

Someewhere
in the
Music,
I'll Find Me:
A Memoir

LAURIE MARKVART

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ACT ONE
ON THE VERGE

1

PRIDE

Los Angeles Sports Arena, March 2011

“Tickets and wristbands, please,” the daunting security guard in black jeans and t-shirt repeats like a drill sergeant straight out of Central Casting. As I get closer to him, my heartbeats speed up.

With a trembling hand, I show him my seat ticket and the purple wristband attached to my wrist for the last 36 hours. He glances and waves me on. Grasping the railing to steady my wobbly legs, I descend the stairs to the arena floor, realizing that—I beat the system.

My group from Section 12—30 strangers—gather around a show staffer, a twenty-something gal. Half my age, she’s petite but assertive, waving her arms above her head, drawing everyone to her like she’s presumably done with hundreds of previous singers on this audition assembly line. We cluster in closer. An intense aroma of makeup, hairspray, and body order permeates the group. A contestant behind me forcefully sighs, and her breath smells like

stomach acid. My gut lurches in response. Well, this *is* Round One for “X-Factor.” *Keep it together, Laurie. This is just an audition. You’ve been through far worse than this.*

On the arena floor, it’s apparent how loud the upper arena is: packed full of contestants, families, and friends, cheering, talking, and clapping. The clamor radiates off the concrete floor, like at a sporting event.

I fumble in my purse for my iPhone. I need to listen to my music to gain perspective, even as my eyes remain deadlocked on the staffer. She’s still wrangling people, so I have time to get it together. I roll back my shoulders and stretch my neck from side to side to calm my nerves.

A fellow contestant taps me on the arm. I pull out one earbud.

“You, okay?” he says. He appears in his late fifties and looks like a street magician from Venice Beach. He’s scruffy, has a drastically receding hairline, and his thin ponytail is a *too dark for your age* shade of black. He wears a faded black tux tail over a ragged floral print Hawaiian shirt. The only thing on him that looks current is the purple wristband, just like mine.

I’m surprised by his curiosity and attempt to interact. If anything, I’m annoyed. What does he care?

“Hey, I’m in my zone, and you just messed it up.”

He gapes at me, lifting an eyebrow. His face softens. “You just look really nervous. Relax. You’re about to be discovered,” he says with sparkling eyes. “Be proud you’ve made it this far.”

“Proud?” I shake my head, then smile remorsefully. With my head hung low, I stick my earbud back in. I’m such an asshole. As

well, I'm lying. I'm not in my zone. The only zone I'm in is one warped with anxiety and confusion.

However, proud? My husband Neil said the same thing this morning as I left our house to go on this wild goose chase. As I paused at our front door, Neil followed closely behind. I sensed the warmth and calmness of his tall body behind me. I assumed he had something to say. In a somewhat uncomfortable but sweet send-off, he muttered, "Good luck today or break a leg or damn, which is it?"

"It's break a leg." I chuckled and turned to him. I reached up for a hug and melted into his strength. He kissed my forehead. I wish things were better for us. If only we hadn't suffered so much. I whispered, "Thank you. I'll be in touch throughout the day."

As I walked to the driveway, he added, "I'm proud of you." That comment stopped me in my tracks.

"Why are you proud of me?" I asked, turning to him, a quiver of curiosity in my stomach.

Leaning against the door frame, Neil removed his hands from his PJ bottom pockets and folded his arms across his muscular chest. "Well, I mean, the last few years have been tough for you. I hope this is what you're looking for. What you need."

I hesitantly nodded in return, got in the car, took a deep breath, and let out a loud, satisfying sigh. I reminded myself, again, that I'm someone who is getting the chance to audition for a reality TV show. Finally, there is no age restriction. I can no longer complain or hide behind ageism. However, I also can't hide behind my anxiety, all that has happened, or my mom's long-

held expectations of me becoming a famous singer or mine, for that matter. Proving it might be enough to fix things. To fix me.

Backing out of the driveway, I realize that no matter how stressed, frustrated, or ill-minded I've felt leading up to this, I desperately miss this part of my life—making music, auditioning—the apprehension, energy, and the full-on engagement of the moment. It's an instant of being fully alive, too mentally and emotionally high to be touched by heartache or loneliness.

Now, standing with aching high-heeled feet on the cement arena floor next to the Venice guy, I'm no longer worrying about my song selection or how I look. It's too late for that. I'm next in line for the audition booth. While I try to ignore my sweaty armpits, I steady myself with deep breathing. *I got this*. Of course, I do. I've been singing since I was a kid. My first performance was at church. A duet of "Jesus Loves Me" with my only sibling and older brother David. We were barely six and seven years of age.

I revert to thinking of my song choice. Which one will I do? I hum each one in my head. Does one feel better than the other? Ignoring all around me in our tight group, I hum the songs out loud to check how my voice feels. My humming turns into words, louder and louder, with no concern about who can hear me. I can barely hear myself, muffled by the intrusive sounds of the arena and those next to me doing similar vocal warmups.

