

On Monsters and Superheroes
And Stuff that Makes my Stomach Hurt

A collection of essays about being a girl

Carly Ginsberg
Senior Thesis in Creative Writing
December 17th, 2014
Fiction & Personal Narrative
Professor Timea Szell

I am thirteen, and I'm lonely. I just asked my Bat Mitzvah tutor if she ever questions her faith in God. She closes her eyes and lets out a sigh as she mutters her standard response of "Oh, Carly." I've never asked this specific question before, at least not this bluntly. I dip a carrot into my Tupperware of ranch dressing and begin to memorize a new prayer, softly singing in Hebrew as I chomp down. Pure elegance.

Sharon stares at me, entranced by my utter lack of grace. Suddenly, she breaks from her trance and places her wrinkly, recently moisturized hand on my shoulder.

"Carly, why do you want to have a Bat Mitzvah if you don't believe in God?" she asks, in her wiser-than-thou, I-secretly-know-the-answer-to-my-own-question voice.

I sit cross-legged at my large wooden dining room table and scratch my frizzy mane of Jewish hair. Dirt crusts beneath my chipped fingernail polish. I am thirteen, and I'm lonely. I don't like hanging out with girls my own age. I like talking to grown-ups, like Sharon. Sometimes it makes me feel like there's something wrong with me. *All the other girls have friends, I think.*

How do I answer Sharon? I'm not asking her these questions to get out of having a Bat Mitzvah. I don't know this now, but I'm having a Bat Mitzvah so I can learn the answers to these questions. I look up from my page of prayers.

"Because my Bat Mitzvah isn't about God. It's about me," I say. I grab a carrot and return to my Torah portion.

I won't learn until much later how important this fact is to me.

**

My loneliness leads to a diagnosis. My diagnosis leads to a label. My label: panic disorder. Chemically speaking, this means that I have low levels of the neurotransmitter, GABA, in my brain, and my amygdala doesn't always process fear in the most effective way. Physically speaking, this means I feel a towel wringing itself out in my stomach and an eerie silence in my chest, where my heart's supposed to be.

The doctor says: take Xanax as needed, for the anxiety; don't eat dairy, fried or spicy food, for the stomach. Whole wheat toast with butter for breakfast, brown rice and grilled chicken for lunch and dinner. If you have veggies, they must always be cooked. Nothing raw, you can't stomach it. Stick to a routine. Carry Zantac on you at all times. Maybe later, we can try birth control for the moodiness, to regulate you a bit more. Try not to be so sensitive. Develop thick skin. Let's try an anti-depressant. Maybe some probiotics. Have you every thought about meditation? You just need to regulate your breathing.

The heart stuff, *try not to worry about that*, they say.

**

I am twenty, and I'm lonely.

My boyfriend, Drew, and I, are packing our bags for a spring break trip to Costa Rica with his family. We are in his apartment, but it's really *ours*. I have a dorm room, but I haven't put sheets on the bed. I live here, with him, because I feel like I can't live without him.

Drew's phone buzzes. Every time Drew's phone buzzes, a tiny ulcer forms in my stomach. He's been texting this girl from his class, Mariah, a lot lately. I think he's

cheating on me. He makes me feel like I'm crazy when I ask any questions about it, but my intuitions about these kinds of things are usually spot-on. I can sense when things are off—it must be because I'm so sensitive, right?

I'm living in a deep state of anxiety that no amount of Xanax can tame. It's just me and my fear, all the time—while I'm on stage at rehearsal, while I'm in class, while I'm giving tours of Barnard to prospective students. I can't escape it. I'm trapped by my fear.

He quickly grabs his phone from the table. I'm hoping he'll calmly assure me that it's his mom checking in on the status of our packing, my ulcer will rapidly heal, and I'll continue folding my clothes. He types something quickly and slips his phone into his back pocket. Not a good sign.

“Drew?” I quietly ask, feeling the towel begin to wring in my stomach.

Before I can say anything else, he sighs and interrupts: “It was Mariah, okay? I told her I couldn't talk. Don't worry.”

I pause, not sure what to say. This is a fight we've had too many times, that usually ends with me crying in the bathroom, throwing up out of anxiety, then calling my mom. The medicine and brown rice don't seem to work for this stuff.

I think of something new to say this time.

“She doesn't have much respect for me, does she?” I ask.

Why do I say this? No, duh, she doesn't have much respect for me.

Drew walks over to me, and grabs my hands.

“Why do you care? I respect you, Ms. Ginsberg,” he says jokingly as he starts to tickle me. I want to throw up.

We fall into a pile of clothes on the floor that haven't yet made their way into my suitcase. We kiss.

"I love you," he whispers.

I nod. This isn't a situation that can be brushed off with a kiss and an "I love you," but I'm out of energy. I don't want to go to Costa Rica with him and Mariah buzzing in his pocket.

"I love you, too." I whisper back.

My stomach would argue otherwise.

His phone buzzes again.

Women who don't respect other women baffle me. Mariah was at my birthday party. Mariah told me she liked my boots. Mariah ate my baked butternut squash at a student theatre potluck. Mariah fucked my boyfriend.

I don't find that last part out until I get on the plane to Costa Rica.

**

My panic attacks aren't always triggered by a specific event. Sometimes, they just hit me out of the blue, while I'm walking to class, or while I'm actually in class, or when I'm dancing at a party.

When I was young I would call my panic attacks "monsters." I would run into my mom's room and yell, "the monsters are here!" and beg her to take me to the emergency room because I thought my heart was broken.

Apparently I don't describe the chest pain I feel from my panic attacks in the 'typical' way—most of my mom's clients and doctor's patients tell them their hearts beat

too fast when they're anxious; they fear that they're too revved up and intense. I feel the opposite. In fact, I feel comforted when my heart beats rapidly.

I feel like my heart stops beating when I panic. I'm convinced that I can't feel my heart beat. It should be easy to convince someone that they're alive—if they're breathing and talking right in front of you, you should just be able to say, "Look! You're alive!"

But I was convinced that this is what happens when you die: your heart slowly starts to break down until it stops beating altogether. My poor mother had to convince me that I was alive.

She would sit cross-legged on the floor with me with both of her hands on my heart, repeating, "It's beating, sweetie. I promise," over, and over, and over again as I cried. She would make me slip a Xanax under my tongue—they work faster that way, but taste like metal—and wait for me to get sleepy. Then we would lie in her bed with the dogs and watch *Criminal Minds* until she fell asleep, and Bella, my canine confidante, would follow me to my room and sleep at the end of my bed. These were my wonder women, my female superheroes in every mammalian form.

