is self-propelling.

When you provoke this kind of amusement, you remind him that he doesn’t have to be
perfect to be the best brother he already is, and when you see him striving to play a game free
from mistakes, your presence alone gives him permission to break the high standards he holds
for himself; the expectations the world places on men. But you are not concerned with whatever
destiny he has set for himself. You, after all, are not concerned with the hero’s journey. You are
someone who is there to enjoy the ride, embracing roughness around the edges rather than top-
button polish, and sports are made to be messy. You are the process-driven yin to his outcome-
driven yang. He knows you aren’t going to judge him for missing a shot, dropping a pass, or
turning the ball over, but instead will be impressed by the idea of trying a new move or
improvising a play. “Next time,” you’ll say. “We got this.”
CHAPTER 3
REALIZING THE SELF

Basketball is a meritocracy. Players understand it as a showcase of natural talent, nurtured with coaching, and refined with hard work; as a battleground where character is tested and tormented; as a game that surely cheats those who play, and with no safeguard for shame or humiliation. A coach blowing the whistle, signaling the start of another sprint, does not feel remorse when watching 14-year-old girls run baseline to baseline. He does not feel responsible when one girl fails to touch the line or when another girl does not make it in 24 seconds, and he certainly does not feel regret when the whole group runs again, and again. Running sprints after missing a foul shot is not punishment, but rather it is a testament to living under the banner of getting better. Blowing the whistle, therefore, is not an act of contrition, it is the sound of discipline.

Brian Robinson is not a religious man. He imagines himself to be more God-like in his towering 6’5” frame, home to a residual ego that continues to celebrate his Division 1 hoops days at St. John’s during the early 1980s. Hard work and dedication had carried him out of his working-class community in Elizabeth, NJ where the majority of men held occupations in law enforcement, transportation, warehousing, and engineering. Someone had to support the state’s oil refineries and chemical plants, but it wasn’t going to be Brian, who at 18 years old, was featured in a 1979 New York Times article as one of St. John’s top recruits. “Five freshmen will play. One is Brian Robinson of Marist High School in Elizabeth, NJ. Coach Bobby Perkins described him as ‘a real Hudson County player, like Jim Spanarkel and Mike O’Koren. He’s tough,’ said the coach, ‘streetwise, no turnovers, some assists.’” It is unclear what the psychological impact of a rags-to-riches-to-savior story can have on a young man’s developing
mind. But it shows up later, when the man, now aged, spends his Tuesday and Thursday nights and weekends, coaching his daughter’s traveling AAU basketball team.

The Jersey Shore Lightning practice at Monmouth Regional High School in Tinton Falls, a middle-class suburb located 40 miles south of Bayonne. The area is also home to Fort Monmouth, where the U.S. Army Materiel Command manages Command and Control, Communications, Computing, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) capabilities. Monmouth Regional is the only public high school in the county to field students from military families, a detail that will become significant for the community next year on September 11, 2001. But for now, the school serves as a practice facility for the Jersey Shore Lightning, and where a handful of girls will play basketball in the coming years; where only one – and she will be the first in school history – will get a scholarship to play Division 1 in college. Yet others, whose parents can afford the $12,500 per year tuition at St. Rose or the $15,000 per year tuition at Red Bank Catholic, they will continue their basketball journey at legendary powerhouses known for feeding the college pipeline. Brian Robinson can afford this. Afterall, he owns a wealth management company, Brian Robinson, Inc., that employs certified public accountants and financial planners that provide tax and investment services. He will acquire at least one new client as a result of coaching his daughter’s team.

Success – acquiring said client – is no kind of guarantee, however, no outcome for simply showing up as Coach. It is the sheer tenacity of his presence, that is all, his mind made up about imposing his will, of giving parents a face to his name, that help people remember, and of course, desire to know, not only how their daughter is playing, but how much money he can make them in retirement. That is how opportunities are born if you are a man of Mr. Robinson’s generation, an aeon that afforded men self-determination through intercollegiate athletics while
women waited six years after Title IX had been passed for universities to interpret the meaning of “equal opportunity.” Yes, 1979 was the year the U.S. Department of Education determined specific compliance measures for participation, scholarships, and provisions to hold universities accountable, but it was a success whose dividends wouldn’t arrive for another generation.

Instead, while Brian was balling outrageous in Queens, some women were commuting every day on the Long Island Rail Road to interview for secretarial jobs that offered $4.81 an hour in Manhattan; women who neither had the opportunity to play sports in college nor parents who could afford to pay for their higher education; parents who found the money to send their sons instead. This history lesson is lost on both Brian and the girls he coaches.

And so there are times when other versions of history get spoken aloud, announced so clear and absolute, that it is mistaken for important. “When I was a freshman at St. John’s, Mike Krzyzewski was the coach at Army, a team in our league,” Brian said. “But the next year, he got the head coaching job at Duke and I thought about transferring. I had an opportunity – here was a guy who had seen me play – and I didn’t pursue it because of fear. I chose, instead, to weigh my doubt more heavily than my worth. Was I even good enough? That question prevented me from working hard. It stopped me from even trying.” That sensation of bearing witness, now stirring, seemingly occupies an audience that now extends to parents who have arrived early to watch the end of practice. But there are these moments, listening in the huddle, when the girls believe they, too, control their own fate, and when they step between those lines, decide whether or not they are confident in their abilities.

The air is cool inside the gym. The sweat has dried on their skin during the water break. But hearts are racing – racing quietly, and for the casual observer these athletes are just girls playing a game on a school night in April. Some stretch their hamstrings, others shoot foul shots.
A trio talks strategy on the sideline. They are warming up to the idea of competition. The 5 v. 5 scrimmage is the final line item on Brian’s agenda, though everyone knows practice isn’t really over until someone beats him in a one-minute jump rope challenge. “You can do anything in 60 seconds,” he’ll say, as the girls stare, jaw loose and tongue slack, as a 260-pound man skips his size 13 feet anywhere between 140 to 160 times. No one knows where the weight came from, not even Brian, whose man boobs and belly fat will flop about under his shirt like fish caught in a net, breathing air for the first time. He’s still got it, though. Everyone gives him that. For now, the girls give each other high fives and fist bumps as 10 walk onto the court, including five who are wearing bright blue pinnies over their “Shero,” “Basketball is my Boyfriend,” and “This Girl Got Game” t-shirts. Half of them will go through high school and college and fail to recognize that they can have a boyfriend and play basketball. They will sacrifice one for the other, whichever one they choose, and none of them will ever know that “pinny” is short for “pinafore,” a British term for a sleeveless garment worn over a dress: a smock.

Brian sets the clock and blows the whistle. The scrimmage begins. Within seconds, there is a turnover. After three minutes, no one has scored. The girls remind him of simpler times “back in the day” before he knew any better and so he must teach them. The gym had accordingly changed into Marist High School, and Marist High School into the Rose Hill Gymnasium where Coach Bobby Perkins raged, and grew hot, and grew cold, and cursed silently, and emerged soaked with disappointment toward young men eager to please and desperate to perform. Somehow, the girls were not like this. They were not concerned with his approval. Brian wipes the sweat from his forehead. One girl dribbles into a trap at half court and throws the ball away. He scratches his head. A girl from the opposing team picks it up for a 2-
on-1 fast break and finishes the bucket. She gives a smile and nod to her teammate, who points right back to her. The whistle sounds and Brian walks to the circle at center court.

“Let me ask you girls a question. How many of you think you’re a starter on this team?”

Whether you are like Samantha, and laugh at her Dad’s deception – of course, so as not to disrespect him; or like Lindsey, who wouldn’t dare share a personal opinion, particularly about herself, in public; or like Shatoria, who just joined the team two weeks ago but whose swagger speaks for itself; or like Kate, whose wide-eye earnestness is matched only by her straight-A desire; or like Kelsey, who is too busy fussing with the pinny to stand still; or like Amy, who is just trying to survive this practice; or like Elle, who is second-guessing her vocal leadership; or like Keke, who is breathing heavy, bent over her knees, recovering from the fast break; or like Toni, who has, up until this point, been running gingerly on a sprained ankle; in any case, the chances of anyone speaking up become less likely, and so you are compelled to raise your hand in the air.

Brian sees the girl, but the girl, standing near the front of the pack, is unable to see her teammates raise their eyebrows behind her. Someone coughs. Another skids their sneakers against the polished hardwood. Both sounds echo magnificently in the silence. Brian contemplates this moment: on the one hand, it is impressive that a young girl not only believes in herself but has the courage to do so in front of peers; on the other hand, the balls! The latter response, he recognizes, goes against the very soliloquy he gave earlier in the huddle, and in an effort to motivate his players, he realizes now that he also misled them. Players work hard. Coaches make decisions. He looks at the girl – she is the one with two turnovers – and briefly misremembers why he asked the question in the first place.

“No one is a starter on this team,” he says.
The girl lowers her hand quickly and looks around at the stupefied expression on her teammates’ faces. Inside she rages, growing hot, and growing cold, she curses silently; her heart is soaked in self-consciousness. In later years, she will not recall, who first taught her how to doubt. Nor will she remember, among other uncertainties, why a coach would ever diminish her presence when she has something to say or stand up for. But what she does sense, what is undeniable now, is the smiling deceit of authority, obtained by people who have seized opportunity, bound always in the tireless hustle of a former self in a less-than place striving for a greater thing; and partly in the broken idea that these moments of transcendence are a scarcity to be won, not given away. She will not know who to believe, when her hand, now down, hesitates to shoot.

“Your place on this team is not a guarantee,” Brian says. “It’s something you must work for every single practice, every single game, and not to mention, what you do when no one is watching. Being a starter on this team is something you earn.”

And all these years she played for him as the starting shooting guard – the local weekend tournaments, the summer showcases up and down the east coast, the Junior National Championships in Florida; her progress now cross with a chameleon, changing all that exists, with words meant to mystify and perplex. The trap, of course, is to respond. Looking at him now, pacing before them, she feels a fracture she neither understands nor accepts, a chasm that grows one way, deep into the subconscious, fueled by a malicious code that copies and pastes fixed beliefs that can only be described as untrue.

“Do you girls know what potential is?” he asks.

The girls nod their heads.

“It’s what you’re capable of.”
Brian walks off the court toward the water cooler. His definition settles into their frontal lobes, where it is deconstructed – a problem to solve, an emotion to express, an idea to communicate, a trait to personify, a judgment to make; it is a place that is not fully developed. The myelin needed to insulate nerve cells that transmit, strengthen, and accelerate information to other parts of the brain, are not yet mature. The meaning of potential, therefore, just as the word suggests, remains hidden, as a possibility that might one day be achieved in the future. Brian pours a cup, takes a swig, and walks back to center court. From his perspective, potential is far-reaching finish line that vanishes into the horizon; as an end one should never reach. It appears as an apparition to chase on pavement or hardwood, in and out of an agility ladder, up and down stadium steps, or around track fields.

“Girls, you don’t ever want to reach your potential,” he says. “You don’t ever want to reach that point where you know that all you are, is all you are ever going to be.”

There is something in his voice: a brevity in the baritone that reveals the smallness of a closed mind, firing the same neural pathways over and over and over again, only to spark fear more frequently, and aerate apprehension with every syllable spoken aloud.

“Because once you do, once you reach your potential, that’s it. That’s as good as you’re ever going to be,” he says. “That’s why you must always keep striving. Your greatness should always be just out of reach.”