My voice is cold and unsteady, restricted and tight, like any muscle until it's warmed up. I want my voice to feel as nice as a warm glove. Instead, it's as frozen and unforgiving as the winter pond I skated on as a child growing up in Wisconsin.

ACT TWO

LEARN, ESCAPE, BREAK,
REPEAT

2

FILLING THE GAPS WITH MUSIC

Waterloo, Wisconsin, the 1970s

By Midwest farm country standards, our two-story red brick house on one of the main drags, Madison Street, was in the hustle and bustle of little Waterloo.

Waterloo had two thousand people. There was one stoplight in the whole town, and it marked the four corners of the town center, where the two main thoroughfares of Madison and Monroe Street met. I could see the light blink from my front yard.

Our town center consisted of a pharmacy, bowling alley, shoe and clothing store, bank, movie theater, fire station, diner, and six taverns. Yes, six. And all within walking distance of our house. Our town also had four churches, all within walking distance from our house and town center. Occasionally, the clergy from those churches patronized those six taverns. Mom would say,

"The best sermons are on a Saturday night to a bunch of drunks, then on Sunday to the hungover."

Waterloo was not much different from other small towns in Wisconsin. Still, I thought Waterloo was beautiful, with soft hills making up Fireman's Park filled with tall Oak, Ash, and Pine trees forming canopies over summer's deep green lush grass. The tree branches turned to icicles twinkling like diamonds in the sun when we used the hills for sledding in the winter.

The chocolate brown slow-flowing Mauneshia River ebbed through the park, lined with Pussy Willows and marsh shrubs. A dam at the Mill House forced some of the Mauneshia up into a large-sized pond, which in summer was home to ducks, geese, and the occasional fisherman frustratingly hoping for a catch. When December would come, the pond became a frozen sheet for childhood shenanigans of snowball fights, hockey, and ice skating.

If it wasn't for the strong smell of manure that would waft through the town from the many nearby dairy farms, as a little child, I thought Waterloo was damn perfect until it wasn't.

Everyone in Waterloo knew each other, and they didn't just say hello in passing on the street or at the local diner. Long conversations would ensue about family, friends, and the latest happenings about town or, God forbid, national politics or worldly events. In the 70s, those conversations were curated from the Sunday newspaper, evening news, and the radio and spiced up with small-town opinions.

My mom would always direct the conversations to local gossip, which she found more attractive, even though she sometimes

was part of the story. And my dad, having grown up in Chicago, served 20 years in the military through World War II and a year in Korea during the Korean War, would never engage in the gossip that he called "small town nonsense." Still, he'd willingly debate politics with the right person.

A typical grocery store run was the excitement of the day for Mom, and she conversed with everyone from the entrance to the exit. From the vegetable aisle to the meat counter, she never missed a chance to "bullshit." When I was a pre-teen, I'd usually bide my time waiting for her by looking at *People* and other entertainment magazines hanging near the checkout, fantasizing about a more exciting life. But by the time I was in high school, Waterloo was isolating and boring to me. Although I was not the popular type, I had good friends and enjoyed school. But with only 70 kids in my class, popularity was not my priority. Variety was.

Every day around Waterloo, I saw the same people repeatedly, and while my mom found this comforting and enjoyable, I was restless. The folks of Waterloo were genuine and caring, and the sense of community was strong, but I yearned for diversity and excitement.

The closest city where I believed the real action and activity happened was Madison, twenty-six miles to the west. Madison had nearly two hundred thousand people, and I could feel the energy every time we visited for shopping or birthday celebrations. If we approached the city at night, the thousands of streetlights lit up the dark sky, and it was a beacon to something more thrilling.

The city had various ethnic restaurants, the state capital, indoor malls, an airport, people of different colors and religions, a university, and giant lakes, Mendota and Monona, that looked like oceans to my adolescent eyes when I first saw them. But Waterloo did have a quaintness that my mother loved. And at times, I embraced it too. Primarily for her sake and especially when I was young and yearning for her attention.

As a young child, every Sunday morning, I pleasantly woke in my upstairs bedroom of our house to the sound of needle scraping vinyl on the downstairs record player. Classical music boomed from Pioneer floor speakers in our living room. My dad—that ex-military early-bird, predictably rose at 6 a.m. (when the bugle sounds!) and played his favorites after he poured his first cup of coffee. I assumed that this was part of my father's routine to wake up my brother and me: a friendly pronouncement, the Head of the house was up. Or so I thought at the time.

As the years progressed and my parents' relationship grew more strained, I wondered if he might have done it to piss off his typically hungover, depressed wife.

But I loved the music. As I rested on my white eyelet canopy bed, surrounded by stuffed animals, I listened to every note with anticipation and memorized every lyric, even in French or German. I'd fade in and out of sleep, content, amused by the swells of the music, the sudden lulls, the dramatic operatic vocals. My father had said, "In every opera, someone always falls in love, and

someone always dies, but in between, there is a lot of beautiful music."