I spent my whole life thinking that my heart was broken. I used that phrase. I told doctors, "my heart is broken," over and over again. They'd laugh.

"Oh, sweetie," they'd say, "you're much too young for that."

I never understood what they meant.

**

I was on an airplane when my heart broke in that way—the way the doctors warned me it would.

It wasn't until I was in the air, floating high above the actual events that took place, that I began to feel my heart start to crack open like an egg. I sat in my window seat, pushing the shade up and down, up and down, up and down, until I finally turned towards Drew.

He looked different now, and for a second I thought he was someone else. He was, in a way.

I rubbed my eyes to make room for the next round of tears before I nudged him to take his headphones out. I needed to tell him again. He seemed too relaxed, leaning back in his airplane seat in his Yale sweatshirt, listening to the mix I made him for Valentine's Day. He was the hurter, not me. He deserved the pain, not me.

"Drew," I whispered, "You broke me. I'm broken."

"I know, I don't know, um, I'm sorry," he frustratingly whispered back, as he turned towards me. He looked at me with his deceptively caring dark eyes and reached out his hand. Before it could reach my thigh, I turned back to face the window.

I'm sorry. That's all he ever said. Was he sorry that he broke me, or just sorry that I was broken?

Either way, saying goodbye to him was the most difficult part of the whole process for me. When it came to saying goodbye, I forgot about all the terrible things he did to me. I had been conditioned to fall into routines—that was part of my prescription. It was a way for me to avoid panic. I had a routine with Drew. I didn't want to break it.

I didn't understand how I could go from waking up to the same person's face every

morning, to blocking them on Facebook and Instagram and deleting their phone number. I didn't understand how I could go from always having a companion for every meal, to sitting in the dining hall alone with my plain toast and sliced apples. I didn't understand how I could go from having a best friend with whom I could share all of my deepest, strangest secrets, to keeping all of it to myself, all mashed up in my brain.

I forgot about the women. I forgot that I wouldn't be alone. I forgot about my mom, and grandma, and Susan and Anabel. I forgot about the medicine. I forgot about Judaism. I forgot about everything my late Aunt Sylvia taught me—in the midst of her seven year battle with cancer, she would still call and remind me that I was her “technicolor girl,” that every color lived inside of me, that like Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*, I've had the power along.

I looked down at my feet, but all I saw were my worn out Birkenstocks. No ruby slippers.

In this moment on the plane, I forgot everything. I needed some sort of warning, some sort of protective shield.

There's a reason you put on your oxygen mask on an airplane before you put on a loved one's, my therapist, Susan, always reminds me. You can't take care of anyone else until you take care of yourself.

I looked up, tempted to pop out my oxygen mask from the airplane ceiling and use it as a makeshift shield against Drew.

I couldn't figure out how the button worked.

So, I plastered my face against the glass window for the next two hours until we hit the ground. I was halfway between heaven and earth, in complete limbo.

Goodbyes don't exist here, I told myself. I'll wait until we hit the ground to face this.

**

“When people come over to our house, why don't they stay forever?” I asked my mom as she strapped my snotty, sleepy, five-year-old self into my booster seat in the back of her car.

I think this was the moment when my mom realized that I would be a deeply difficult child to raise. It was also around this time that I decided, in a dictatorial, melodramatic manner, to wear tights to school every day. I decided that tights were simply part of my person—that without tights, I wasn't really me.

It wasn't just that I required my mother to slip my legs into tights every morning while I anxiously sat on my Princess bed, in a beautifully sunny Los Angeles in which tights were rarely a necessity, but I also accompanied each of these dressing sessions with a tantrum. The line on the foot of the tights had to run in a straight, seamless line across my toes, or I would cry. So, I cried every morning while my Eggo waffles burnt in the toaster oven.

Meanwhile, my two-year-old brother, Brian, would awake to my kicking and screaming and immediately yell from his crib, “Cocky, I waked up!”

Brian couldn't pronounce “Carly,” so, naturally, the next best thing he could come up with was “Cocky.” Brian called me Cocky until he finally learned his “r's” in speech therapy three years later, and made the shift purely out of his pride in himself for overcoming his speech impediment. He, and the rest of my family, would have gladly

continued calling me Cockey.

Brian would sit in his car seat during after-school pickup with his fingers crossed, whispering, “please let Cockey be in a good mood, please let Cockey be in a good mood” to himself. My mom would laugh at her chubby son’s strangely mature understanding of his moody sister, while she secretly hoped for the same thing.

They could usually get a quick scan of my mood before I even entered the car, based on my face and the way I walked. I would either energetically run towards my teacher with a beaming smile, shake her hand and wish her a “marvelous evening” as she opened the door to the backseat, or I would slowly stomp, itching at my tights, and put on a pretend smile for my teacher and aggressively stick out my hand for the required private school handshake.

I wish I could enter my five-year-old brain and understand what drove these drastic mood shifts. What it all comes down to at the end of the day, though, is that I’m far too sensitive for my own good, as the doctors liked to point out. I walk through the world without any bubble wrap, without any Band-Aids. My fragile goods and open wounds don’t have the protection they need to handle the world around them—to handle the shaking, the cuts and bruises, the unpredictable damage.

I tried to use tights as a layer of protection, but in the end, they just gave me a rash.

**

My friends tell me I should write about my breakup with Drew—write about the *feelings* behind the betrayal of being cheated on. What did it *feel* like to find out that the person I loved with all my heart was in love with someone else? What did it *feel* like to see his phone buzz with the words "I love you. Have you told her yet?"

Well, at first, I felt relief. I felt relief for all of the times I drove myself crazy. I felt relief for all the times I beat myself up for thinking that he would ever hurt me.

"You're insane," he'd say. "I only want you."

The relief lasted for about thirty seconds. It sort of felt like pride, too. *I was right! Yes! Very, very short-lived pride.*

Then, it felt like my body tumbled down a flight of stairs, and no one was there to help me up. I just tumbled down by myself, alone, beaten up, bruised, throbbing, crying.

And it wasn't even that no one was there to help me up, but that no one could. They could try, but my body was so weighed down by the pain that no one could physically lift me.

And then there were the thoughts. *The thoughts.* Are the thoughts different from the feelings? Do the thoughts spark the feelings, or do the feelings spark the thoughts?