That night, in the driveway, she shoots foul shots in the dark. Her mother is in the kitchen cooking porkchops and macaroni, her father is in his study filing away expense reports, and her brother is watching from the front door. He will be leaving for college in two years, and upon his departure, she will begin high school. His absence from her games will largely go unnoticed;
while he cares about her, he does not care for watching women’s sports – a difference she will not understand until for another 16 years, a span of time in which media coverage and ratings for women’s professional leagues will remain unchanged.

“How long has she been out here?” the father asks.

“Not sure, maybe 20 minutes,” says the brother.

“What is she trying to do?”

“I think she’s trying to get 10 in a row.”

“Has she gotten it yet?”

“Nope. She’s got to nine a few times but keeps missing the last one and starts over.”

This is her motivation now, and habit and routine are the trainers of muscle memory. Even in the dark, with half the hoop faintly lit by the lone spotlight above the garage, she shoots, building momentum bucket by bucket: swish – 4 – swish – 5 – swish – 6. She dribbles three times and backspins the ball into the palm of her hands. She bends her knees and exhales.

Her father opens the door. “Hey sweetie, dinner’s ready.”

“Not now, Dad. I have four more to make.”

He smiles.

“Are you going to go back inside?” she asks.

“Can’t I watch?”

“No.”

“What do you mean, No?”

“You’re going to mess me up.”

They stare at each other, their gaze tightening the tension between them, and suddenly this father-daughter duo recognizes a humorous likeness, a lighthearted playfulness on the edge
of their mouths; if only one of them decides to smirk, the other will smile and the two of them will laugh. But neither of them does, so the father turns and walks inside. Both he and the brother disappear from the doorway.

She steps off the makeshift line, where cement meets grass, and resets her feet. She repeats her ritual – three dribbles and a backspin – bends her knees and exhales. She looks at the rim. And when she misses, says Fuck. This. Shit. The ball bounces underneath the hoop and slowly drifts down the driveway. She says it again, louder and louder, letting her frustration manifest into something greater than itself, a rage so ridiculous she laugh-cries. She is upset, but she knows it is not for this reason. She regrets raising her hand earlier at practice. The ball idles in the street for five minutes, and in those five minutes, she weeps quietly, calmly reflecting, hyper-aware of the empty street and full houses, feeling the wind dance on her skin as if it is tuned to her own rhythm and blues. She wipes her eyes with the collar of her Nike tee, and strides after it.

“Fuck you, Brian,” she whispers and with a three-step wind-up, punts the ball 40 yards down the block.

Before you eat dinner that night, you retrieve the ball and make 10 foul shots in a row. The idea is that a girl should achieve what she knows she is capable of doing. It is a small exercise in personal fulfillment, born of a desire to know who you are becoming. By now you have made and missed thousands of shots the last few years. You have naturally enjoyed the highs of the game, both the friendships and the competitions, and with great difficulty surrendered to the lows; all the crippling bouts of anxiety and hyperventilating. You have learned how to use your nerves, albeit sans words, to fuel actions that ease your worry about future
uncertainties. You are aware, whenever you step onto the court, riddled with expectation and pressure, that you can influence the outcome of a game, which is powerful and true, but also because in this moment, with your shirt drenched from snot, tears, and springtime humidity, you have discovered the seedling of something unique, a precious fitness, and one you can use to endure the strength, smarts, and skills of others. An idea simultaneously pops into your head and burrows into your heart: no matter what anyone says or does, you too, can say and do.
CHAPTER 4
THE UNWANTED SELF
1.

It is the summer before your freshman year of high school. Your teenage bodies bump. Your back slides into his chest. Your brown hair brushes his face. He reaches around your torso, grabbing for the ball as you dribble – this is how you get the tiny half-moon scars on your wrists: his fingernails. Sometimes he knocks the ball away, but most times, like this time, you slowly back him down across the driveway, making little crescents as you move left, pivot, move right, trying to get closer and closer to the hoop. Every time you touch, he grunts in your ear, his hot breath slapping your neck. You reserve your laugh. You two are spoons, and you like this intimacy, the way his body feels against yours, partly because the strength he offers sedates time; and partly because as he resists how much ground you cover, the moment also begs you to match his muscle, and so this grind becomes a question of dominance. It is a question of what your relationship is, and how exactly young love wins, and what is left when one of you loses. Pump fake. You lean back hard into his body, catching him on an inhale and taking his breath away, and drop-step your left leg around his left leg, your hips side-sliding past each other. You lower your shoulder, bump his chest and create distance for your body to jump up and away from his arms. There is enough room to shoot, so you score.

“Yeah, you like that?” you taunt.

“Go home.”

He picks up the ball and walks toward the garage.

“What are you doing? It’s tied. I have to win by two. And you know I’m –”

“Not today. Game’s over.”
Living around the corner was the first step in falling for Josh. And for the last six years, you have enjoyed the walks, jogs, sprints to each other’s houses after dialing each other’s number – and his will be a number you remember by heart – asking can you play? Endless hours throwing the baseball in the street, using trashcans for hockey goals, building forts in the living room, playing video games, having sleepover parties with our siblings and neighborhood friends, climbing trees in the backyard and kayaking in the gully when it fills with rainwater after a summer storm; and when it gets late enough for dinner, staying to eat spaghetti with meat sauce or convincing your parents to order pizza. Last summer, had you skipped your summer basketball camps and gone instead to Maine to live in a red cabin on a lake for a six-week vacation with his family, you know for sure you would have kissed him. He is a boy who has become your best friend, and you think you like the young man he is becoming, but you can’t be sure how high school will change him, or you, or the both of you, and so you conceal your thoughts and feelings from him. You are a pair whose parents always joke will get married someday – you are, as everyone knows in school, the top male and female athletes, with the top grades – and while neither of you object this possibility, neither of you are willing to pursue each other in the present. Like most kids about to cross the threshold into high school, especially those who have known each other forever, you both view life – and love – in terms of now and later. And now, in a larger school with more students, time has run out on your childhood and you want to see who else you can spend all your time with.

He turns to look at you from inside the garage. His body is a silhouette, but you can tell his face is flushed. He throws the basketball into an old gray trashcan filled with other sports equipment you didn’t get to digging in to today and punches the code to close the garage door. He doesn’t wait. He steps instead, inside the house, and leaves you standing there listening to
one door slam shut and watching one door slide closed. You think about trying the front door but
know it is always locked. It does not occur to you, innocent as you are, that it is he who liked the
lack of space between you, that he pressed your body not only to play defense, but rather for the
stimulation that you, his girl next door, have in a moment of physical chemistry the capacity to
give him a rise. When you see him next, after three days of ghosting, you call him a sore loser.
You don’t understand how or why, but he makes you feel bad.

Things, unresolved, are susceptible to change; you know that now high school has
started. His words, spoken less and less to you in the hallways, eventually cease and become
head nods. His smile, delivered to other girls – girls who are fully figured and less athletic; who
style their hair and wear make-up; who determine the fashion trends and therefore, what is
attractive – becomes a cheesy grin when they smile back. You go on as if nothing has been lost
between you, not even your friendship; you may even claim to remember all the inside jokes; but
your innermost core knows that you have been rejected by someone who used to make you feel
as if you were the only girl who knew who he was; and now dropped like a hot potato, you have
no idea. It is surprisingly unnerving how much of your confidence is wrapped in how he sees
you, and now not at all, not really.

Strange how, when you are a girl, known for the same level of academic and athletic
talent, same decent looks and good humor and leadership, that boys have no interest in knowing
who you are; not the way that girls want know Josh. Because of this, you start to believe that
boys don’t find girls who play sports attractive, and when you look back, a decade from now,
you’ll see how grown men do not support grown women who play sports– lack of professional
leagues and teams, sponsorships and salaries, facilities and equipment, fans and ratings. They are
not desirous; not the way that professional male athletes are – every man wants to be them, and
Every woman wants to be with them. But you do not yet live in a world where every woman wants to be a professional athlete, and every man wants to be with that woman. For now, you can get through high school, if you are careful, and lucky, without having your heart broken, or rather, without making your heart available. Unlike most girls, in fact, you do not know any girl who has graduated in recent years who went on to play sports in college, you have a rare opportunity to achieve a greatness that boys casually achieve. So now you better understand how to cling to your own story – without competing for Josh and boys like him – focusing instead on your own glory, so long as you can bear doing so without a companion to champion you.

A couple months later, you have settled into a new environment filled with honors classes, soccer practices and games, and fall league basketball. You have made some new friends, but mostly stick to the core group you solidified in middle school, especially during the C block lunch period, which is mostly filled with upperclassmen. You sit down and open your brown paper bag lunch and enjoy a few minutes of casual chatter. When you take a bite of your turkey sandwich, you feel a quietness weigh down the table like a gravity blanket, and with each subsequent bite, you think something is awry, that surely you have lettuce on your face, as each pair of eyes amplifies your concern: everyone is looking at you.

“Are you a carpet muncher?” Nicole asks.

A question, sometimes, may seem amusing or accusatory, and because you have no idea what this term means, you do not find it funny, but rather, humiliating.

“A carpet muncher?”

“Yeah, you know…”

With each subsequent snicker and sniggle, you think you have been set aflame, that surely nothing could be more discomforting than this, and each time you are proven wrong until
you cease thinking and simply surrender to the layers of tumult and turbulence shaking you like a passenger trying desperately to put on an oxygen mask, desperately that is until you black out, without warning, and then you blink yourself back to the lunchroom, and you are finally, irrevocably enraged.

“Well, are you?”

“Yeah, I go home and munch on carpets every day,” you say quickly and sarcastically, but you have given yourself away, and everyone knows that you do not know what they are asking. They roar, loudly. A few fists hit the table hard in amusement, and you feel as if their pandemonium has made every other table look at you too.

“I told you she was a Hoover,” you hear one of the guys say, and watch him slap another guy on the shoulder.

“No, no, that’s not —” Nicole is laughing as if it’s the only way she can breathe. When she gathers enough composure, she makes a peace sign with her hand, puts the V to her mouth and sticks out her tongue.

You feel a shock and shame you don’t quite understand, a degradation that occurs socially, in small-minded circles, fueled by ignorance, and simply implied and accepted as a stereotype in women’s sports that is often characterized in derogatory terms by sex alone.

“Wow, that’s what you’re asking me?” you say. “No, sorry, I’m not gay.” You get up from the table and throw your things in your backpack. Are they not saboteurs, friends that promote fables and fiction; are they not the cruelest close confidantes of history, twisted, collaborators, the comrades of youth trusted with hopes, dreams, and wishes; now tarnished by a public inquiry designed to minimize, disorient, and isolate? “Have a great fucking lunch,” you say and speed walk out of the crowded cafeteria, down the long yellow hallway, up the stairs and
to your locker. Here is where you spend the next five minutes pretending to put books and binders in your locker and shield your face from passersby as you cry slowly, calmly, and without a sound. You are not sure what you have done to give them this impression. They have known you since grade school, which means they also know how much you liked Josh, forever and ever, amen. And now, they are asking you what society is telling them about girls who grow up and continue to play sports: they become lesbians.

You’ll never know if it is your reaction that makes up their minds about you, or your body, which at 150 pounds, is taller, thicker, and more imposing than other girls your age. You, actually, love your body – the way it moves, the way it stretches, the way it enforces power when accelerating upon impact – for the things it can do. Things, misperceived by others, create disparate narratives of your life: the one you know you are living, and the one they believe you are living. This is perhaps why, over time, you feel less and less seen; for a fissure, once opened, continues to run parallel. Rumors, once spoken, continue to spread. You all keep on as friends, albeit an abstraction of what you used to be, which does not bother you as an Aquarius whose cool aloofness comes naturally; it is quite easy for you to detach, and move forward, and never look back.