My dad had a small-framed body and carried his shoulders back with poise and confidence, especially when discussing opera. Even though his weekend sweatshirt and white Converse high-tops wouldn't suggest that he was an opera enthusiast. Nor would his machine shop green coveralls from his day job. No matter the attire, grease lingered under his fingernails and his hands smelled of machine oil, as did what was left of his hair. But I liked the smell. It smelled like him.

My brother David would shut his door on Sunday mornings in response to Dad's orchestral onslaught. However, the door to my parents' room—with my mom presumably sleeping—was always closed, although a closed door wasn't enough to silence the music. My door was left open. The cacophony told me I was not alone. Dad was there. I was safe. My father was the stable force in our unpredictable home.

I could assume my dad's mood, and my mom's likely condition, by his musical choices. He was in a carefree spirit if he listened to piano concertos like Tchaikovsky's or operas like *Tosca* or *Carmen*. He'd be enjoying the Sunday paper. Sometimes he'd hum as he made his way around the house, and the sound would bring me great pleasure. It also meant my mother was sober, happy, and making breakfast. On these days, I would not linger in bed; I'd rush downstairs to join them.

Beethoven, especially *Moonlight Sonata*, meant he was stressed. I would find him amiable but unhappy. He was busy

doing my mother's chores: making breakfast, cleaning the kitchen, and disposing of liquor bottles from the night before. He was an old-school man who'd say, "These are the wife's duties, not mine."

Mozart's *Requiem in D Minor* meant a dark mood. I would find him unapproachable, further evidenced by deep furrows on his brow and puffy eyelids. I could only assume he and my mother had fought the night before. He had every reason to use Mozart to insulate himself from her. Thankfully, I was confident that he loved me. Even if he was not incredibly welcoming, as he sat with legs crossed tightly against the base of the living room armchair, his hand wrapped tightly around a cup of coffee, offering a reduced smile for me. I would head to the kitchen, hoping my mom was preparing breakfast before church. However, when *Requiem* was playing, she was never there. She was still in bed.

I was angry at my mom for putting my dad in such a state. Also, I was lonely, the only one to sit at the breakfast table with no one to make food for me, provide comfort, and ask if I slept okay.

As a ten-year-old, I could put Lucky Charms in a bowl and pour milk on it. Then again, compared to my mother's *good* Sundays, when she would prepare pancakes, waffles, bacon, toast, and fresh juice, cold cereal was disheartening. Until my brother would join me, these quiet moments of eating alone were sad and crushing, especially with *Requiem* in the background.

On Mom's good Sundays, when she was not depressed or hungover, she was engaging, loving, caring, and had an

outrageous sense of humor. She dished out hugs, back rubs, and kisses to our foreheads and cheeks and never missed a second to say, "You mean the world to me." She had pet names for us: sweetheart, darling, honeybunch, pumpkin, kiddo. Her attention was devotional. But also confusing. How could she be so unavailable on some days and emotionally stifling on others?

My mother was a pretty woman with pleasant straight light brown hair that would curl into her neck as it reached her shoulders. Her clear blue eyes and high arched eyebrows were probably her most delicate features. She was of average height and weight but slightly taller than my dad. She'd put on weight when depressed and then lose some when she was in a good state. She would dress in contemporary clothes and shoes if she felt mentally well, but nothing fancy or flashy. She loved clip-on earrings and long-chain necklaces, and she incorporated purple, her favorite color, into her wardrobe every chance she could. But the most constant part of her attire was a cigarette. A Salem was her fashion statement. And her comfort.

When Mom was in a good state, she ran the stereo on Saturday mornings; it was rousing fun. She'd play upbeat music, popular on the radio: *Candy Man* by Sammy Davis Jr. or *Raindrops Keep Falling on my Head*. Those Saturdays would not be complete without Johnny Mathis.

Mom spun Johnny Mathis vinyl like his voice was an oxygen tank for her lungs. She owned every album he recorded. She documented her collection on ruled school paper, with columns drawn with a ruler in pencil to section out release dates, album

and song titles, and duets, and she placed it all in a 3-ring binder. The spine simply labeled Johnny.

Much to my dad's displeasure at the cost of Mom's obsession, every time a new Johnny album arrived in the mail, Dad would say, "Johnny put out *another* album?" Mom also belonged to Johnny's international fan club and swooned like a teenager when she received an annual birthday card with his photo and replica autograph. She'd tack it to the bulletin board in the kitchen for all of us to see. Johnny's tender chocolate eyes and apparent genuine cheerfulness made me adore him too. Along with his smooth, charismatic velvet voice, I understood Mom's attraction and wished I could sing like him. Mom told me she heard he gave up a successful shot as an Olympic high-jumper to be a singer. I often wondered why he had to choose between the two.

Ella Fitzgerald, Nat King Cole, Stevie Wonder, Glenn Campbell, Joan Baez, and Carole King were also Mom's favorites. She'd tout, "Laurie, did you know Carole King writes her music? That's a big deal, kiddo." Those words stuck with me. Even as a very young child, I would stare at the cover of Carole King's album *Tapestry* and wonder if *I* could write a song.