The thoughts: I should be madder at him than I am at her. I'm not her responsibility. I'm his responsibility. But she's a woman. Why would she do this to another woman? Why would she go out of her way to do this? Could she really not fall in love with anyone else? It had to be him? But I'm still madder at him. He lied to me, over and over and over again. He told me nothing was going on. He told me he loved me, over and over and over again. He told me they were just friends. He told me. He told me. He told me.

What am I supposed to do now? How do I go to sleep alone?

Why does my body hurt so much?

**

I spent a lot of my young life thinking I was alone—in the way I saw the world, in the way I thought, in the way I felt. I dealt with my loneliness by sharing intimate details about myself with strangers. I was often hushed by relatives for over-sharing or nudged by friends at parties for being embarrassing.

“Hey, why does it feel so good to sit on the arm of the couch like this?” I would ask my mom, as I straddled our living room sofa in nothing but my Princess Belle nightgown. I guess you’re never too young to start exploring.

I constantly felt the need to discuss all of the stuff that was happening inside of my body with anyone who’d indulge me. I refused to use the term “private parts,” and would instead initiate very casual chats with my mother about my vagina. I knew that none of my second grade pals were doing this, but it never bothered me.

I wish I could say I was driven by some ideological force—after all, the two parts of myself that I feel give me so much of my identity: my womanhood and my Judaism, also happen to be two of the most silenced groups in history. But no, I was driven purely by a fundamental, unadulterated need to talk about myself. That’s why getting my period was the best day of my life.

I got my period when I was twelve years old, the day before the Bar Mitzvah of a boy I had a huge, lusting crush on. It felt like a sign from Mother Jewess. She was saying,

“go ahead, Carly, be free! You’re a lady now!” And I obeyed her wishes. I went to that Bar Mitzvah and danced the night away, and would get unbelievably excited when I needed to pee, because that meant I got to go back to my table and grab my hot pink, sparkly clutch purse from Clare’s under my dress so no one would ask me why I needed it for the bathroom, even though I secretly wanted everyone to do just that.

I also got my period before any of my friends. It was spectacular. I had done my research about this day to the tee—I knew why I was bleeding, both anatomically and symbolically. My friends immediately called me with questions. Was I craving salty foods? Was I bloated? Was I iron deficient? I had all the answers.

The night of the event, I sat on the marble floor of my mother’s bathroom crying tears of joy over our portable phone, while she wept about my loss of innocence as she handed me a maxi-pad. We fought for a while about this. I wanted to use a tampon, she told me I wasn’t ready, I told her that the Torah says I’m a woman now and I can do whatever I want, she told me that’s not what it says, and the cycle went on and on until she eventually left me alone in her bathroom with a box of tampons, completely defeated. I spent roughly three hours with this box of cotton vagina lining until I too ultimately gave up.

And that experience is a rough representation of my teenage years: passionately fighting with my mom about things I secretly know she’s right about the whole time, and only accepting defeat once she leaves the room.

**

In the midst of this isolating cycle of defeat, I developed panic disorder. This was when it started. My anxiety began to rip my personality to shreds. I began to feel small, which I later learned was just loneliness in a costume. This was the grown-up version of what I felt as a child—I still felt alone in the way I saw the world, in the way I thought, in the way I felt. But I didn't deal with it like I used to.

And I wasn't nice to myself about it. The moment I learned that I could judge myself—that I was allowed to decide if I liked myself or not—I became petrified of myself.

I found a creative way to deal with my fear though—a way to get outside of myself, to forget about *Carly* for a little while. Since I was inherently dramatic, it didn't take my parents long to realize that I should probably start doing theatre. I had already written a full length musical to be performed at our Passover seder, so enrolling me in an actual theatre program seemed like the logical next step.

I had no stage fright whatsoever. When I walked on stage, I was no longer Carly, and that comforted me immensely. Even when we were just playing games, I still associated the stage as a space where I could be completely outside of myself.

What I lacked, however, was grace. This was a problem when it came to the dancing part of musicals. I was constantly cast as the comedic relief, the quirky characters who jumped around the stage awkwardly and occasionally delivered a witty monologue that did nothing to advance the plot. Especially in children's productions, it meant I was cast as the "grandma" a lot. One of the first musicals I did was *Bye Bye Birdie*. My tiny twelve year old body was placed into an enormous faux fur coat, my hair was braided and covered with a grey wig, and night after night, I would clunk my way on

stage and scream, “Albert, what are ya doin’ with your life? Come here, give your mama some kisses.”

My voice teacher found me at one of these performances. She scouted me out after the show, asking around for the “little girl with the big voice, the one who played the nana.”

Her name was Rebecca Somberg, and she taught me how to make it in the big bad world of community theatre. She provided me with a wide repertoire of songs for auditions, most of which involved me complaining about men not liking me or how I always received secondhand things from my older sisters. Rebecca made sure that I was typecast as the quirky character in every production at every community theatre in the valley of LA County.

All of these parts were sidekicks, never the leading lady. I became conditioned to believe that I would never be the pretty ingenue who prances around the stage in a pink dress and white tights, waiting for her fella to come and save her.

I took this as an insult, and finally got my revenge in eighth grade when I was cast as Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*.

It turns out that being the naive ingénue isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. The princesses don’t get to fight any monsters. They get to stand in the spotlight in a fluffy dress and sing in high pitched voices about falling in love, but they don’t get to hang out with the Jets in *West Side Story* or bail themselves out of a wedding they don’t want to happen in *Company*. They never learned that they could be their own super heroes. But I did. It just took me a while to realize that I actually liked it.

Transforming myself into these funny female characters right as I was diagnosed

with panic disorder turned out to be my saving grace.

I just needed to figure out how I could keep them with me when I wasn't on stage.

**

I am in eighth grade, and my English teacher is my best friend. Her name is Dr. Simon. I eat lunch in her classroom everyday; we listen to Gwen Stefani and she teaches me about third wave feminism.

I think she's the coolest person I've ever met. I want to be just like her.

She wears a cross around her neck every day, but I never ask her about it. When people show an intimate part of themselves on the outside, I usually assume that they don't want to talk about it. A few months ago, I was in the waiting room of my mom's office, and there was this super punk-rocky biker-chick lady with tons of tattoos. When I asked her what they meant to her, she started to cry. My mom tells me that people who look the toughest are usually the saddest.