II.

It’s 11 p.m. on a school night in May. Per NCAA rules and regulations, there is one hour left in the day for college coaches to talk to high school recruits. The phone rings. Your dad answers.

“It’s [Associate Head Coach] from Lehigh.”

“Are you kidding me? No. I don’t want to talk to him.”
Your dad stares at you.

“It’s literally the 11th hour. He could have called anytime throughout the week or earlier today like the other coaches – coaches who actually want me to play for their programs. No, I’m going to bed. I have school tomorrow,” you say.

“Just…give him a break,” your Dad says. “At least he called.” He uncovers the mouthpiece and extends the phone. You talk briefly about your high school season and the start of AAU, which will take you to several tournaments this summer in Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and Richmond. When he asks what you think of Charlotte Hampton, a fellow junior at a rival high school who can “do it all,” you realize he is recruiting the both of you and doesn’t actually know that you destroy Hampton every time you play her. Your answers are short. Your tone, terse. When you hang up the phone, you find your dad downstairs ironing his clothes for work the next day. He presses a crease in his pants and looks up from the steam.

“How’d it go?”

“He wants to recruit Hampton,” you say. “Hampton!”

“Well, you have all summer to prove him otherwise.”

This is the part of basketball that seems especially exhausting.

III.

He was wearing a blue sweatshirt, baggy jeans, and dusty steel-toed boots. I was wearing tight jeans, a pair of heels, and a pink form-fitting shirt unbuttoned just so. His beaming crooked smile met my grimace, and we embraced. The upscale sports bar was located a few blocks off campus and inside we ordered drinks at a table for two. It was my night off. In the corner I saw
my three assistant coaches nodding, clapping, and smiling with looks of Get it, girl! I ignored them, wishing they would leave immediately, and instead returned my focus to my date. I felt bad. I already knew this wasn’t going to go anywhere. It was a pity date, for me. I called him after meeting him at this very same bar the weekend before. The music was jamming, the lights were low, and the dozens of high-definition screens played every type of sports game imaginable that night. It was a bizarre cross between a drunken dance party and the Superbowl. It was nauseating, but I was alone. Not just that night, but in life, I was alone. My wingwoman of a teammate urged me to ask him for his number after she saw me chatting with him. She was mistaken though; I was actually trying to get him to stop talking to me.

“Hi,” she walked over and interjected, “My friend here would like your number.”

I turned around immediately, beer goggles bugging.

“What are you doing? I don’t want his number.”

“Yes you do.”

“No I don’t.”

“Why not??”

“Because. He’s desperate, and I’m not.”

She grabbed my phone from my hand and turned to him. “So what are your digits?”

He gave them to her, my back still to him.

“Name?”

“Rocky,” he said. “Rocky Rinker.”

I gave him a call a few days later. After dinner that night, we got coffee at Dunkin’ Donuts. We sat across from each other at a booth and I kicked my heels up next to him. He asked when my next game was, and I told him I’d put him on the comp list for a free ticket. He smiled
and began to rub my shin for no reason, and I was undecided whether or not I liked it, liked him. He would never understand my world. I needed someone to help me think about and understand what I was going through, not convolute it with unbridled mediocre attraction and a dumb smile that begged to be liked. I couldn’t imagine myself waking up next to him, comforted. Eventually, he walked me back to my car where I thanked him for a wonderful evening and said I’d call him again sometime.

“I’d really like that,” he said and leaned in for a kiss.

I turned my cheek.

IV.

It was a chilly November night when we played Long Island University in Brooklyn, N.Y.; the first game of my collegiate career. I started, and scored a lot of points, made a lot of assists, and grabbed a lot of rebounds. I even had a steal or two. It felt good to win. We stopped for ice cream on the way back to Bethlehem, P.A. My fellow freshman guard was a bit down, sullen from a subpar shooting night and for her, she lived and died by the three-point line. She never saw a shot she didn’t like. Tonight, however, was a night to have learned when to stop. I empathized with the struggle of this game, how you do have to keep shooting but also need to recognize that there are other ways to contribute. She got wrapped up in herself, which made it hard for her to share the good vibes of the win with everyone else.

I sat across the aisle from her on the bus. She took her big Bose headphones off and placed it around her neck. Her eyes were wet with silent tears that arrived under the cover of the darkness as we arrived at Friendly’s. She looked at me and sighed. I smiled, and we both got to our feet so we could cheer up and celebrate with some ice cream. Once outside, I placed my arm
around her. “It’s just one game,” I told her. “It may not have been how you wanted to start your career, but you have plenty of time to determine how you finish it. You’re alright.” She let her head drop on my shoulder as we walked with our teammates into the parlor. Behind us, a junior guard and a senior captain laughed and chided us with mock “Awws” and “You two are cute.” I gave one final pat on the back and turned around. “What’s that? What are you saying now?”

“Nothing,” the junior said. “Ya’ll are cute, that’s all.” Then she turned to the senior captain and said, “I told you. Called it.”

A couple weeks later, the junior called me after practice one night to see if I wanted to hang out with a bunch of teammates and some softball players and watch TV. When I got to their house down the hill from my dorm, I took off my jacket, cracked a beer, and sat on the couch with my friends. I asked what we were watching.

“What the L Word.”

V.

The new Media Relations intern was good-looking. He was tall, had dark brown hair, big blue eyes, the perfect amount of scruff, and played football at a nearby university. At the time, my only two physical requirements for dating were that the guy was at least 6’2” and could throw a football. This is erroneous in so many ways, but that’s what I was into back then, which meant that I was really into this new intern. His job was to help our Sports Information Department with stats, facts, and figures about our team, checking archives for neat anecdotes and prepping write-ups for marketing material at all of our home games. It was easy to get distracted during warm-ups, watching him walk across the sidelines in his crisp, pressed khakis and starched white polo shirt with our Mountain Hawk logo on the breast pocket. My paparazzi
eyes zoomed in on his smile and snapped mental images whenever he laughed at some mundane
detail discussed among colleagues. I knew he knew my name, but the challenge was getting to
know his. I walked over to the press table where he was standing with our Sports Information
Director, who greeted me warmly with a “good luck” and “knock ‘em dead tonight.” I, too, was
an intern for our Athletics Department during my off-season so I asked who the new face was,
and introduced myself, telling Luke that he would really enjoy working with this crew. I joked
I’d even be okay he wanted to boost my struggling shooting percentage.

After a few weeks of small talk and high fives and smiles and Facebook research, I
decided to make a bold move and give Luke my number. It was a Patriot League home game
against Holy Cross – a big game I should have been more mentally prepared for than I was. I got
to the locker room early and was the first to dress. Inside my left crew sock I had placed a note,
folded and sincere, with my number on it. I tied my up Nikes in a rush, got up quickly, and
slowly walked down the hall into the arena and onto the empty court before any of my
teammates would suspect anything as they too started to arrive and get ready. “Just putting up
some shots” I was prepared to say. It wasn’t unusual for anyone to get shots in early. I started my
routine with some one-handed form shots to break in the muscle memory. Then I did some off-
the-glass shots from the block and eventually moved my way across the key, extending further
and further out at the hash marks until finally I was launching some three’s. Luke was nowhere
in sight and I was beginning to feel stupid for walking around with a note in my sock. I rested at
the free-throw line, aligning my feet and dribbling three times. When I rotated the ball backward
in my hands, a big grin spread across my face. There he was, ready to go, walking alongside the
baseline underneath the hoop. “What’s up superstar?” he said playfully. “You ready for tonight?”
I told him I was. We chatted for a little bit, and I noticed the clock had officially started its 90-minute countdown until game time. My teammates would start to trickle out of the locker room soon.

“Hey,” I said. “I don’t ever do this, usually.” He looked at me, half-grinning, half-puzzled. “But,” I continued, now bending down to reach into my sock, which I failed to anticipate becoming ever so slightly sweaty. “But I wanted to give you this.” I pulled out the note and gave it to him. Before he could say anything, I explained, “It’s a little something. My number is in there. I figured it might be nice to catch up sometime outside of this place.”

He shifted the weight in his legs and laughed and told me that sounded great. He appreciated it. After the game that we lost, I was having a post-game meal with my parents at a local restaurant. It was a rough loss, not because the game was hard-fought or we played well, but because it wasn’t. We handed that game to Holy Cross. Our new captain, a point guard a year younger than me, was bawling her eyes out afterward. It was a dramatic display of crocodile tears and immaturity, yet to others, taking a loss to heart meant you carried the weight of the world on your shoulders the way that any great leader should. At this point in my career, I felt little to no emotion about games like these. Unfortunately, it was par for the course in some ways, and drowning myself in sorrow seemed like the least productive thing to do. Besides, I had made a promising new connection to keep me excited. My phone buzzed on the table: Luke.

“Hey Kristen, I’m sorry for the tough loss tonight.”

He asked what I was up to later that night and I told him there was a house party off campus where we were going to be hanging, but it’d be low-key. I didn’t invite him because I didn’t know him yet. It would’ve been hella awkward if he rolled up and I had to explain to my teammates who he was, a question I couldn’t yet answer.
“I felt really bad for your point guard. She took it really hard.”

I didn’t respond. Reading this stung with sharp disappointment. If Luke was falling for this charade, what did I think of Luke? I suspended my judgment, finished my meal with my parents, and headed home to walk over to the party. Drinking at the “third floor bar” was a favorite hangout of ours. Essentially, just a large bedroom that transformed into a hangout for late night alcohol-infused conversations, silliness, dancing, games, and louder than necessary music. It was midnight when Luke texted me and asked for Avery’s number. I looked across the room at her, canoodling in the corner with our shooting guard. He had no idea that she was gay.

VI.

My Blackberry vibrated under my pillow. The room was warm with the summer sun, and I felt rested for the first time after a long season. I rolled onto my side and checked my phone: “Yo bitch.” I rolled back over and closed my eyes, trying to remember why I had agreed to meet for brunch. I convinced myself it would be nice to catch up with an old friend and former teammate from high school. I wondered, however, where the language of this mid-morning greeting came from. It seemed too jarring, and also, we weren’t tight.

“We still on for brunch? I can pick you up in 30.”

Thirty minutes later, she arrived in an old Chevy Impala convertible. Perplexed, I hopped in. We drove the coastal roads of Long Branch, N.J.; roads I typically enjoyed cruising alone at night when it was cooler, with the windows down, music on blast, and sometimes, especially in the fall, with the heat on low. Summer break was just beginning, and everyone was home from whatever year of college they had just finished. We arrived at Beacon Beach Grille on Atlantic Avenue, a block away from the beach, and self-seated ourselves on the shaded outdoor patio. We
chatted and ordered food. It was nice to catch up, to see how we’ve changed. I told her about the on-going basketball drama amongst teammates, unknowingly and emphatically using my hands to work my way through how complicated of a situation it made not only for playing together but living together. She told me lesbians like to use their hands a lot when they’re talking.

I squinted at her, looking at me. I wondered if she had heard anything I had said. This comment seemed unrelated and out of place. I thought perhaps, that I had misheard her.

“What?”

“Yeah, the strong use of hand gestures is one way you can tell.”

She was looking at me and smiling.

I took a sip of my water, slowly processing this code with disbelief. Last time I checked, we were both straight. I sat on my hands and thought about how the rules of friendship have changed since I went off to college. I sat on my hands, I sat on my hands, I sat on my hands. For the rest of the brunch, I remained silent save for one-word answers and simple sentences that required no complex thinking or speaking. I watched her lean closer toward me across the table, her energy and enthusiasm too much. This was no longer a meal between friends. My half-smiles hurt my face.