When Mom played musicals, like *South Pacific* or *Oklahoma!*, I was inspired to sing along, happy because I wasn't alone. Sometimes Mom and I'd dance around the living room; afternoon sun rays shining on us through the window like a spotlight. We'd twirl and spin like novice ballroom dancers; rug burns on our feet. Holding hands, we'd lip-sync until the song's end, and on cue,

Mom and I'd fall dramatically onto the couch in an embrace of sweat and laughter.

"Laurie, someday I'll take you to New York City, and we'll see Broadway!" she would exclaim, throwing her hands in the air for a loud clap, her eyes dancing. She would quickly fall into the fantasy world show tunes offered. I had no problem joining her. Nevertheless, the song always ended.

3

PRIVILEGE

One day on the weekly drive to the grocery store with Mom, she paused the car a bit longer after pulling out of our gravel driveway.

"Laurie, your dad and I have noticed you love music; you're always singing. So, you're going to take piano lessons."

"Sure, Mom. If it makes you happy." I never thought twice about making her happy, and she was right. I loved music, and when I'd listen to it, I was intrigued by how to play any of it. How does music happen? How did these opera vocalists get so high with their voices or hold a note so long? How did the horns peak at the right time with the strings? How did any of it happen? I guess it must start with piano if that's where they want me to start?

"Learning a musical instrument is a privilege." She glanced my way, winked, and then gunned the gas pedal, my head forced back against the headrest. I knew with the wink she was happy for me.

"I never had the chance. Understand how lucky you are that we can afford to buy a piano for you to take lessons."

James Archie Sr., my mother's father, was a classically trained vocalist. He descended from a long line of family musicians. He was a well-known regional singer in the 1940s when my mom was young.

My mother idolized her father and his success. She would say, "Your grandfather was very popular. Hundreds would come from far away to hear him sing. I couldn't believe I was the daughter of someone famous!" Then her expression would sadden. "But he was also a drunk, and my parents had awful fights."

I was never sure if my mom exaggerated the stories of their fights or her father's musical success. Although, one of his live shows was recorded, and she would play the LP vinyl for us. His tenor voice sounded beautiful and pleasant, and he sang with tremendous emotion. When Mom was melancholy, especially when she was drunk, she'd play that record and drift off somewhere else, eyes closed, swaying back and forth. My brother and I would never disturb her then.

My grandfather had supported his family the best he could on a singer's salary, but he spent most of his money on alcohol. Eventually, he was forced to quit performing and work a stable job to keep the lights on. Attempting to keep my grandfather off the sauce, his father opened a dry-cleaning business. My family had a saying that my granddad learned how to clean up other people's clothes, but not himself. He was in his early sixties when he died of a heart attack. I was only three but well remember my mother's

pain; she cried for weeks. Her sadness scared me. That had been the beginning of her unavailability, the start of my profound loneliness and desire for her attention and approval.

From the time I was five, my mother went to a psychiatrist twice a week. My brother and I went too-to the waiting room. It was an appealing office in Madison with soft cushioned couches, magazines on tables, and tall leafy indoor plants. The best part, the Coca-Cola machine in the waiting room would dispense endless amounts of glass bottles for our drinking pleasure. The receptionist never stopped my brother or me from sliding the top of the machine open for more drinks. I was happy if the bubbles kept coming but eventually, I'd get a stomachache. Also, there was never enough Cola to satisfy my curiosity why my Mom was talking to the man "behind the door."

Mom had been diagnosed bipolar with a severe anxiety disorder. She had massive mood swings: being happy and energized, then wholly depressed and shut away in her bedroom. When my dad would come home from work, he would discreetly open the back door and whisper to my brother or me, "How is she today?" During this period, she was admitted to a psychiatric hospital twice. It was the first time I heard the words "suicide attempt." She was gone for two weeks to a month. Each time Mom left, a deep sense of abandonment took over.

In her absence, my father was loving, sometimes reading to us before bed. Although he was also despondent, he took on her housekeeping chores. But between his job and visits to her, we were stuck with our grandmother for much of our caretaking. My

mother's mom came with all sorts of demands and expectations regarding bedtime, dinner, and politeness. Her coldness was far different than our mother's warmth and love, and sometimes we could be downright rude to her. She was an easy target for frustration over our mother's absence.

Our grandmother was highly emotional and would swing between anger and weepiness with predictability that amused my brother and me. When grandma would look for us, we'd giggle, hiding in closets or under beds. We played a game of hide-and-seek that she didn't know she was playing. She always wore a white apron that looked ready to burst; it was tied so tight around her plump waist. "Children, I've asked you to come downstairs now!" This stock high-pitched shriek from her perpetual white Mylanta-lined lips came after other failed attempts to rouse us for dinner. We'd ignore her until she'd crawl up the carpeted flight of stairs on all fours, like a monkey, due to her bad back. She'd whine in tears, her blue eyes squinting in frustration as she approached us. They were the same blue as my mother's eyes, filled with sadness. And mine, filled with curiosity.