Dr. Simon never asks me why I don't want to eat lunch with other girls in my grade. She enjoys my company just as much as I enjoy hers, I think. That's what makes our relationship so special. I learn that a lot of the relationships I will form in my life don't have this kind of reciprocity, especially the ones with other girls.

I go to my locker after lunch with Dr. Simon, and the most popular girl in my grade, Samantha, appears behind me in her patent leather ballet flats and pearls, yelling, "Congratulations!"

"Oh, um, for what?" I ask.

“Belle!” she squeals, and gives me a hug. It’s not every day that I’m hugged by the most popular girl in my grade. I bask in this glory for a minute before I sprint to the cast list posting for *Beauty and the Beast* next to the drama room.

My school is small. The drama kids don’t take on the geeky stereotype they do on TV or in movies. Everyone knows about everything. This is a big freaking deal.

My excitement at getting cast as Belle slowly dissipates, though, when my two bullies, Chloe and Stacy, appear in my peripheral vision. They think they’re famous because they have IMDB pages.

Stacy is the leader of their two-girl pack. They strut towards me. My palms are clammy. They look identical to me: shiny, flat-ironed hair, braces they pretend aren’t there, white knee-high Juicy Couture socks that say “SASSY.”

“They only gave you the part because they feel bad for you,” Stacy says.

Chloe nods, and adds, “I mean, they’ve basically given up on putting on quality musicals here.”

I stare at the ground and think about the post-it notes my mom plastered to my mirror. *You are beautiful. You are talented. You are smart. You are enough.* I hope this will give me the confidence to say something, but I don’t believe any of it enough.

I look down at my torn up Converse sneakers with neon laces, trying to hold in my tears. No ruby slippers.

I finally look up at the girls’ faces, and I slowly start to cry. I quickly turn towards my locker and sob. Teenage girls are a vicious species.

A part of me wishes that these girls knew about the 150 milligrams of medicine I take each morning because of them—that their bullying has pushed me to a point of

being so self-critical I lie awake each night scrutinizing every move I make throughout the day.

This is the kind of stuff that makes me question God. I can sense there's something wrong with this situation: I just got the lead part in the school play—a part that should validate every insecurity I feel about my beauty and my talent—and I'm sitting in front of my locker in my khaki private school uniform and Converse sneakers with neon laces, sobbing.

And in this moment, my lonely, melodramatic teenage self decides to pray. I close my eyes and begin to ask a God I'm not sure I believe in a question that will haunt me for the rest of my life: why are girls mean to other girls? We've already got it tough enough just being alone with ourselves.

**

I entered my first serious relationship with a boy when I was in fifth grade. This was one of my first attempts at combatting my female bullies: using a boyfriend as a shield.

He was in my class, his name was Nathan, and we talked every night on the computer without fail. It became a routine for me to run up to our home office after play practice and log onto AIM for my nightlong chats with Nathan. He would tell me things like, “U r stupid,” and “Reading sucks.” I was smitten; how could I not be? We decided we were boyfriend-girlfriend, but he asked me not to tell anyone at school about it. I eventually told my friend Ally, because one night he said “lol” and I thought that meant

“lots of love” and I freaked out and couldn’t just keep that to myself. Things spiraled out of control from there, Nathan yelled at me (“U R STUPID”), and that was the end of that. I know this experience sounds so trivial, but it really stuck with me. My panic slowly grew out of control. Why didn’t Nathan want anyone to know about us? Am I really that embarrassing? Will I ever find love?

These kinds of out-of-control thoughts go through my mind on a daily basis. I spiral and think of the worst-case scenario for every situation. At least that’s what Susan, my therapist, tells me I do. She makes me write down everything that could happen in the best-case scenario to help me realize that everything is going to be okay. But there’s something about the horror of all the negative possibilities that really gets me going. It’s hard for me to think about the good stuff when I know there’s also bad stuff. My mom, who’s also a therapist, always reminds me of her favorite Charlie Brown quote: “Don’t waste a worry!” I try my hardest not to be wasteful, but there’s only so much my biochemistry can do.

**

Some people get really uncomfortable when I tell them I have a therapist so casually. I think I do it because I come from a family of therapists and doctors, so we talk about it so openly at home that I forget it makes my middle school peers feel a little strange. But I love coming from a family of doctors nonetheless. Whenever I think something’s wrong with me, which, as I mentioned, is quite often, I always have someone to call.

Once, I made my grandpa give me an EKG (that test where they stick those little sticky circles all over your chest and measure the electrical activity in your heart on those squiggly line graphs), for five weeks in a row. I was convinced I had a heart murmur. I was so convinced that, finally, my grandpa just told me I had one and gave me (what I later learned to be) placebo pills. I took them every day for three years.

I experience these kinds of emotional crises when I think about my friendships with other girls. I know deep down that I shouldn't waste so much energy on this, but I know a lot of things deep down that don't help me that much.

**

I eventually learn that women can be sources of comfort, not fear. I just need to find the right ones.

My friendships with other girls are the true romances of my life. It took me a long time to realize this, and the realizations usually came during instances of pain—the times when the true friends showed up. For me, this meant being able to call someone other than my mom or my grandma or my therapist when the monsters arrived. This meant exposing my scariest self.

Sometimes I think that my monsters are the reason Drew cheated on me. I wonder if they scared him away. But here's the thing: my monsters are much scarier to me than they are to other people.

Ever since Drew and I broke up, I find myself randomly picking up my phone and texting "I love you" to my best friends, not for any sort of validation like I did when I

texted the overused phrase to him, but just because I feel it. Because they help me see parts of myself that Drew made me forget. Because they remind me that my monsters are pretend.

I feel my love for Waverley so deeply that I caught myself bragging about her accomplishments in her set design class on my first date post-Drew, to someone who doesn't know her. The first instance of true excitement I felt after my breakup was about a week into the process, when Anabel called me to tell me she finally kissed the boy she's had a crush on since her first week of college. I hadn't gotten out of bed all day and was surrounded by empty tubs of Dreyer's ice cream and the *Sex and the City* theme song, and you'd think the thought of kissing a male would make me want to vomit. But instead, I found myself squealing out of excitement—her happiness helped ease my pain.