She took the long way home and drove at an agonizing pace: the speed limit. After a long moment of the wind howling through my ears, she asked me if I had ever heard of Josh Ritter, the musician.

“Oh my god, I want to marry this man,” she droned, and smiled obliviously onto the road ahead. “Here, I’ll play you a song. You’ll love him.”

She played “Where the Night Goes” and after an impossible three minutes and fifty-five seconds, there was a long silence as we rolled in traffic up to a red light.
“So…” she said.

I didn’t want to look her, but I slowly turned my head. My hands were tucked under my thighs.

“So,” I said.

“My door swings both ways now.”

“That’s cool,” I said. “Mine doesn’t.”
CHAPTER 5

SELF-MADE: THE BUSINESS OF BASKETBALL

Her office door was open. It was a policy that made her visibly accessible, and I wanted to believe that the warmth she projected to passersby would still be there once I crossed the threshold. She was the head coach for the Lehigh University women’s basketball team. Teammates often praised her as a second mother and by looks, yes, she rocked the turtleneck frequently. She highlighted her brown shoulder-length hair every six months and traded in her tan Ford Explorer for the updated model every three years. It was an SUV that likely stayed under the lease mileage, traveling the four miles up and down South Mountain multiple times a day, back and forth to her office and Stabler Arena. She was a mom who planned 6 a.m. pre-season workouts so she could get back home to her three children before her husband went off to work and they went off to elementary school. She had lunches to pack, cheeks to kiss, dramas to dispel, homework to help with, and a dog to walk. Who she was then was unknown to me. I only knew her as Coach, a woman to prove things to.

“So how are you doing? Doing good?” she asked, as if trying to enforce a state of goodness rather than welcome me as I was. Her uneasiness about her players’ well-being always gave me the impression that she really didn’t know who we were, and after four years of the same leading question, it was disappointing to know she didn’t really want to. Good was a stiff-arm greeting that kept us close enough for her to listen without committing to any meaningful understanding. It was also easier for us to agree.

“I am doing well, yes.”

I took a seat in the wooden chair in front of her desk and smiled at the 1997 and 2009 Patriot League championship teams framed in glass on the shelf behind her. This year’s 2010 team would soon be added to the legacy, and I thought how strange it was to see team success so
clearly from the outside while knowing there was a ceiling on my individual potential. Is this the culmination of my experience? A photograph that distorts the reality of the face inside the glass? For the first time, I realized success and potential could be mutually exclusive. The occurrence of one did not influence or result in the other. I dismissed the thought and for a brief moment, felt content to be a champion.

A few weeks ago, we beat American University (AU) 58-42 in the Patriot League title game, earning us the No.13 seed in the NCAA tournament where we took a private plane to Ames, Iowa to face the No.4 ranked Iowa State Cyclones. We lost by 37 points. I remember taking a selfie outside the locker room with Jordyn, a best friend, trusted confidant, and a power forward who could nail the three. I remember how massive the 13,409-seat arena was, magnified only by the hollowness of being filled to half capacity. I remember warming up on the stationary bike on the sidelines. I remember our point guard having a meltdown the night before when she found out Brooke, our shooting guard, was cheating on her with AU’s Patriot League Player of the Year. She went 1-11 shooting in the game, a game I don’t remember playing but according to the post-game write up, I hit a free throw at the 13:38 mark in the first half. I must have missed the other one. I remember taking a shower, getting dressed, listening to our coaches congratulate us on a 29-4 season that included keeping intact a 33-game home winning streak. I remember teammates crying. I remember walking out of the locker room, wandering, crying for a different reason: relief. My body was breaking down. Everything hurt. I remember getting on the bus with two packs of ice wrapped around my back and watching the hay bales stand like monuments on the flats, the open sky gray with emotion. I remember listening to A Little’s Enough by Angels and Airwaves on repeat all the way to the airport, the most in-my-feelings song I could depress myself with. I was tired and lonely and desperate to feel differently.
“Would you mind closing the door and shutting the blinds behind you?” Coach asked.

My smile was gone. I turned around, puzzled that after four years I hadn’t realized there were blinds on the door window.

“This seems serious,” I said, feigning a joke.

“Are you nervous?”

“Well I wasn’t, but now I’m thinking I should be.”

This was the trouble with Coach and me. We could never read each other. Even when I wanted to let my guard down, I couldn’t trust that something I had said or done wouldn’t be used against me as feedback or constructive criticism or opportunities for growth. She would caution me not to “fly off the handle” during these moments and remind me that leaders know how to control their emotions. I would remind her that Elphaba defied gravity in *Wicked* and that maybe I just wanted to fly free so why couldn’t she just let me be me? It dawned on me as I closed the blinds that my fifth year of eligibility wasn’t guaranteed. That is to say, I wasn’t prepared for the conversation I was about to have with Coach; a negotiation for the $50,000 it would cost for me to come back. I returned to the chair and took a seat for a second time, emphasizing an uprightness with my back straight and knees bent in front of me; my Nikes firmly on the ground. My palms were open and rested face down on my thighs. I breathed in, smiled, and exhaled a confidence I wasn’t sure I had. She crossed her legs, folded her arms, and asked me how I thought the season went. After listening to a few proud moments, she placed both feet on the floor, leaned in, and slid her chair closer to the desk. Both elbows pitched a tent with her hands folded, fingers interlocked in front of her mouth. She looked down at her notes, and then we reviewed my individual performance.
“You were 42-134 from the floor this season,” she said. “That’s not great but it’s not good either. That’s a 31% shooting percentage, and your three-point shooting was 21% -- the worst of your career, not counting your sophomore season since you only played eight games that year before redshirting.”

Sophomore year was the year I swallowed down muscle relaxers and painkillers, dejected by my inability to put my pants on or tie my shoes or get out of bed without gripping discomfort. Two bulging discs – one between the L4/L5 lumbar vertebrae and another between the L5 lumbar segment and S1 sacral segment – pressed relentlessly against raw spinal nerves. Hamburgers too big for their buns. The gel-like discs became disfigured when I was squatting 155 pounds in Taylor Gym during a summer workout in June. I never worked out in Taylor, the common gym with old mismatched equipment that was open and accessible to the general student-faculty population, which wasn’t there during the summer, but the Varsity House was closed. I stood inside the squat rack, ducked my head and moved my shoulders beneath the bar. I took a few quick breaths in, tightened my hands into fists, and lifted the weight away from the rack. My feet set a few steps back, toes pointed slightly outward. Another inhale. My hips swung back into a deep seat and I felt the weight dig firmly into my heels. Absorbing the energy, I pressed down, shooting the weight up through my calves, hamstrings, quads, and glutes. My lips were loose knit as my mouth hissed a long exhale that lost itself in the sharp, agonizing pain of my lower back. Something released itself as every muscle contracted in that movement. A twinge. A stab. An out pouch on the inside. I re-racked the weight, slowly, as fast as I could. When I un-tucked my head from beneath the bar, I could not stand up straight. I looked in the mirror. I was standing up straight. What is this illusion? I thought. My body had been cut down a size, and yet, here I was all tall and wrong. My back throbbed. “Leah!” I yelled out to my
teammate. “Leah!” She dropped her weights, walked over, and looked me up and down. “I’m afraid to move,” I said.

The next seven months were a grueling imbalance of rehab, steroid injections, pre-season workouts, practices, and games. I called it quits at the end of December when I had unintentionally taken a charge during our Christmas City Classic holiday tournament, drawing a foul on the offensive player as I slammed into the hardwood tailbone-first. Immediately, my muscles locked up as layer upon layer of sinew and tissue built an immobile fortress to protect against any further movement that might expose the tenderness of my spine. No one – no teammates, no coaches, no trainers, and no chiropractors – would ever suggest I throw in the towel to rest and recover from injury. In fact, one of my trainers would continue to treat me as if I were healthy. During a mid-season strength and conditioning session, I opted out of standing on a Swiss ball to do body weight squats, an exercise advanced even for those in the best shape. “I thought you were more mentally tough than that,” he said. It was the insult to an injury no one knew how to treat properly so everyone pretended it didn’t exist. Truth was, I couldn’t play like that anymore, struggling just to embarrass myself and do more harm than good to my teammates.

One night, I had a panic attack in my single dorm room.

“Brooke,” I was hyperventilating into the phone. “Brooke, can you take me to the hospital? I can’t breathe and there’s a sharp pain in my lower abdomen.”

Our shooting guard didn’t sound at all like she wanted to take me to the hospital at 10 p.m. on a school night. I was just glad it wasn’t a night before a day off; she’d be drunk and high otherwise. Five minutes later, she knocked on my door.

“Aww Diz, what’s going on with you?”

My eyes did the talking for me. I was still trying to catch my breath.
Sometime in the middle of the night, I woke in my hospital bed to see Coach and my parents in the chairs beside me. Brooke was there too, but upon seeing my eyes open, my future roommate peaced out to get some sleep herself.

“You’re dehydrated,” Coach said.

“I have to pee.”

“And they think the cyst on your ovary burst,” my mom added. “You’ll have to get an ultrasound later.”

The room was heavy with inconvenience. My head was light with delirium. I kicked my feet out from the white on white blankets and sheets and felt a tug on my right arm. The IV drip. The nurse wheeled it over to my side of the bed.

“You’re going to have to take this with you,” she said.

I breathed away my annoyance and shuffled down the hall.

“Nice underwear!” Coach shouted.

I laughed at the thought of this memory.

“Is there something funny about these stats?” Coach was staring, scowling. “Compared to last year, your field goal percentage was down 7% and your three-point shooting was down 16%. Even your free throw percentage, which is usually high, dropped from 88% to 81% this year.” She paused momentarily and looked up from her notes. She enjoyed this. She was a numbers lady who majored in economics and later received her MBA. I stared back, unblinking.

She continued, “You averaged 4.1 points per game, a drop from 6.1 last year.” She moved her pen up and down my career stats, tapping it when she found something insightful.

“And a drop from the 5.7 points you averaged as a freshman. We seem to be on the decline here.”
Freshman year was a fun year. I started more than half the games that season and averaged 24 minutes per game. Every time Brooke and I stepped out on the court with a sophomore and two seniors, there was the collective feeling that we were playing for each other, curious to see what we could do that day; how great we might be. As the point guard, I wanted to see Brooke and Jess make it rain from three, and Dawn and Paige post-up, drop-step, and spin move their way to buckets. Passing was my favorite. It was poetry to me, eager to believe in things before I saw them and find connections in hidden places. “Threading the needle” was a skillset that required a keen sense of knowing where my teammates were anticipated to be in motion. Court vision. I essentially threw the ball to an empty space on the good faith that we were able to read each other in real time and connect without words; just a ball, sometimes a bounce, and always a grin. The physics of matter, energy, motion, and force colliding to create art was pure chemistry. Pure joy. And we played well knowing this strength.

What we practiced, however, was perfection. Perfection was the name of a drill, a simple drill, really, and every practice began with this:

- Full-court right-hand lay-ups.
- Full-court left-hand lay-ups.
- Full-court two-player passing into right-hand lay-ups.
- Full-court two-player passing into left-hand lay-ups.
- Full-court three-man weave passing.
- Full-court Michigan lay-up drill.
- Full-court three-man weave shooting.