"Wait until I tell your father!" That was her final warning, shaking her finger close to our faces when she found us. And it worked. I never wanted to make things worse for my dad.

My mom did not like her mother, as she told me numerous times. I assume this knowledge added to my disregard of my grandmother's feelings and my annoyance of her in my mother's absence. Grandma would say, "Your mother makes excuses. She's just like her father, bless his soul, a drunk and ill-minded. She has

everything in the world--a lovely home, you two beautiful children--and yet she chooses to be ill!"

I knew my grandmother was wrong. My mom didn't choose this. Something was wrong with her, and I had a growing need to protect her. To make her healthy and bring her back to me.

4

SMALL TOWN SECRETS EVERYONE KNOWS

As the years went by and Mom's illness intensified, I was taught that mental illness was a private affair, never admitted to—not in our small town, where everyone seems to know everything. “No one will speak of your mother's condition. This stays within the family,” my grandmother would fiercely state. Personally, it was another matter when she'd yell at my mother. “Mary Ann, you can't take your kids to school in your pajamas! You're a slob, and your drinking is embarrassing.” Mom would return to her bedroom in tears but not before bellowing, “Oh, go take another Valium, Mom!” Both were dealing with a similar illness, but no one spoke of it.

Sometimes Mom would experience Agoraphobia and not leave the house for weeks, sitting in front of the TV like a zombie, smoking one cigarette after another watching *The Price is Right* or *Wheel of Fortune*. Sometimes she'd spout out the answer with

clarity. Or for days she'd stay in bed, in the same clothes. At her worst, she would remain in her bedclothes for weeks, not showering, her hair not brushed. Their bedroom darkened, drapes pulled, sheets wrinkled a thousand times over from her continuous use and an ashtray full of the butts that never satisfied her despair. My dad would sleep on the couch during those times.

Every couple of weeks, she would alternate between depression and mania. When manic, Mom would get her hair done, and she looked beautiful to me, like in her flawless senior high school portrait that hung above our fireplace.

She had endless energy to make sure all the household chores were completed, attending school events and cooking, yet she also wanted to socialize at local bars where she had many friends. Her mania encouraged her drinking and her propensity for telling vulgar jokes, to the amusement of many, and she argued with those who were annoyed by her lack of verbal filter. I recall overhearing someone at our town grocery store say, "That Mary Ann, she's a loose cannon."

At the time, I didn't know what that meant. Years later I figured it out in a McDonald's parking lot in Madison. A stranger had us blocked in our parking spot, and he wouldn't move his car even though my dad beeped and flashed car lights at him. Unexpectedly, Mom lunged out of the passenger side of our Plymouth station wagon. She swiftly marched to the stranger behind the wheel like a bull approaching a Matador. Through his driver side window, she angrily screamed, "Go fuck yourself!" while tapping

her middle fingernail on his window. He didn't look at her. But he did move his car. I slunk down in the backseat, embarrassed.

During times of delusions, she thought everything, and anything was possible. She would tell me, "Dream as big as you want. You have a great voice, just like your grandfather. Keep practicing your piano. Someday you'll be discovered and be famous like Elton John!" To me, those words were magical, and I believed everything she said.

But it was different when she was in her dark, depressive state. Those times left me confused, insecure, and desperate for her attention. Thankfully, my father's dependable presence provided a degree of normalcy. I assumed he made excuses to neighbors and schoolteachers to explain her long absences.

However, by the time our car broke down during the dead of winter on the way to elementary school, and my mom got out, lifted the hood for a look, I assumed everyone knew her condition. As she hailed a neighbor for jumper cables, her shabby house slippers sunk into the snow and her see-through tattered pink night dress swirled in the icy winter air, exposing pale arms and unshaven bare legs. No bra, no coat, no gloves. At least she wore my dad's winter hat--the knock-off Russian kind that covers your ears. She hadn't lost all sensibility.

5

THE STUMBLE INN

Folger's coffee percolated the air on Monday mornings. When I was twelve, I'd sit at the kitchen table, watching Mom sort her weekly meds into her plastic pill organizer with the precision of a pharmacist. She'd count out loud as she dispensed the pills and diligently wrote each drug name, dosage, and side effects on a pocket-sized notebook, she'd carry in her purse. I was impressed by the rainbow array of different colored tablets and capsules.

She openly spoke to me about Lithium, Sertraline and eventually Prozac, as well as her many benzodiazepines. I assumed she told me to prove she was trying to heal or prepare me for the sporadic side effects she would exhibit like drowsiness, slurred speech, agitation. The mere mention of the meds evoked an uneasiness within me.

"Mom, I don't need all the details. I just want you to be happy," I'd say.

“You know, Laur. I keep trying all these damn pills, and I hope one of them is the magic one. One of these days, sweetheart. One of these days.” Her face would sink, and I was sad for her.

I had two years of piano under my belt and an impeding recital. The piano became an outlet for the melodies occupying my head, and maybe a way to reach my mom.