During this same period, Alex had gone through my phone and computer and created secret, password-locked folders full of any photographic evidence of my relationship. Annie texted me every two hours to make sure I was okay and sent me YouTube clips of Jenny Slate and Ilana Glazer, my favorite comediennes, each night. My grandma was on the west coast sending me handwritten letters detailing her love for me and newspaper cutouts of stories about progressive education and birth control she thought I'd find interesting. My mom had just flown across the country to move me out of Drew's apartment and into my dorm room. The women in my life are superheroes. They are my truest loves.

**

On my first night of college, I called my best friend, Anabel, drunkenly weeping from the laundry room. I rested on top of the dryer in the fetal position in my denim short-shorts and lacy top, holding my iPhone in front of my face on speaker. Mascara dripped down my cheeks and I already lost the key to my room. I was off to a great start.

“Don’t go to college!” I screamed into the phone. “Just, don’t do it!”

“Car?” she whispered, “What happened?”

“Everyone is mean.” I fiercely responded.

“That can’t be true,” she said, kindly realizing how inebriated I was. “Do you want to talk about it, or would you rather just cry and talk about poop?”

“I love you, Beezy,” I whispered.

“I love you back, Car.”

~

Almost three years after this laundry room phone call, I’m on my bed in the fetal position, crying over a breakup, paralyzed with the fear of not knowing what to do next. Anabel is the first person I call. Waverley is on her way over with my favorite dining hall coffee. Alex is at her internship sneaking in emails to me. This love felt so foreign to me at this time. But now, I realize I was just being treated with a love I never had in my relationship—a love I forgot existed. A love that comes from women.

**

I met Drew my sophomore year of college in the dorm room of my friend, Kayla. I didn't know the whole thing was a set-up.

She had just done a play with him—*Romeo and Juliet*, to be as cliché as possible. He was Romeo. He was a sexy, biracial Romeo with a tattoo of a shell on his chest that said “Amor.” He transferred from Yale, after taking a year off to live on a boat. He seemed a lot cooler than me. Everyone in the theatre community adored him and thought he was fantastic.

I assumed he was gay.

Kayla told me he wasn't, and that we'd be perfect for each other.

“Really?” I asked, “He's like, *Romeo*.”

“What does that mean?” she asked, “He's too perfect?”

“No, no, it's more that I'm like, *not* Juliet. I'm like Juliet's wacky best friend who embarrasses her at parties. Also, yeah, he's too perfect. He's just like, too suave and well dressed and beautiful to be real.”

“That means something must really be wrong with him,” Kayla said, firmly.

“Plus, you're attracted to fucked up guys,” she said as she hopped off her bed and walked to the door.

“I am?—” I asked, as Drew waltzed in the room. He hopped onto her bed where I was sitting, and put his arm around me.

I was already falling for him.

**

I do have a pretty stellar talent for getting fucked up guys to date me, or at least make out with me. I think it's because, subconsciously, I believe that I can help them—fix them, even. I come from a family of people who fix people for a living, so I'm convinced it's just in my blood.

When I say fucked up, I don't just mean that they're emotionally unstable or have mommy issues. I mean that they usually have some sort of addiction, anger management problems, they probably steal, or, even worse, they're Republicans.

**

“You are what?” Drew asked, looking at me with those same dark brown eyes that would taunt me two years later.

I giggled, not sure what to say. I hoped Kayla would come up with an excuse. She did.

“I was just telling her that she's really cute. She was saying mean things about herself!” Kayla said, winking at me.

This felt like such an awkward set up. I began to feel the towel wringing in my stomach.

“She is,” he said, looking at Kayla.

He turned towards me and whispered in my ear, “*Very* cute.”

I giggled some more.

Something felt wrong about this. He reeked of danger, the kind I really liked.

Susan tells me I crave danger that I know won't physically harm me when I get bored of

my habits.

We left Kayla's room that night, holding hands as we walked down Broadway. He kissed me goodbye on the stairs to my dorm and told me he just "felt right" with me. I had met him two hours prior to this.

That should have been a sign.

There were so many signs—when he told me he was eight months sober on our first date and that he blames his parents for his addiction because they "gave him too much" when he was growing up; when he surprised me by flying to LA two weeks after we started dating to spend New Year's Eve with me, when he told me he could see himself raising kids with me after dating for two months; when he stopped talking to his in the morning; when he started getting angry; when he stopped going to meetings; when he told me I was gaining weight; when he stopped telling me where he was at night, when he told me he was happy that I didn't practice my Judaism anymore, that it was annoying; when he stopped caring about me.

I lost so much of my identity while I was dating Drew, so much of the identity I cultivated throughout my life before him—my Jewish identity, my self-caring identity, my female-loving identity. I fell in love with him really hard, really fast. He seemed like a superhero when he swept in and told me I could fix him. My own kind of superhero: a dangerous, fucked up one who needed my help.

I didn't think about the fact that he wasn't Jewish that much, though. The fact that he wasn't Jewish played a much larger role when I went to his family gatherings. His extended family is very blonde and, well, not Jewish, and basked in their privilege, and his parents hated it, and they would constantly tell me how much they loved having me

around because I made things "lighter" and was so "open" about stuff. That felt like a back-handed compliment because even though I loved that his parents loved me, it felt like they loved me because I was just the typecast, character I had been growing up. When in reality, I think my Jewish cultural background has shaped the caring, giving way I act around adults and other families. It's not because I'm just silly and "light."

I went to a few of the big family events, and I remember feeling so out of place, and I know it sounds weird, but I think he really liked that about me. Once, we were at his cousin's graduation party at this terrible, hoity-toity country club, and I was making all of these jokes about how dumb golfing is, and I befriended all of the waiters and snuck them pieces of cake while all of the white men in his family gave speeches, and I know that Drew loved that about me. But he would never do anything like that—it was too embarrassing. He loved it about me, and was also jealous that I had the guts to say something about how forced everything felt—that it was awful .

When he came to LA and stayed with my family, he definitely felt out of place, because he felt this need to maintain that uptight and better-than-thou nature of his family. He wasn't the Drew I knew when he was with my family. He was someone totally different. My mom noticed. My grandma noticed. I noticed, but I didn't seem to care.

He also used to tell me often that I was the first brunette he'd ever dated, and he found that totally exotic. He would always emphasize how outside of his "type" I was. He also didn't understand why I needed to shave so much, or why my hair down there grew back so fast, or why I called my mom so much, or why I was so "neurotic." He said so much of me was "outside his comfort zone," and it was hard for him to handle. He made me feel ashamed of where I came from, ashamed of myself.

I don't know if I ever felt comfortable in my own skin around him.

There were so many monsters.