The entire team had eight minutes or less to complete all of the components. The Associate Head Coach decided how much time to give us depending on how many of our 14
players were practicing that day. He typically stood at the far end of the court with his arms folded and legs crossed, as if trying to tuck in his penis. There is no other way to describe his signature pose. The cross of his legs was severe – at the knees rather than the ankles – and both of his feet faced forward. It seemed an impossible stance for his overweight middle-aged teddy bear body. His gray-blonde hair was fixed in boyish haircut. That is to say, it was not fixed at all, but wispy in the way a child’s bangs frame the forehead while the rest of his hair covers his ears. He was gentle and mild manner from appearances, until something set him off and his fair complexion flamed bright red. He stomped his feet. He waved his arms. He spit words that burned not only in the moment but also in memory. He had a bad habit of verbal abuse on the court, and always tried to make up for it with superficial pleasantries off the court. He must have known I felt a certain way about him.

He was equally ruthless with the clock. If it struck 8:01, we had to do Perfection all over again. If we missed a shot, dropped a pass, didn’t touch the base line, we had to sprint to the back of the line and do that portion of the drill again, until everything was done perfectly and on time. It was painful to watch teammates miss lay-ups, curse, and sprint to the end of the line only to dribble down the length of the court and miss again. Sprint back again. Miss again. It was humiliating if you were that teammate, wasting time, failing at something so fundamental. Most days we completed the drill without flaw but with overwhelming anxiety. On the bad days, we could waste a half hour of practice doing a drill that did not remotely emulate playing a game in real-time. The game was not perfect. Instead of strengthening our creative habits – reading the defense, making a decision to pass, dribble, or shoot, or setting ball screens and back screens and slipping screens, moving without the ball, and determining whether to pop, curl, or fade off screens based on how your defender was guarding – we not only diminished our capacity to
believe in ourselves, but subconsciously began to play from a place of fear. Perfection reinforced a doubt that didn’t otherwise exist.

“You look upset,” Coach said.

“Those numbers aren’t the full story. You need context.”

“Ok.”

“I played 17.5 minutes a game this year. You made it very clear to me what my role was as the glorified sixth man,” I said. “So it’s upsetting to hear you tell me that you’re disappointed in my numbers. This was a decision you made.”

“And you agreed to.”

“And we won championships, didn’t we?”

“So why are you upset?”

“I’m upset because I’m playing with my hands tied out there. I’m making the most of what you’re giving me, and that still isn’t good enough.” I raised my voice without even realizing. I sat on the edge of my chair and leaned forward with my elbows on my knees, looking up at her from under my eyebrows. “Running plays where my job is to sprint to the corner just to be a decoy for Brooke and Avery is insulting.”

“That’s not entirely true. We run a five-out motion offense too. Everyone has an opportunity to score when we run it.”

“Which we never do!”

“Shhh, you’re yelling.” Coach looked at me in disbelief. “Is this what it’s like to fight with you?”

“I’m not yelling. I’m raising my voice.”

“Well you don’t have to do that. We can just have a conversation.”
“We can be better than what we’ve always been doing, and that means the ball has to be in my hands more.” We breathed a few beats together. “I’m just passionate about this, that’s all.”

“I can see that.”

I paused and wondered whether or not I had crossed a line. The last time I had raised my voice was at my teammates during a practice over winter break when we were the only ones on campus, didn’t have to split our energies with classes, and were spending way too much time with each other. For two weeks, our practices returned to a pre-season structure of fundamental drills, reviewing the X’s and O’s of our offensive and defensive schemes, and my favorite -- tons of scrimmaging. We weren’t playing any games, so we weren’t watching film or going through scout. Our focus was solely on getting ourselves better. Coach kept hounding me to “be more vocal” rather than rely on my actions to lead by example, so during a scrimmage in which I was the floor general for the second string team that was disadvantaged against our starters, I passionately encouraged my teammates to make their shots when I created opportunities for them to score. Leah, who busted her ass to run the floor, missed fast break after fast break after fast break lay-up. JA, who missed two wide open three-pointers, became wide-eyed and panicky when she got the ball and hesitated to shoot altogether. And the freshmen, who never knew the plays, forced us to audible and scramble for bad shots. The next day Coach pulled me aside and suggested I apologize to my teammates for being forceful with them.

“A couple of players have come to me complaining,” she said.

“Really? No one has mentioned anything to me about it.”

“I think you should address it and clarify your intentions.”

“Ok, fine,” I said. “I’ll talk to them today.”
“No, I think an email to the full team would be better. Your written words come across clearer.”

My gut panged with a strangeness I eventually dismissed as overthinking. I sent the email out later that night and the next day saw Jordyn on my way to grab lunch at a deli off campus. I asked if she read it. She said she did but didn’t say anything more about it. When I pressed for some feedback, she squinted and looked at me hard. “I just don’t know why you sent it. I guess I’m confused. We’re playing basketball, right? Isn’t that part of the game? Why are you apologizing?”

There was a sophisticated irony to being in a position that Coach could manipulate. One the one hand, she teased me with motivation every time she said, “You can’t lead from behind.” On the other hand, she had every intention to keep me there.

“Fighting is not talking,” I clarified.

Coach was unsure what to say next. Maybe she did want to fight, I thought, and for a long minute, the two of us sat in silence. I looked at her, looked at my hands, looked at those photographs, looked at my shoes, looked back at her. I kept my eyes locked and my mouth shut. I sighed and shook my head as if trying to shimmy loose some key piece of understanding.


“It’s been great having that kind of production from our bench,” said [Head Coach]. “I would say our bench play is the strength of our program right now. We have three or four kids that can start at any Patriot League program. Kristen (Dalton) can play like that every night if she gets 25 minutes, but she has learned to accept her role and it’s great when a player like Brooke has an off night and we can go to our bench.”

Dalton was a big contributor off the bench, as she finished with 12 points and a career-high seven assists.

Lehigh Keeps It Rolling With 66-51 Win Over Rival – Lehighsports.com – 1/23/10
“We distributed our scoring. Our guards played well, our posts played well. I thought Kristen (Dalton) played well off the bench; she came in and gave us a spark.”

**Strong Defense Helps Lehigh Defeat Army 70-40 – Lehighsports.com – 1/16/09**
For Dalton, the 13 points is a season-high as she was able to come off the bench and provide a spark. “It was a great team effort tonight, “Dalton said. “It’s always nice to have a game like this and I’ve been trying to be more consistent. We have a lot of offensive weapons and it’s good to utilize everyone.”

**Mountain Hawks Win Second Straight CCC Title – Lehighsports.com – 12/30/09**
“It was a team effort over a quality team,” said [Head Coach]. “A lot of different people stepped up in different ways. Leah came in and played some great defense, Kristen (Dalton) with that big shot in overtime, it was just a great team effort.”

With the score tied at 65 in overtime, Dalton hit the game-winning jumper with 38 seconds left.

**Balanced Attack Lifts Lehigh over Villanova 80-65 – Lehighsports.com – 12/5/09**
The other three Mountain Hawks to finish in double figures were senior Brooke (14), junior Jordyn (11), and senior Kristen Dalton, who came off the bench and scored 12 points.

“We have a lot of offensive weapons,” Dalton said. “Tonight we shared the ball with everyone and communicated really well. When we do all the small things well and stay consistent, we’re going to see results like this.”

It is a special kind of heartbreak to know I was being disrespected, and I accepted it anyway. The championships were consolation prizes for losing the best parts of who I was – the joy, creativity, laughter, confidence. I no longer had the freedom to express my thoughts and feelings on the faith I’d be understood, but rather was trained to apologize for principles I believed in, principles that got rebranded in the sport’s narrative as “overcoming adversity” and “being humble” and “knowing how to win” – lessons I was told would carry over into life after Lehigh, but these were choice words that painted over the incomprehensible parts. They were intended to empower, but I didn’t need someone else to give me what I already had. I needed to know why they tried to take it from me in the first place.

Coach broke the stalemate. “Do you even want to come back for a fifth year?”
More time went by before I answered. “Do you want me to come back?”

“I do. I just want to make sure you do.”

“I’m here, and I haven’t said otherwise.”

“That isn’t exactly a yes.”

“You haven’t actually asked me to come back yet.”

“Would you be willing to take out a loan?”

Here it was: I had lost my value. Not quite worth full tuition anymore.

“A loan?”

“For a small amount like $15,000.”

“No.”

“No?”

“No.” I already knew that two other teammates whose fifth years were covered in full after they tore their ACLs. I also knew that Leah did take out a loan, but I didn’t love basketball enough to do that. “If those are the conditions, then I’m not coming back. I can walk out this door knowing I’m a two-time champion who played to the best of my ability with the time that I had. I don’t have anything to prove to you. I know I have done good here.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that, and I agree, you have helped our program tremendously get to the next level. But I’m also sad because I don’t think it will work out. I’m sorry.” Her eyes began to tear up as she grimaced away her emotions. As much as she was hurting me, I didn’t enjoy watching her betray herself. I knew she knew she was making a mistake. She just wasn’t expecting me to be so cavalier about it.

“Me too,” I said and stood up. My legs had no idea how long they’d be grounded.

“Thanks for these --”
“If money weren’t an issue,” she interjected, “would you come back?”

The weight of this question knocked me back in my seat.

“Honestly, based on this conversation, I don’t know,” I said. “I’m not 100% confident in our relationship that we’ll learn to trust each other even if I do. And I feel like that’s a requirement. Right now there seems to be more risk than reward for me to come back. I want to, don’t get me wrong, but it has to be right for me and none of this feels good.”

“Fair enough.”

I stood up again and we locked eyes. Our miserable faces mirrored each other. She walked out from behind her desk and gave me hug. “Thank you,” she said, and squeezed me tight. “Thank you,” I echoed.

I walked out of her office, out of the Athletic Department, out of Taylor Gym, and out onto South Mountain. My head hung on my shoulders like a broken bobble-head, my eyes permanently fixed on the ground. There was no name for this kind of defeat, only surrender. I gave myself up.

Two weeks later I got a text from Coach: “We found the money for you to come back. Let me know if this changes your mind.”

Elie Wiesel was our commencement speaker. The then-81-year-old survivor of the Holocaust, Nobel laureate, peacemaker, writer and author of Night, spoke under a cloudy sky about the damaging ideologies of the 20th century: Nazism, Soviet communism, colonialism, apartheid. He recalled a dark context from which my 2010 class was emerging and urged us to be
torchbearers of hope that would always remember our humanity in the face of war, racism, bigotry, and other discriminatory practices that would continue to evolve in the new millennium.

“When will it end?” he said, hunched over a wooden podium placed center-left on the black stage set in the middle of Goodman Stadium, the wisps of his gray hair catching the wind. I looked up from beneath my brown cap and wondered what ideology I had subscribed to as an athlete, and why I no longer felt proud to be one. In the days I was committed to moving on, I saw myself as a woman who no longer held that identity, as someone who could become anything. Graduating with my class meant that my “real” Lehigh experience was over but returning for a fifth year gave me extra time that simultaneously postponed any new paths I had imagined for myself and prolonged the one I had always been on. The hope of fulfilling my potential as an athlete clashed with the reality of retrofitting myself into an unfavorable environment. This beginning was a false start.

“The opposite of life is not death because the opposite of love is not hate,” Wiesel said. “It is indifference.”