The piano sat against the wall in our living room, the liveliest area in the house. Sitting on the cushioned piano bench, I could ignore the chaos around me, focusing for hours on sheet music, transforming notes on pages into music radiating from the instrument. I liked how repetition improved my ability, and the beauty of the music would seep into my body and provide instant gratification. If I got frustrated with a new piece, I'd look up at the bronzed Beethoven bust on top of the upright Kimball, convinced he was staring back. My dad told me that Beethoven had lost his hearing and yet still created music. If Beethoven could do that, I could keep practicing. Sometimes, exhausted, I'd fall asleep, my head on folded forearms draped over the keys.

For the recital, I chose Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*. Most likely due to the Beethoven bust. When I completed the piece, the applause from the teacher, Mom and Dad, and other kid's parents, tickled my tummy. I felt immense joy and pleasure at their reaction. I wanted to stay at the piano and relish in my feelings, but the teacher shooed me back to my seat. The praise stirred my desire to practice more and even to compose my own music. An ache to become a musician awakened.

As an early teen, my mother's episodes decreased as her psychiatric meds evened her out. On some levels, her pills worked. She was more available, dependable and calm during the week. She was emotionally supportive to my questions on boys and first crushes. However, her weekend binge-drinking worsened. Like clockwork, shortly after dinner, most Friday and Saturday nights Mom and Dad would leave for one of the six bars in our small town. Some Friday nights my brother and I would join for the family fish fry. When the bar kitchen closed at 8 pm, and patron conversations turned louder and raunchier, Mom and Dad would pull us from our game of pool and pitcher of Pepsi and send us home.

Typically, around 10 pm, Dad would come home after he'd had a couple of beers, enough for him. He'd say, "She's still at the bar. She'll come home when she's ready." I learned this meant she'd close the bar down.

Some weekends, I'd overhear Dad call the bar at midnight and ask the bartender to send her home. Occasionally Mom would oblige and return with a round of choice cuss words directed at Dad. Most times she'd stay at the bar. Dad would go to bed, but I remained up for her.

Looking up the sparse tree-lined town street from my second-floor bedroom window, I could see some of the bars. Their neon beer signs flashed in a rhythmic cadence against the black night. In my dark and quiet room, I'd kneel on the red shag carpet, chin on my arms on the windowsill, watching. Pins and needles marching into my legs as they'd fall asleep. I'd adjust to crisscross, eyes

focused on the door of The Stumble Inn. Eventually, she'd stagger out alone or sometimes with a group of swaggering friends. They'd part ways with boisterous laughter, and she'd sway and weave as she walked down the sidewalk. When she shut the front door behind her, I'd return to bed and let my heavy eyelids close for sleep. It was 2 am.

My parents' marriage declined as her drinking increased. Their fighting escalated. Screaming and name calling at the heart of their fights. My father would sometimes have enough of it, grab a suitcase -- never filling it, and abruptly leave the house -- with a slammed door behind him.

I would dash to my bedroom, lock my door and put ear-phones on, and crank up the music to avoid Mom's crying. The music or my heavy panting was not enough to quiet the sound of her smashing beer bottles in the kitchen sink. Sometimes she'd scream: *You're so stupid, Mary. You're just a drunk!* One summer after one of their battles, she threw all her clay potted plants of various sizes and flowers off the back deck, screaming obscenities as she tossed them at the grass. She had no specific target but to release her frustration, and I assumed she hated her actions that caused my dad to leave. If it were winter, and they argued, I escaped to the frozen millpond behind our house and skate. My tears warmed my cold face as they'd fall in sequence to my metal blades that screeched the hard, fractured ice like the sound my parents made when they fought.

Eventually, no matter the season, my dad would return after a few hours, easing the same door open with caution, with beer

on his breath, not drunk. I never saw him drunk. After he returned, he would usually go straight to the couch to sleep or retreat to his basement workbench where he had a cot. He never said a word to my brother or me, and the next morning, he and Mom acted as if nothing happened. Their silence was worse than the argument.

6

BUT YOU'RE A GIRL

It was 1980. I was thirteen. When I wasn't in school, the headphones were plastered on my head, with bands like Queen, Heart, The Police, Journey, and Blondie pounding against my eardrums. I didn't want to leave the turntable, as I sprawled out on the living room shag, attached by a coiled cord to the stereo system. Listening to the band Rush tormented me in an alluring way. I wanted to learn every musical note, vocal inflection, but it was almost impossible. I couldn't figure it out just by listening to them again and again.

With tenacity, I begged my parents to allow me to attend the upcoming Rush concert at Dane County Coliseum in Madison. My dad was going to drive my brother and two neighbor friends to the show. They were fourteen, the age my parents deemed okay to go to a concert. I thought I was close enough to convince them. At first, my parents resisted.

“You're too young, Laurie,” Mom stated.

“You're a girl,” Dad injected.

“Dad, that’s not fair! Because I’m a girl?”

They finally submitted to my foot-stomping, crying, and teen antics, and allowed me to go with a few conditions: no drinking or smoking pot. Who knew that was even an option?

As my dad dropped the four of us outside the concert, he told my brother, index finger firmly pointed out the driver window, to look after me. Also, he advised me to stay close to David.