**

I am sixteen, and I'm scared. I'm most scared on Sunday nights, around ten PM, after I've eaten my second bowl of Dreyer's chocolate-chip-cookie-dough ice cream while watching *60 Minutes* with my dad. The fear usually hits me right when I get out of the shower. I wrap myself up in my bright purple towel, hop on my bed, and lie on top of the covers in the fetal position. "The Sunday Night Worries," my grandma calls them.

The worries begin in my stomach— my body's warm and cozy home for my anxiety. I've gotten to know my stomach pretty well throughout my short life—far better than I would like. She's far too hospitable. Sometimes she lets her rowdy guests stay overnight. Sometimes she lets them in while I'm in social studies class. Sometimes she throws wild dance parties while I'm on stage at rehearsal. She sends no invitations. She gives no warnings. She just decides when the time feels right for her, and then sets off an earthquake to my insides.

By the time I'm crouched in the fetal position on top of my covers, the quake is in full force. I sweat. I cradle my legs against my chest and rock back and forth. I count my inhales and my exhales, trying to catch my breath.

I'm scared of going to school the next day. I'm scared of doing something embarrassing, like hitting a tree while I'm trying to park my car on the back road behind the upper school campus (a regular occurrence), or not having anything funny to say at

lunch. I've convinced myself that I should stop eating lunch with teachers because it makes me seem uncool.

I sit with the popular girls now—the blonde beach babes from Malibu. I wish I were kidding. They let me start sitting with them at lunch because I dated a senior when I was a sophomore, and they thought that was cool. They tell me this all the time. They tell me I'm "adorable," like I'm their group's little pet. I've been going to school with these girls since second grade, and they started speaking to me last year. I'm a junior now. Nick and I broke up a few months after he started college at UCLA because I wasn't ready to have sex with him, but I told everyone it was just because he wanted to "fully experience college." The only person who knows the truth is my mom.

The girls at lunch all think I've had sex, and I don't dispute them of that notion. I would love to talk to them about why I didn't feel ready to have sex and what it felt like to be rejected by the boy I cared about, but they don't talk about their feelings. I know they have them, though.

I let these girls ask me questions about sex and I answer them with my extensive knowledge from *Cosmo* and my vast selection of reproductive health books I check out from the library, pretending it's all firsthand experience. I tell them hilarious, excruciatingly personal stories, and they think I'm fantastic. I tell them about my first time—how Nick and I did it in the back seat of his parked car on Mulholland Canyon, overlooking the entire valley, all lit up and gorgeous in the night. I tell them how it was so awkward being crammed in that tiny space but that it was also super romantic, and that Nick was so nice about the whole thing and that it really hurt after but I pretended that it didn't because I didn't want to ruin the moment but when I got home I had bled through

my underwear and I needed to wear a pad for two days and it was so embarrassing.

I teach them about keggles and condoms and contraception. I tell them about the time Nick and I did it while I was on my period, and how that's actually the safest time to do it because you "totally can't get pregnant then." I'm basically a sixteen-year old gynecologist.

They tell me I should be a stand-up comedienne. I later win the "Class Clown" yearbook title by a landslide my senior year. My best friend from this lunch group wins "Most Attractive."

What if I can't think of anything to say tomorrow? What if I accidentally let it slip that I'm actually a virgin and I have no idea how to give a blowjob or a hand job or any kind of job? Why am I scared of telling the truth to a group of girls who only let me sit at their table because I'm their group's token "funny girl?"

I begin to shiver. Water from my wet hair drips down my back and onto my sheets. I stretch out my legs and turn onto my stomach, letting out a scream into my pillow. The party in my stomach comes to an end. It's all just part of the process. I hop out of my bed and walk into my bathroom, staring at the foggy mirror covered in post-it notes drenched in ink with affirmations my mom wrote for me. *You are beautiful. You are talented. You are smart. You are enough.* I hope this will give me the confidence to say something, but I don't believe any of it enough.

**

When I finally did lose my virginity, I forgot all of the tips my sixteen-year-old self

knew so well. I forgot about the Cosmo list of sex positions, the need to pee immediately after, the reminders that your first time should be with someone who really cares about you—someone who you really care about.

It was my nineteenth birthday when it happened, in an extra long twin bed with a Republican, Economics major on the crew team.

I was no longer the “sexpert” when I got to college—almost all of my friends at Barnard had already done it. I decided it needed to finally happen, mainly so I could regain my teenage gynecologist status.

I decided to get really drunk and go to a frat party.

I’m not saying I regret losing my virginity to a Republican in a frat house, but I am saying that if could go back in time, I would have put a lot more thought into the decision before I drunkenly climbed up the sticky, beer-stained stairs at one in the morning. I would have put more thought into my answer when he asked, “do you want to have sex?” after kissing me for thirty seconds on top of his t-shirt fabric sheets—the ones that show every kind of stain, even in the dark.

I would’ve told him I’d never had sex before. If I felt comfortable enough to take all of my clothes off in front of him, I probably should have felt comfortable enough telling him I was a virgin and I was scared and needed to take it slow and that I had no idea what I was doing and studies show that I’ll probably get attached to him in some weird way and *I’m just trying to play it really cool for you right now but inside I’m really, really freaking out.*

I responded to his question with a shaky, nervous “um, sure.” That’s not the “enthusiastic yes” they taught us about in our consent workshops during orientation.

He jumped off his bed and grabbed a condom from his desk drawer, singing under his breath, “I’m gonna fuck Carly Ginsberg, I’m gonna fuck Carly Ginsberg.”

“What?” I whispered, “What are you singing?”

“Shhh,” he said, as he climbed onto the bed. I just laid on my back and waited for him to enter me, baffled by all the was happening.

*Did my friends leave the party without me? How do I tell my mom about this?
Should I open my legs more?*

I was squeezing my body so insanely tight, especially my vagina. This was not a welcoming environment for a penis. Like so many times before, my body was screaming at me, “Get out of here, you dumb fool!” and I didn’t listen. I sort of screeched in pain at one point, but he didn’t notice. We were both dripping in sweat, not saying a word. I closed my eyes and held back my tears, hoping that if I clicked my heels and squeezed my eyes shut tight enough, I would be transported back to my own bed.

No luck. No ruby slippers.

It was so dark in the room that he didn’t notice the blood immediately. I had just introduced those t-shirt sheets to a whole new kind of stain. I knew it would be there—that part I remembered from my books. He turned on the lights to search for his boxers so he could go to the bathroom, and that’s when he saw it. His bed looked like a crime scene. In a way, it sort of was.