The boom of his voice echoed throughout the outdoor stadium, endless steps we had often run up and down during pre-season workouts every fall. If you want to lead by example, you can’t lead from behind, Coach once told me. And if you want your teammates to listen, you need to be more vocal. The grass hill behind the end zone was a particularly memorable place to prove my leadership on a September afternoon. I pounced on every whistle to out-sprint my teammates to the top, and on the walk down, chirped encouraging words to my left and right. Our gray cut-off tees slowly soaked a darker shade after every rep and return to the bottom, where some players held their arms on their heads while others placed their hands on their hips. I walked throughout the line, high-fiving and let’s go-ing everybody to push just a little bit harder.
one more time, every time. A few days and several strength and conditioning workouts later, Coach told me a few teammates weren’t responding well to my newfound leadership. *Maybe tone it down, just a little bit? Some people are motivated differently than others.*

Wiesel concluded his speech with a story of a man lost in a forest. He had been walking for days, rationing his food and water, wondering when he would run into another soul. Delirious and desperate for directions, he continued to wander with the hope that help was just beyond the next tree, and the next, and the next. Finally, a figure emerged in the foggy distance walking toward him. He ran to the unknown traveler, “Help! Help! How do I get out of here?”

“My dear friend, I don’t know. Like you I’m lost. But one thing I can tell you, don’t go this way, I just came from there,” the traveler said, pointing along the trail.

Wiesel took a long breath, and then another. He looked out at the 1,400 brown gowns filed neatly in rows down the center of the football field. “This is something I can tell you – there are certain ways, certain paths you cannot follow,” he said. “It is not an option because I came from there.”

Later that night in my second-floor studio apartment, I sat alone at a kitchen table whose drop leafs turned an otherwise circular top into a rectangular one perfect for writing. Three large windows hugged the makeshift desk where I opened my laptop, playing Wiesel’s story in my mind, and began to write about the strangeness of a past self-warning a future self not to travel the same path twice.

A few days later, Avery and I were putting shots up in Taylor Gym. We didn’t talk about Brooke, our leading three-point shooter who walked with me at graduation and had since left for home in Georgia. The last thing she did before leaving was break Avery’s heart. We shot in
silence, with one person rebounding for the other. First, two’s around the horn: baseline, wing, free throw line, other wing, other baseline. Then, three’s around the perimeter following the same pattern. Five at each spot. Next round, off the dribble. Round after that, off the dribble and to the rim. We finished with ten foul shots each, and every time I bounced the ball back to her, I erased whatever words had come to mind.

The breakup was inevitable. Avery and Brooke had been hurting each other every day for the past two seasons and the rest of the team had to deal with the emotional shrapnel on the court, in the locker room, in class, on long bus rides, in hotel rooms, at weekend house parties and townie bars. Even when we wanted to get away from each other, only a back alley where we parked our cars separated our respective row homes; Brooke and I were roommates in one while Avery, JA, and Jordyn were roommates in the other. Their arguments traveled back-and-forth between the buildings while the make-up sex happened wherever they decided to sleep at night.

But this wasn’t the first time Brooke broke up with Avery. In fact, the exact same thing happened at the exact same time last year. JA, Jordyn, and I had been pissed and rallied around Avery, providing comfort and solace until she burned all three bridges the minute fall semester started again. Ditching her friendships entirely, she went al-in on manipulating Brooke into one more year of a relationship everyone thought it was a terrible idea after wallowing in a summer of hurt. Brooke, ever the opportunist, wanted sex and the ball, so sleeping with the point guard was an irresistible benefit. The only difference after this second break up was that Brooke was gone for good, and JA, Jordyn, and I were no longer offering our shoulders to cry on. Avery resented us for it, holding her hurt over our heads until we apologized for not being there for her. We never apologized.
On the ride back to our apartments, I turned up the volume in my ’98 VW Jetta to drown out the silence between us. Where was the girl who loved reading *Harry Potter*, playing Rock Band, debating politics, and wheeze-laughing in the loft of the Hawk’s Nest, punch-drunk on stress and no sleep during finals? Why had she replaced those things with gossip and backbiting and power moves with the underclassmen and coaching staff? I turned into the alley sandwiched behind the row homes of Birkel Avenue on the right and Montclair Avenue on the left, and parked in the empty two-car lot. She jumped out and slammed the door.

“Thanks,” she said.

“Ave.”

She kept walking.

“Avery! Wait!” I shouted through my rolled down window. “Can you just wait a minute?”

She stopped and turned around.

“Look, I’m really sorry for what Brooke did to you.”

She took a few steps toward the car and leaned in to rest her hands on the window frame.

“You know what, Kristen? You have no idea. And the last thing that I need right now is advice from someone who’s never even been in a relationship before.”

Six weeks later, we had our annual summer basketball camp for girls in elementary and middle school. It was a chance for our team to help grow the sport in our community, and also to play pick-up, lift, and run together for a full week. The days were long and Rauch Field House was a tough place to play basketball. Six green running lanes circled 200m around three beige rubber courts whose surface was so thin the concrete underneath reciprocated the pounding of
feet with an equal force of its own. Sneakers that would otherwise squeak while stopping, starting, and cutting on the perfect traction of hardwood were now muted and absorbed by an elastic surface riddled with too much friction. It did not grant forgiveness for tendons and ligaments whose long stringy collagen fibers needed flexibility to gradually stretch and lengthen to avoid over-use and fatigue. Without this plasticity while running and jumping, the impact shock of the game could snap the tough bands of connective tissue.

Nearly 200 girls were in attendance, eager to play all day with their friends and maybe learn some basketball skills along the way. We liked to think that when they looked at us, they saw future versions of themselves, eager to know how we became the champions standing before them: hair up in messy buns, pony tails or braids; cut off muscle tees with neon orange, lime green, or highlighter pink sports bras underneath; mesh shorts whose elastic bands were turned inside out and rolled up for a tighter fit, if not a fashion statement to show more skin above the knee; leopard print or wild patterned compression shorts visible underneath near the upper thigh wicked away sweat; and black, white, or gray crew socks pulled up below the calves to keep the Achilles warm. They didn’t need to know I doubted myself most days. When I looked at them, I saw who I used to be.

“K-Dizzle!” a group of younglings I recognized from the day before ran up to me with smiles and high fives. I dribbled the ball around each of them, weaving in and out of the tight-knit tribe before I finally picked it up and hung it on my hip. It was nearing 9 a.m. and Coach was about to blow her whistle to signal the start of the day: team huddle, morning announcements, warm-up laps, and dynamic stretching.

“Look at this crew!” I grinned. “You ready to ball outrageous today?”
“Who’s your bestest friend on the team?” they giggled, replacing my question with a more important one.

“Whoever passes me the ball,” I joked, and watched the delight melt from their faces. “I’m kidding!” But I too, had stopped smiling. Nearby, a growing huddle of children began to form around Avery, whose obnoxious laugh and humble-brag social justice stories about Africa echoed through the masses and pulled in more bodies like a magnet. “People often say I look like Cameron Diaz,” she said when they couldn’t quite place her doppelgänger celebrity. I was repulsed. Not only could I not reconcile her basketball persona with the best friend she once was, I refused to follow her as a leader.

Avery inherited her title after two seasons of proving her effectiveness on the court, and this past year she wielded a power that was at once selfish and generous, intuitive and paranoid, farsighted and superstitious. Untrustworthy, really. Her authority was a privilege she often mistook as entitlement, and now she didn’t have Brooke to protect her. She no longer had our attention, a fine detail that made her tremendously insecure about her reigning command. How would she go about her senior year without the support of her fellow seniors?

“K-Diz!” a camper pulled on my shirt. “You’re not paying attention!”

“What?”

“Do you have a boyfriend?”

Yep!" I lied.

“What’s his name?”

The whistle blew and the dull thud of a small stampede vibrated across the floor to center court. “Time to go!” I shooed them away and thought of what sexiest men alive I could photoshop into my albums. They’d inevitably ask to see pictures by lunch time and I wanted a
good belly laugh. Last year, no one was a fan of me showing a portrait of Wilson under the soft
glow of arena lights, and the year before that, Spalding, frozen mid-spin on a fingertip. “I’m
actually married,” I had clarified then. But they were right – it wasn’t funny.

A few hours later, camp was over and it was time to play some pick-up. We split the
teams evenly, with Avery and I designated as opposing point guards. Playing against her, the
reigning Patriot League Player of the Year, was always an opportunity to show my teammates
how differently the game was played when the ball was in my hands. She didn’t match up well
against me – three inches shorter and 30 pounds lighter – she struggled to see the court and drive
to the basket. Her quickness was met with a strength she couldn’t muscle through, but if she did
beat me off the dribble, I played the angles and either forced her into other defenders or fouled
her hard. There were no easy buckets for her.

The game went back and forth, and though we were all rusty, we were well rested and
determined to show each other what we had been individually working on over these past few
weeks: improved defense, moves off the dribble, finishing at the rim, more crisp passes, deeper
threes. Everyone had her own style that commanded a presence, but it was how we played the
game that revealed whether or not we respected it. Avery dribbled the ball down the floor as I
shuffled side-to-side loosely guarding her and jabbed every now and then for added pressure.
When she got closer to the three-point line, I bodied up to avoid a high ball screen, my forearm
pressing hard against her ribs, forcing her to dribble wide to the left wing rather cutting the
corner to drive down the lane. As soon as I felt content, she crossed over hard and caught me off-
balance, beating me off the dribble and into the lane when she glided in for a floater. The shot
was long. The ball hit the back of the rim and while it was in the air, I recovered my two steps
and ran in for the rebound, our bodies colliding in mid-air, my hip slightly above hers, my arms
slightly more outstretched. She got a hand on the ball, but I pulled it down hard and, in the process, turned my right shoulder and back against her, creating space that further distanced her. The impact knocked her to the ground while I was off and running down the court, beating a defender and driving to the rim for a fast-break lay-up. I looked at Avery and smiled.

“That was a foul, don’t you think?” she said.

“Foul? Get out of here with that. No foul.”

“Whatever, Kristen.”

“I mean, I can show you a foul if you want a foul.”

After passing the ball inbounds to Avery, Jordyn ran between us.

“Ladies, you know I love a little banter.” Even though she was on Avery’s team, she winked at me and continued running down the court. We were getting in her head. Every time she complained, I responded with a bucket of my own. Every time she made a good play, I congratulated her. Every time she frowned and raised her voice, I smiled and laughed with teammates. I let my play speak for itself, determined to let everyone know this wasn’t Avery’s team anymore.

After a few games, we stretched and hydrated. I unlaced my Nikes and took off my socks, letting my feet breathe before putting them in my sandals. I changed my shirt and packed my bag and walked toward the door where Coach was waiting outside.

“You looked great in there,” she said, nodding inside. “Really great.”

“Thanks.”

“Can obviously tell you’ve already put in a lot of work this summer and we’re only in June. I’m excited to see what happens when you come back after another eight weeks.”

“Thanks, me too. I appreciate that.”
“Because there’s one thing I want to tell you,” she said. “You can’t just turn it off and on like that.”

I gulped my water and looked at her hard. This was going to be impossible, I thought.

“I need you to play more consistent next year. You can’t just pick and choose when you want to play hard,” she continued.

What she meant was: I play differently when I’m angry. Something triggers a switch inside me – I’m more vocal, demanding the ball and calling plays, out-hustling the opponent for a loose ball or rebound and putting my body on the line to take a charge. I become more aggressive driving to the basket, creating my own shots, making plays for teammates, or more simply put: dominating the game and decimating the defense. And I don’t think twice about it. It’s as if my instinct is responding to an irritant in the atmosphere and takes over all motor functions.