“I’ll be back in three hours at this exact spot. Meet me here and don’t get in trouble,” he said. His white-knuckled hands on the steering wheel and his squinted blue eyes gave away how reluctant he was to leave. I leaned in through the window, kissed his cheek, and reassured him I’d be fine. He departed, and we started our walk to the arena doors.

While Dad’s taillights faded away, we took an unexpected detour. We’re hailed by older teens tailgating to partake in their beer if we had anything in exchange. I was confident we had nothing to offer. On the contrary, joints fell out of one of our friend’s jean pockets like stolen candy. I was astonished. My brother appeared unmoved, sipping their beer. He wasn’t smoking, but our friends dove in quickly. They pounded beers and blew out plumes of pot smoke that I tried to dodge by waving the smoke away from me. I didn’t want my parents to smell it on me.

I waited, impatient with hands on my hips, occasionally leaning against the stranger’s black Camaro with a gold eagle painted on the hood. AC/DC blared out of its windows. Almost every other car had a similar party going on. It was kind of fun to watch,

but I was more concerned with the steady stream of people entering the Coliseum. I was there for one thing only: Rush.

I yanked on my brother's arm and begged him to leave the tailgaters. He pushed my hand away but eventually obliged. "Guys, we gotta go. Meet you inside," he told our friends. As we walked away, he whispered, "Don't tell Mom and Dad."

Inside, it was a sea of long-haired rock fans in black rock concert t-shirts, and a significant pot haze that hovered over the crowd like a mushroom cloud. There was no way I could escape the strong smell of marijuana. The stage drew my attention, taking up the other end of Coliseum, painted black, surrounded on both sides with a towering wall of speakers that appeared 20 feet tall and 30 feet wide. Now I didn't care about the weed. I made a beeline to the arena floor to get as close as possible.

"Laurie, hold on! We have to stay together," Dave yelled over loud recorded Black Sabbath music that played through the stage speakers.

"I'm going to the front," I yelled.

He shrugged and joined me. "It's gonna be loud and crowded!"

"I hope so," I said eagerly.

We found a small opening, 30 feet from center stage. We're jammed in tightly together, and I had to stand on tippy toes in my all-white Nike high-tops to see the scene on the stage: workers dressed in all black scurrying around, moving cables, tuning guitars, getting ready for showtime. How exciting! One of them was testing the drums. Every time he kicked the bass drum, it felt like

a shock wave beat on my chest. Oh, man, that's Neil Peart's drum kit. I got goosebumps.

I was sweating; a cool breeze passed over my face. A fog machine pumped out white spirals from the stage, temporarily eliminating the weed and cigarette smoke. So, this is a rock show? Hell, yes. I couldn't imagine being anywhere else except on that stage. *Imagine all these people looking at me?*

Finally, the Coliseum lights went down. The audience screamed, and it was the loudest thing I'd ever heard, like an airplane taking off. It hurt my ears, as a reflex I covered them, but then I gave up. I loved how loud it was. The whole place was pitch black, except for cigarette lighters held above the heads of some fans. Standing directly behind me, with barely an inch to spare, packed like sardines, my brother patted my shoulder numerous times--his show of excitement. Unexpectedly, a surge of bodies from behind moved towards the stage. Like a wave engulfing us, I was caught off guard and tumbled on top of the person in front of me. My brother grabbed my t-shirt and yanked me back up. A significant amount of water poured down my back, and it cooled me off, except I soon realized from the smell it was beer. Oh, well. A guy to my left, twice my age, with a beer and cigarette in one hand, turned to me and screamed something I couldn't make out. His thick Fu Manchu mustache surrounded his broad smile, and he put his free hand up for me to slap. I did without pause.

The excitement in the air was magical, and I was ecstatic. I turned my head around to smile at my brother. He responded with a squeeze of his hands, now firmly placed on my shoulders

to keep me close. The audience swayed and moved like a boat on a turbulent sea. With each surge forward, I laughed riotously as my brother's grip tightened. The screaming was finally squelched by the thunderous music booming from the stage: Rush! I recognized the song, 2112: Part 1: Overture. *Holy Crap*.

During the show, I jumped, screamed, clapped, sang out loud, even cried. The experience was spiritual. How can I be a musician like this? I must get on stage, too.

After the concert, we found our friends outside. One of them didn't make it into the show. He got too wasted on weed and beer and passed out in a bush. Oh, no, this won't go over well with my dad. And, like the sergeant he was, he lectured the beer-stinking, sweaty, stoner neighbor for 30 minutes straight, all the way from Madison to Waterloo.

As for me, I thought my new Rush concert t-shirt would cover up the beer smell, but it didn't. I stunk like one of the town bars Mom and Dad would take us. And my previously pristine white high-tops, now covered in dirty footprints and beer stains were a dead giveaway. My parents agreed that I didn't consume anything, but they still grounded me from live concerts for a year. A year! Their only explanation: *You're a girl. You shouldn't be around such corruption*. As for my brother, no ban for him. I was pissed, sad and angry, but at least I saw Rush. And contrary to my parent's intentions, their ban ignited my curiosity and passion for rock music even more.