“Oh shit,” he whispered, “Are you on your period?”

I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t prepare myself for this.

“Oh, um, I guess, wow. I’m so sorry! Let me clean this up.” I jumped off the bed and began to look around for a towel, or something, nakedly crawling on the floor, until I

realized I had no idea what I was doing. I stopped in my tracks, completely frozen. I looked up at him.

“I’m a virgin,” I whispered quietly under my breath. I felt humiliated.

“Oh, well,” he fumbled, “You’re not anymore! Ha!”

I hadn’t made that realization yet.

“Oh, yeah, I guess you’re right,” I sort of giggled.

As he slipped his boxers on, he looked at me and said, “just don’t become clingy or anything. You’re not attached to me now, are you?”

“What? Oh, totally not. I, um, this is totally chill. Super casual.”

I truly had no idea what I was saying. I climbed back onto the bed and sat in a pool of my own blood, hoping my body would just cover it up like a towel and we could forget about the whole thing.

“Cool,” he said, “I’m gonna pee,” as he opened the door. “Be back in a sec.”

Shit, I thought. I’m supposed to pee!

I was still sitting on top of my blood, looking around his room in a state of shock, when out of the corner of my eye, I spotted it: the thing that officially made this the worst virginity loss experience ever.

There was a Mitt Romney poster taped on the wall above his desk.

I had just gone through this horrifyingly painful, completely unsentimental, opposite-of-everything-I-expected sexual experience, and the only thing I could think about was that this dumb fool was voting for Mitt Romney.

I walked home alone at five in the morning, shivering, completely defeated, and I bragged about it to my friends.

I thought I was doing this as a kind of empowering experience for me—to just get the act over-with. But I wasn't. I was doing it for a bunch of girls who I thought would stop being friends with me if they knew I was a virgin.

I needed Anabel. I needed to lie in bed with Bella and my mom. I needed my superheroes to remind me I was still alive.

**

I met Anabel during my junior year of high school. Our siblings were dating—or whatever two eighth graders would call it, I thought Anabel's sister, Emma, was the coolest. She had long brown wavy hair and tons of freckles, and she was packed to the brim with confidence I wish I had at her age.

Whenever Brian needed to be picked up from their house, I gladly offered to go. I would always get there a little early so I could talk to Emma. We both loved theatre and yoga, and we would share stories about the mean drama girls who bullied us at rehearsal, and the obnoxiously perfect-bodied girls in our yoga classes who made us feel inadequate.

We were brought together by our mutual love of talking about girls who made us feel like shit, both actively and just by existing. But there was a way that Emma and I talked about these girls that was different from the way the catty girls at lunch talked about the girls that bothered them—the girls at lunch slut-shamed and mocked their peers in order to compensate for their own teenage angst, while Emma and I opened up about the pain these girls made us feel.

The girls at lunch used “girl talk” to build a wall between themselves and their emotions, while Emma and I used ours to make ourselves vulnerable and access our emotions.

On the car ride home, Brian told me he didn’t like that I was getting so close with Emma.

“It’s weird,” he said, as he downed his fourth protein shake of the day. Boys.

“Why?”

“I don’t know—you’re older than her. Doesn’t that make you feel weird?”

“I guess.” It didn’t, really.

“You should hang out with her sister. She’s just a grade below you. She’s really cool.”

I couldn’t believe I didn’t know Emma had an older sister. This was amazing news. I immediately began to picture her in my mind—long, unruly dark hair, nonchalant-but-totally-put-together style, immeasurably smart.

“When can I meet her?”

We made plans for a family brunch.

I tried to stop myself from obsessing over Anabel—she could’ve been totally different from Emma. I didn’t want to set my expectations too high. But I also couldn’t stop thinking about my new potential best friend. Was I going to get my very own Emma? Then I began to freak out. *We’ll never be best friends now, I thought. I’ve built her up too much. She’s going to think I’m insane and obsessed with her and totally uncool.*

We got to brunch and all of my anxiety melted away. After we all scarfed down

too much French toast, we divided up into our natural pairs: the parents, the couple, and the sisters. Anabel and I sat on the floor of her room and the conversation just started naturally.

It turned out we were both very excited to meet each other, and both built up images of each other in our minds. And we were both comfortable with saying it out loud. Talking to Anabel was so *easy*. We understood each other, we respected each other, and we truly wanted to get to know each other. My friendship with Anabel is one of the most special things in my life, and it's a constant reminder that I'm not alone.

I had a new reason to come over to their house now—it wasn't just to pick up my brother from his “dates” with Emma. I still talked to Emma when I came over, and sometimes I'd get there early, while Anabel was still at her summer internship, to be with Emma.

Brian and Emma eventually broke up, as eighth graders tend to do. It didn't affect my friendship with Anabel, though. I did everything in my power to make sure I never had to say goodbye to Anabel. She was my bubble wrap.

It turns out, it's nearly impossible to break that stuff. You can pop it all you want, but it's always there to protect you, especially from the monsters. And Republicans.

**

I get upset when I remember that my therapist sees other people. *Susan's only my super hero*, I think. *She just gets to save me.*

Whenever I ask my mom and grandma if they have favorite patients, they tell me

that they try to stay invested in each and every patient they see equally. But I know they still pick favorites. It's impossible to stay unbiased when you're in that kind of profession.

Some of my mom and grandma's patients give them presents for the holidays, and those presents are usually pieces of their own art. My grandmother's walls are lined with needlepoints of cuddly animals and watercolors from introductory art classes. My mom is much more selective about what she hangs up in the house, though. The occasional artsy photograph appears on an out-of-sight wall in the family room. But Grandma just feels too bad.

"They made themselves so vulnerable giving their artwork to me!" she pleads, "I can't just shove it in the closet!"

Once, she received a painting from an elderly man that was so, horrifyingly ugly it was beautiful. The man told my grandma that their sessions inspired him to paint again. His depression kicked the habit in the bud. When he could finally pick up a brush again, the first thing he did was make something for my grandma. He told her the piece depicted his journey through therapy. The painting was this really abstract, bright blue swirly bridge, surrounded by a bunch of colorful floating shapes. He said the shapes represented all of his thoughts. It made me cry. I couldn't stop picturing the old man going home after his afternoon session with my grandma, maybe making a sandwich and a cup of tea, and unpacking his shopping bag from the art supply store.