Anger, however, is not my default disposition. It is the culmination of emotions like displeasure, impatience, and indignation that slow-burn in the back of my mind until the heat rises and releases only when an injustice occurs. Whenever a wrong-doing, however minor, crosses the threshold from petty offense to personal insult, it prompts an immediate redress of grievances. It’s like thunder rumbling, rumbling, rumbling in my clouded mind until lightning strikes it clean for clarity. Anger is a sense-making tool for me, and on the court, it fueled my ability to make statements.

Writing gave me the intelligence of my body, the blood and muscle and bone that did so much of my talking for me on the court. Verbally articulating emotions is not a skill set I developed as athlete, but as a writer, I needed words to make sense of my experience when basketball failed me. The same biting wit I have today, the one that emerges in opinionated
debates with friends and family where a slight of someone’s logic triggers my inexplicable demand for authenticity – sometimes it is a barrage of investigative questioning, other times it is the need to express *myself* more clearly, which is often linked to forceful tones and higher decibels – is the same response I had to antagonism back then. My tongue, when it decides to let loose, is quick to piece together facts and figures that build an entirely new context in which seemingly irrelevant connections become ironclad sense. My ideas are locked in, and I no longer see whom I’m talking to. My words become the jabs, and sometimes, when the syllables hit the ears just right, I even have fun doing it.

Later that night, exhausted from a full day of camp and working out, I published a poem on my blog called, “I Can See Cleveland From My House.” It was a nod to Avery, who was from the city. Perhaps my anger got the better of me. I know it was a vengeful thing to do – posting those words for the public to see – and it caused a lot of harm that permanently damaged a friendship. We would never recover, but I knew I couldn’t return for a fifth year and play the same role. She was not a person I could follow anymore. I had already come from that place, and it was no longer an option.

My anger is too complex now and far away from the surface to write something like that again, let alone share it as a declaration of independence. Distemper pulls from too many parts of me, the parts that have lost their potential to be something or someone during various chapters of my life, the parts that are no longer significant. I’ve since learned to let go of this yearning, but back then, in an environment where women were trained to compete against one another, I used every bit of anger to my advantage.
CHAPTER 6
A SENIOR SPEECH OF SELF ACCEPTANCE

Hello everyone. Thank you for being here.

Last week I presented my creative writing thesis and explained how I was the basketball player who was trying to be a poet. But the more I think about this, I’m starting to believe that I was always the poet who was trying to be a basketball player. I believe in things before I see them, and I enjoy finding connections in the hidden places. And this is so much easier to do with writing than with basketball. So, I attribute all of my turnovers to my wishful thinking and poorly executed imagination. But all of my assists, well, I applaud the risks I’ve taken to reveal that dotted line that draws me to you. And I think life is like that too. You have to be willing to turnover your hopes if you are ever going to give them a chance to succeed. I would like to thank you all for giving me that chance.

To [Athletic Director], the administration, and every hard-working employee in the Lehigh Athletic Department, I thank you for giving me the opportunity to help make the Lehigh Women’s basketball program better every year, for five years. You and your staff have challenged me in a competitive atmosphere while still providing the safety net of a strong support system for any of my questions or needs.

To the Lehigh Sports Media and Information Department, thank you for giving me a creative place in a professional setting. I have learned an incredible amount about video production, editing, interviewing, and feature writing; all the things I was hungry to explore while studying journalism. Thank you for the endless hours you’ve given just to cover a game in the middle-of-nowhere New York, and the immediate post-game write-ups and interviews that always make our parents happy to see whenever they can’t personally be there. You are an
extension of the game, and a very important one at that. And special thank you [multimedia coordinator] for making me feel like a superstar during my 60 seconds of fame.

To [Assistant Athletic Director for Sales and Marketing] and [Community Relations Coordinator] for your undying commitment to get our fans in Stabler Arena, and to give us the opportunity to personally meet a lot of them in the community. To [Executive Director of Student Auxiliary Services] for providing us with the never-ending food platters and family dinners.

To [Head Trainer] and the rest of the Sports Medicine staff, I thank you for keeping me together with tape, ultrasounds, back braces, and a whole lot of ibuprofen and antibiotics. My body has never felt so old, achy, beat up, and wanting to quit. I am so glad you never let me quit, and always threw me back out on to the court whether I was ready or not. It taught me a great deal about fighting whenever I would have much rather taken flight. To be injured and wounded, and yet still be demanded of my very best, was both frustrating and as difficult of a thing I have ever experienced, but stand up here and say that I did it for one more year beyond the standard four, is a testament to the time, effort, and dedication that [Head Trainer] has given to our program and to all of Lehigh’s athletes. And of course, the rings are friendly reminders that make it all worth it.

To the coaching staff, I thank you for your commitment to making Lehigh a program to be reckoned with, and to be recognized. [Director of Basketball Operations], you have always been a hard worker and a great encourager, and there is no doubt that the transition into coaching was seamless as natural for you. Thanks for sticking around long enough to not make me fell all that old. To [Assistant Coach], we’ve only spent a year together, but it was a pleasure to get to know you. You are a genuine individual who has the uncanny ability to relate to people on all
levels, something that will make you a great counselor someday. I hope you know your presence
in this program has been felt by all of us. To [Assistant Coach], thank you so much for being an
honest and direct human being, and thank you for always fighting to be heard. Your personality
is refreshing and comforting, and for me personally, I have responded very well to your style of
coaching. Your love for the game is contagious and your passion for fun has been a constant
reminder for all of us that it’s okay to belly dance at individual workouts. No offense to the
guard, but post players, you sure know how to bring it on all levels. You will be a great head
coach one day, and I know that the impact you have had on this program will speak volumes for
you when the time is right for you to take that next step in your career.

To [Associate Head Coach], if I knew how to give a speech in defensive hand signals and
foot stomps, I would have done just that. But for the sake of time and sanity, I’ll just keep it
simple: thank you. Your knowledge of the game is so incredible that you make the X’s and O’s
look like a foreign language to us Lehigh students. You that brilliant. You have been an integral
part of our program’s success and I thank you for your tireless commitment to making each one
of us better every day. And let’s not forget thank your connection to the basketball gods has been
a great means of imparting wisdom upon us.

To Coach: let me know you a little something about Coach. She loves time – so much so,
that she has figured out a way to organize, schedule, pencil in and cross out meetings, and run
practices and workouts so that every single minute is maximized to its fullest potential. I have
never met a woman who trusts time to do such a thing, because you see I’m the kind of person
who doesn’t like to measure it. I don’t like getting into the finer details of the ticks and tocks
because I’ve always preferred getting lost in the rhythm it produces: the ebbs and flows of
laughter and crying, of winning and losing, of listening and speaking, of hellos and goodbyes.
But Coach loves the “How are you doings?” so I thought today would be a good time to answer this question once and for all.

Coach, I am doing good. And what I mean by that is not that I’m feeling pretty content, pretty okay with everything. What I mean is that I am doing good. I am active I am living my life and representing this program and everyone a part of it, with the mindfulness of spreading goodness. I have seen my fair share of ups and downs, of victories and heartbreak, of wellness and injury, and of connection and the lack thereof. I take great pride in being able to say that through it all, I have done good here. I played the game the right way: hard, unselfish, confident, and with a smile. In the process of trying to prove myself to you, I ended up discovering that I was more than enough for me. And so, I thank you. I thank you for pushing me to my limits, both personally and athletically, and for having the patience in letting me grow.

This is perhaps what I am most grateful for: you have given me the opportunity to become my own woman. You have given me the freedom to speak my mind and the strength to persevere through those consequences. You knew me well enough to give me the space that I needed, and you understood the moments when I needed to be brought back with reassurance. You handled me delicately enough to know which buttons to press without breaking me. I am glad that I was never broken. And I am glad that I was able to show you a strength that couldn’t be measured by any personality test. After my freshman year, you sat down with me and said to me something I will never forget. You told me, “You can’t lead from behind.” And though this has had many meanings for me over these years, I think I settled on one pretty great. Coach, I want you to know that there is nothing neither shameful nor weak about being the barge that pushing everyone along.
I’m glad you asked me to come back for a fifth year. You have had a tremendous influence on my growing up process, and that isn’t easy. I know this. I also know that you were always there for me, for all of us, and that is something that I will be forever grateful for.

To my teammates, I have been blessed with the best. We were given each other, to spend the time of this year together, and I have to tell you, it was one of the very best years for me. It amazes me, the stories we will walk away with. We are lucky, to be doing this thing we do, to play a sport that has become so much more than a game for each of us. It has become our lives and we chose this path, but we did not choose the people, and perhaps this is the best part.

My freshmen: you have all kept me young and vibrant and soulful. I am certain that I would not have made it through this year if it were not for the buzzing energy and the eagerness you all illustrated in your desire to learn and contribute. Believe it or not, it was contagious despite a four-year age gap. You are innocent and honest, and your direct personalities have been a joy to get to know. Being around the four of you every day brought a smile to my face, and though that seems like too simple a thing, I assure you, it was the very best thing.

My sophomores: the four of you are wise beyond your years. Believe it! You have challenged me intellectually as much as you have athletically. You are some of the hardest-working people I have ever been privileged to compete with. Your grit and determination to be better every single day, in every single way, is inspiring. And the greatest thing about it is. That you do it for yourself. You work hard because you find personal fulfillment and purpose in the things that you do, and because it makes you happy. You have been role models for me, setting the example in unselfishness. I am excited to see each of you have your moment in the sun.

My juniors: you ladies know how to have fun, and you know how to compete. Each of you have incredibly strong personalities whose presence could be felt every day. This is exactly
what is going to make your absence so much more heartfelt. I will miss you. I will miss your beautiful voices singing, giggling, and telling stories. I will miss the knee-high socks, and the hot pink and leopard printed spandex And I will miss stepping foot on the court with you, knowing that I have played with and competed with the best, whose will to win always deemed losing impossible. The program is in great hands. Believe in yourselves and know that each of you are more than ready to take ownership and responsibility for whatever next year shall bring. And never lose the sense of fun that you have instilled in me.

My seniors! It has been a joy and a pleasure to watch each of you grow over these years. I have seen you since Day One, and I am so happy to see you through until the end. It has been quite a journey, to say the least. Avery, what else could I possibly say that hasn’t already been said before? I congratulate you on a phenomenal basketball career at Lehigh and wish you the best of luck in your pursuit to play overseas. JA and Jordyn, we’ve had some wicked tight quarters to operate in, but pressure is necessary to produce some diamond. I am impressed by your resiliency and fortitude, and there is no one I would have rather had in my corner than you two.

JA: you have one of the sharpest minds I know. You are witty and intelligent and by far one of the funniest people to ever walk this planet. Never underestimate the greatness of this. It has the power to heal. I know this to be true. You are an incredible storyteller, and you know how much I love this. You are far more creative than you ever give yourself credit for. I am so proud of you. You have brought an abundance of joy to my life, and I am so blessed. That you and I share many pages of the Lehigh story together.

Jordyn: you are a breath of fresh air. Your advice and strong will have given me the courage to keep on keeping on. You have given me a safe space to break down and be
vulnerable, only to find serenity in the process of letting go of other people’s expectations. Your instincts have always been spot on, and you have the unique ability of revealing to people truths within themselves. I do not know many people who can do this, only some of the greatest teachers I have ever had. You are among them. I am so excited to see you cultivate minds in the Classroom, the way you have revived the light in all of us.

To my parents, I have been blessed by the Man Upstairs with a set of parents who make it so enjoyable to be their daughter. I am so grateful to be loved, to know that I am loved. The sacrifices you have made for your children, giving up your own dreams so that Jimmy and I could pursue ours, is a gift I am forever indebted. I can only hope to honor you by. Doing good in the world with the opportunities that you have always believed were designed especially for me. You have given me purpose and direction, value and worth. You love has liberated me to life.

Mom: oyi oyi. You are my soul sister. There is no question about that. No one knows me better than you do. Your unconditional love has been the only thing that has kept me steady over these years while your love has been the only thing that has kept me steady over these years, while your laughter has been the greatest sound my heart has ever heard. It always, somehow, manages to sync with mine, reminding me how great it is to have you in my life, as my mother – the glowing light that makes me believe in impossible things, and the courage to go out and do them. You are the greatest woman. I know. A pioneer, a trendsetter, a force, and a role model for a girl who thinks the world of you; admiring how you have persevered through hardships, stood up for the values you believed in, and used your creativity to conquer adversity. But above all, I admire the way you love. It is the only sustaining thing in this world, and I am so lucky to know the infinite strength of this.
Dad: I cannot tell you how important it is for a daughter to know they are loved by their father. I remember one moment very distinctly: after the American game down in D.C., a game we had won but I didn’t feel I had done much to contribute. I didn’t have points and maybe had a tally or two in some of the other columns, but on the whole, the box score didn’t show any indication that I was a factor. Dad, I remember walking up to you after the game, and the first thing you said to me as you gave me a hug was that I looked beautiful. And when you get to playing basketball this long, wearing sweats all the time and such, you really don’t ever feel all that beautiful any of the time. And when you have an empty box score, it certainly doesn’t help.

So I thank you for never loving me by such superficial standards, and for always loving me as your daughter, and for letting me know that my value is not in the things that I do, but in the presence I have. You are that presence for me in my life – the rock, the leader, the quiet confidence that never forgets what it can do. You inspire me to do good.

Mom and Dad, you have always been my number one fans, and I hope you know that I still think you’re invincible. I love you so much.

As I reflect upon my years at Lehigh, I have never felt more exhausted and fatigued as I did when the season ended: emotionally, physically, mentally. It took me a long time to realize that it wasn’t believe I had been used and abused, as this can so often feel like; but because I had given everything I had in me. And so, I walk away from this experience content and satisfied, knowing that I have turned over every stone and found more than I could have ever imagined finding: great people doing great things. I am so happy to have been a part of it.

Thank you.
I was overdressed for the Coopersburg Diner. My skinny black slacks with the zipper pockets highlighted the lean quads and calves of my tall legs, which had lost inches since I signed up for the Transformation Challenge five weeks earlier at Orange Theory Fitness. I dug my leather-gloved fists into the pockets of my long black pea coat, belted and double-breasted, and breathed in the cold wet Pennsylvania air. The oversized crystal stone clusters of my power earrings caught what little light escaped the clouds and glimmered above my jawline, above my neck, which was wrapped in a soft white scarf. My black booties clicked on the pavement as we walked across the parking lot; the sound a tick of disturbance against our silence, and in the background, the whirring of cars on the highway.

“I’m sorry I’m underdressed for breakfast,” Coach said, looking me up and down. She was fresh from a 7:30 a.m. barre class. Sneakers, leggings, tee shirt, pullover. She wore her brown hair in a ponytail and her bangs perfected the athletic Mom-look.

“Oh, no worries. I’m meeting up with some friends in Philly after this,” I said, putting a finite time stamp on our Sunday morning catch-up. It had been eight years since I graduated from Lehigh University, a Division I brand I wore ad nauseam as a student-athlete between the ages of 18 and 23. Our distinctive brown and white colors were a palette of tradition and excellence, the way an old library or a decades-old glass of scotch reeks of refinement.

“Unselfish” was our motto and it was written on the whiteboards in our locker room and film room, in the header of our scouting reports, and across the backs of our workout gear and warm-up jerseys. It was a word that implied nobility and demanded sacrifice, but ultimately it erased our last names. “Unselfish” was an idiom that meant we could not bring our full selves to the team. The prefix *un* not only denoted a removal from *self*, but also modified the base word in the
negative, while the suffix ish described a sense of belonging or having qualities of. Self, therefore, was bound by magnetic opposites: unself and selfish. To put another way, self was suspended between the destruction of self (−) and the becoming of self (+). This impossible problem was convenient. It could only be solved by teammates and coaches who could help determine your state of being at any given point in time. Un-self-ish was not a rallying cry. It was derivative, and we had become the insignia. Our individuality was subordinate and existed only in relation to the group, which was re-affirmed in every huddle when we shouted the word on the count of three – a call and response to upholding this myth.

Coach and I found a booth in the back of the diner and ordered some coffee and omelets. The night before we had celebrated our 10-year anniversary of winning the 2009 Patriot League Championship, a ring that highlighted a 26-7 season, which included a 17-0 record on our home court and a dance with Auburn in the first round of the NCAA Tournament. Only five of my 15 teammates from that year showed up, an obvious sign of estrangement that diminished any meaningful connection we might have had amongst ourselves, or with Coach, and instead pointed out the obvious: championships weren’t memorable, and perhaps neither was the totality of this experience if nobody wanted to look back on their lives as athletes. Sure, it was nice to be recognized for the success we achieved, but I felt zero nostalgia to return to that life. In fact, I had spent the decade getting as far away from Lehigh as I could in hopes of becoming anything other than the basketball player I was. A journalist in New Jersey. A government consultant in Maryland. A grad student abroad in Finland and Estonia. An innovation strategist in Washington, D.C. A solo traveler in Ireland. A barista. An improv enthusiast. I returned to Lehigh as a writer with one nagging question: how did the conditions of the female athlete experience impact the way I saw myself as a woman?
“You look great, Kristen. Are you back at your playing weight?”

I looked at Coach and laughed. She was nervous, and I was disappointed that she still had not evolved beyond the game. “Umm, yes, actually,” I hesitated. Then I remembered our weekly weigh-ins we had during the season and realized weight was something I had no shame in talking about while I was an athlete. “I’m 170, so yeah.” The number had stayed with me. The shame came after, when I stopped playing and the weight was no longer needed to bench press, squat, dead lift, sprint short and long distances, jump, slide, pivot, box out, absorb and endure physical contact, and accelerate upon impact. Even then, the dense muscle was unnecessary – packed on at the demand of ex-football players turned strength and conditioning coaches – and now my body refused to shed, preferring instead to turn it into fat. It felt heavy, and in the years I couldn't decide what my body should be next, it became an out-of-shape woman I decorated in high heels and comfy dresses, fancy pants and nice blouses.

“And how’s your back?” Her face scrunched up with a pain she presumed I still had from my injury: two bulging discs that sidelined me my sophomore year.

“It’s fine.”

“No issues?”

“I mean, I’ll always have issues. But I manage it, and right now I feel pretty good. Been taking better care of myself, trying to lose some weight. That always helps.”

“Good.”

Coach was a woman who wanted everything to be good. She was risk-averse and preferred not to deviate too far from center court, a place she could control with precision planning, scheduling, and statistical analysis. Her MBA served her well in the strategy and organization parts of her job, but she was inaccessible as a go-to mentor, trusted advisor, and
emotional champion. She coached with an indifference, and as a player I never knew where I stood with her, unless I threw a “for shit” pass, which happened often enough. These small experiments in court vision were minute creative failures that always pushed the envelope in how we played the game – backdoor passes, no-look passes, full-court baseball passes, one-arm bounce passes, skip passes, wrap-around passes, off-the-backboard passes, jump passes, chest passes, fake passes, hand-offs, and my favorite, the ali-oop pass. They were easy things to get over and recover from, but man, if we executed the unexpected, it gave us life. “For shit” passes were the only thing Coach would ever raise her voice for, and I always found myself on the brink of laughter whenever she’d blow her whistle, stride over to where I was standing, and yell, “What were you thinking?!” I could never explain it, my imagination.

It was the mistakes that solidified my place, and for most of my junior and senior year, that meant coming off the bench at the 15-minute mark, playing for five minutes, subbing out, and going back in for another four minutes at the 7-minute mark. Repeat in the second half. I had finite time to play with, regardless of how well I was playing or what position I was: the point guard, shooting guard, or small forward. It didn’t matter that I would hit back-to-back jumpers in the championship game to extend our lead to eight in the second half, and when they came back within one, hit another jumper to put us up three with less than four minutes remaining. It didn’t matter. I only had 17 minutes to play, only 42.5% of the game to make magic happen. No matter the contribution, I would be on the bench when the final buzzer went off.

Coach’s inability to read the game in real time – identifying what players were making plays, getting a hot hand, or making defensive stops – further distanced herself from me, a player who reveled on deviating from the plan if it meant we could tap into a collective creative flow that always felt near sublime. Instead, I became hyper aware of time, anxious to make the most
of what little I had, and was expected to be grateful even for that. This is how Coach controlled
the narrative. To the external world of athletic directors and administrators, she was excellent at
time management and deft at building a team that bought into a system where individuals left
their egos at the door and accepted their role for the good of the group. To the internal world of
her players, she was teaching us how to receive criticism and overcome adversity. We had to
prove ourselves every single day.

“So tell me what you’re up to now. Are you still consulting or are you in school again?
You went back for business, right, or did you graduate? I can’t tell from Instagram,” she said. I
picked up where she remembered last – as program manager for Booz Allen Hamilton’s
innovation center in Washington, D.C. It was my job to manage the 30+ teams selected to work
in the firm’s internal incubator every year, a space designed to share resources, personnel,
technology, and information. “The magic is in the mash-up,” our director used to say. He was an
advocate for experimentation. That is, he always asked how we could create a culture conducive
for learning – what combination of inputs would give us better outputs, in this case, products and
services for our clients? Part of my responsibility was to study the behavior of the project teams,
conduct quantitative and qualitative research on their needs, and build an environment that gave
them opportunities to share who they were, what they were working on, and how they might
support another individual or team. I believed that innovation was a team sport, and my job was
to set the stage for performance. Sitting across from Coach, in all her sameness, reminded me
how different we were. Where she relied on a binary power structure of competition (i.e.,
Lehigh: 1 Kristen: 0), I favored a creative system that never operated at a loss; one that only
multiplied its goodness.
“Wow, that seems like an incredible experience. I bet all those skills of working collaboratively, managing time, dealing with different kinds of people make it a pretty fun place to work,” she said.

“Umm…”

“No?”

“Well, it was. It was a dream job, actually. But I quit two years ago to become a part-time barista and a full-time student again.”

She looked at me blankly, but it didn’t stop her from sipping her coffee. Two creams, no sugar. Slowly, she placed the ceramic mug back on her napkin as her eyes searched mine for understanding.

“That must’ve been a lot of money to leave on the table,” she finally said. It wasn’t the first time I had left money on the table. I had walked away from Coach and her 70% scholarship offer to come back for a fifth year. It wasn’t a full ride like the previous four years had been, so I turned it down.

“It’s –”

“Never about the money, I know. It’s about following –.”

“I burned out.”

We both took bites of our omelets – hers, the egg-white garden and mine, the western omelet, yolk and all – and sipped more coffee. The sound of cheap utensils against heavy plates with oversized portions filled the space between us.

“What was the corporate culture like?”

“It was a lot like Lehigh,” I said with a smile.
She paused at this and broke eye contact. I let her have a brief moment of self-reflection while I took another bite, this time of the whole wheat toast with strawberry jam. Like at Lehigh, I had made the team(s) better. Like at Lehigh, I was hamstrung.

“I knew I was never going to realize my potential there,” I said.