He definitely thought about this day for months—passing by the store on his drive home each day and shrugging to himself, *maybe tomorrow*. But then he did it. He made himself so vulnerable giving his artwork to her. She couldn't just shove it in the

closet.

I like to think that Susan, my therapist, shoves all of her patients' metaphorical paintings in the closet except for mine. It comforts me to think this. Maybe Susan thinks of me at the dinner table when her husband, the radiologist who shares an office with my uncle, asks about her day. She'd never say anything out loud, though.

I like to think that Susan thinks about me all the time. I know it's probably not true, but it helps. I like to think that she thinks about me while she brushes her teeth. She probably has a toothbrush that beeps after her two-minutes are up, and sometimes she doesn't hear the beep because she's so deep in thought about the architecture of my emotions. Maybe her teeth are so white because of me. They're probably just so white because she's perfect.

I was initially nervous to tell Susan about my heartbreak because as much as I wanted her there as my therapist—as someone to guide me through the whole experience with wisdom and cognitive-behavioral homework assignments—what I really wanted was for her to be there with me at three in the morning when I thought I was hurting so much I might die, so she could remind me that I'll not only live through this, but be better for it. I wanted Susan to be in bed next to me while I pictured my boyfriend in bed with another girl over, and over, and over again so that she could reach into my brain and scoop that image out with an ice-cream scooper. I wanted Susan to yank the third bottle of wine out of my hands and remind me that I'm giving too much power to someone who betrayed my trust and made me feel like it was my fault, and that there are much better companions than fermented liquid.

Susan could listen to me cry about my betrayal and hear me talk about the

thoughts I have at three in the morning, but she could never be inside of my brain. That was outside her pay-grade.

**

I leave for my morning classes ten minutes early on Tuesdays and Thursdays so that I can avoid running into Drew and Mariah. I spent my first week of classes this first semester back after the breakup figuring out every possible way I could run into them, learning their schedules and paths they take to class.

I change my path for them. I lose ten minutes of sleep for them. I make sure to put on real pants and blow dry my hair and put on mascara before I leave just in case I accidentally bump into them, so they'll think I'm put together and doing well.

He can't see me in my sweatpants. He knows I wear them outside when I'm stressed or anxious or feeling bloated. I'm committed to him believing that I'm a superhero.

The truth is, I'll never, ever understand how he thinks.

I overslept this morning. I couldn't fall asleep last night because I couldn't stop thinking about how my cousins are boycotting Thanksgiving unless we don't have a turkey. They made my grandma cry. I couldn't stop picturing my grandma crying—all she wants is for everyone to be happy.

I jolt out of bed after looking at my clock and sprint into the bathroom with my phone. I call my grandma and line my toothbrush with toothpaste, sitting on the ledge of the bathtub. It's three hours earlier in Los Angeles, but she wakes up at five every

morning. She doesn't like to miss too much of the day, she tells us.

"Hello?" she answers, like she always does, even though she can see my caller ID.

"Hi, grandma." I say, as I stick my toothbrush in my mouth.

"Carly!" she yells to my grandpa, "Mickey! It's Carly!"

She does this every time I call.

I pull my toothbrush out of my mouth.

"I need to run to class, but I just wanted to see how you're doing. Any luck with getting them to change their minds about Thanksgiving?"

"Oh, honey. I don't want you to think about that. I promise you, it will be okay. You go to class and I'll write out a note on my legal pad for you explaining all of this nonsense and mail it later today."

She likes to write notes on her yellow legal pad and mail them to me. She once wrote me a note outlining her detailed diagnosis of Drew: "mild sociopathy, high narcissism, BAD person." Once, she mailed me a twenty dollar bill paper-clipped to a scrap of yellow legal pad paper, with just the words words, "Shh, don't tell Grandpa!" scribbled on it.

"Okay. I can't wait to see you. Love you."

My grandpa yells from his bedroom, "Love you, Carls!" and my grandma joins in, "Love you sweet pea."

I smile as I gargle water in my mouth.

I can still get to class on time, but I'll need to take the fast route. I hold my head up as I walk down the steps of my apartment building, confident that I can do this. I can face them. I'm wearing pants, my hair and teeth are brushed, and I just heard my grandma's

voice.

I turn the corner, and there they are. I forget everything I just reminded myself. I become paralyzed with anxiety, but I try to keep walking. I pause for a second and take a deep breath. They're crossing the street towards me, holding hands. They see me watching them. They stop in their tracks, and begin to passionately kiss.

I feel disconnected from myself for a moment. I know I should just walk to class and remind myself that they're probably both sociopaths—that I'm the one who keeps getting hurt, and it's not fair, but it's okay.

Instead, I speak.

“Hey, um, could you, just, not do that?” I ask, as they approach me.

Mariah stares at me and smiles, whispers “good luck” to Drew, and turns in the opposite direction.

“Don't speak to me,” Drew says.

“What?” I ask, completely baffled. “You don't get to tell me what to do. You don't get to do that. You left me trapped on an island!”

He laughs, and walks past me, aggressively brushing his body against my shoulder as he struts away.

Completely disoriented and officially late to class, I decide to call my therapist. It's early enough in LA—she might be listening to her voicemails and pick up when she hears my voice.

I begin to cry as I hear Susan's voice recording play—“if this is an emergency, please hang up and dial 911 for assistance.”

This is an emergency, I think.

And in this moment, my beaten up, frazzled self decides to pray, over voicemail.

“Susan” I say. “If you’re listening, could you pick up? I’m sort of, um, trying to pray right now. I haven’t done this in a while. Could you maybe teach me? I want to feel better. I feel like I’m being held together by scotch tape—“

She picks up.

“Carly? Sweetie? What’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” I say through my tears, “I just saw Drew and Mariah, and, I don’t know, I just feel like I’m totally broken. I did all this work to feel better, and I’m totally, totally broken.”

“Oh, sweetie, you’re not broken. You’re just human.”

I think back to my thirteen-year-old-self receiving my panic disorder diagnosis, remembering that all I wanted to hear were those exact words. *You’re just human.*

I think back to my thirteen-year-old-self studying her Torah portion, questioning her faith in God. Ever since then, I’ve treated anyone who really gets me, like Susan, as God.

But the best thing my thirteen-year-old-self taught me is that in the end, it’s not about God. It’s about me.

I’m better than a superhero. I’m a human woman.

And I am enough.