In late 1981, I was almost fourteen. The live concert ban was still in effect. It didn't matter. I glued my face to the new cable

TV network MTV. I was taken aback by the vibrant artists I watched, especially Queen. The video for *Bohemian Rhapsody* made a regular rotation, and it was heart-stopping. I'd heard the song before, but this was the first time I *saw* Freddie Mercury. He pounded a white piano and strutted like a god in a white satin jumpsuit. I was swooning. He was everything I wanted to be.

The Wilson sisters of Heart and The Runaways were my first exposure to women playing rock guitar, and they became my first artist girl-crush. But Chrissie Hynde fronting The Pretenders showed me how a woman commanded a stage, fronting a band of guys, without depending on her sexuality to sell it. Her presence was so strong and demanding attention that she just *was* sexy. All these women incited a lustful desire to become like them. They looked in control and powerful. Their lives, full of fame and money, must be way better than my lonely life in Waterloo. Rock 'n Roll was the only way to go.

7

ROCK YOU LIKE A HURRICANE

A few weeks after the Rush concert and the stains on my Nike high-tops faded, I asked my parents for a guitar one night over dinner. It was clear, at least to myself: I wanted to be a rock star. “Mom, Dad, I like to play piano, and it’s cool. I already sing a lot at school, but I really want to play guitar. I want to play rock music.”

There was a quiet lull over the Tuna Helper.

“Well, I don’t like rock music,” Dad said finally. “However, you’ve proved with the piano that you can stay focused and respectful to the instrument. So, if we get you a guitar, you need to take lessons. And no electric guitar or any of that loud stuff until you prove you’ve learned the instrument.”

“Yes!” I screamed, jumping up so quickly to hug him, I banged my knee into the bottom of the table. However, the excitement I felt, and his chuckle quelled the pain.

“And keep playing piano!” Mom added. She moaned, “We didn’t pay for all those lessons for nothing.”

“I will, Mom. I still love singing and musicals. It’s just that rock music is so, so, cool.” I moved to hug her gently from behind and kissed her cheek. My brother sneered at my enthusiastic display. He had shown little interest in learning to sing or play an instrument and was not bewitched with music like me.

In the small music store in Madison, I touched every guitar before I picked out my first acoustic, a budget Yamaha. The polished, light tawny-colored lacquered wood on the face of the guitar and the rough steel strings under my fingers was mesmerizing. Even the new aroma of the black hard-shell case was intoxicating. I buried my nose deep in the case, like smelling a flower for the first time. When we drove home, I held the guitar case like a mom grasps a baby to her chest. I was excited, if not delirious and already in love with an instrument I couldn’t yet play.

I immediately began weekly lessons. After learning the basic open chords, then bar chords, it was strumming and picking technique. After two months, *Landslide* by Fleetwood Mac was the first full song I learned. Next, *Stairway to Heaven*. I listened to The Beatles and Prince, trying to figure out their songs by ear.

I *had* to be on stage, singing lead and playing guitar. I needed to perfect my rocker stance. My makeshift mic was the blade of a hockey stick, balanced between piles of books under my bed. Singing at the top of my lungs to the stick handle, playing guitar, I fantasized in front of the mirror. I’m famous, playing at an arena,

as far away as possible from this room, this house, this life in Waterloo.

I practiced guitar and singing every day after school for two to three hours at a time. I succeeded in mastering enough chords and progressions to prove to my parents I was ready for an electric. They honored their word; six months after they bought me my first, they bought my second: A Fender Jazzmaster. It had a creamy-white body, cherry-red pickguard, three single-coil pickups, and a tiny practice amp to go with it that was not much bigger than a shoebox for a pair of winter boots. The small amp had limited volume, so I turned it up as loud as I could until Dad banged on my bedroom door.

A schoolmate Paul took guitar lessons at the same place I did, and we had an instant musical bond. We loved the same bands, and both wanted to be rockers. We formed a group with other high school friends interested in the same goal. Our high school was small, 300 kids in total. It was easy to know who the other rockers were. With Jeff on drums, Guy on bass, four amateur but talented fifteen-year-old kids wanting to be rock stars became Trooper. We practiced nightly in Jeff's family's basement. I'm sure the noise drove Jeff's parents nuts, but I was so excited to play, I never asked. We had been offered a gig at our high school dance after we begged our high school band teacher to let us play. We mustered up cover songs of KISS, Journey, Van Halen, Scorpions, Jefferson Starship and REO Speedwagon.

At the dance, we played on the elevated gymnasium stage, curtains, lighting, and all. Outside of tangling guitar cables and some missed cues, we all got our bearings quickly. Naturals.

I wore a tight black blouse and jeans and one single red bandana wrapped around my head. I felt like I was in the rock band Loverboy. I happily played rhythm guitar and sang lead. I loved singing into that mic, commanding the gymnasium stage, and strutting. I especially enjoyed singing the word “bitch” when we played *Rock You Like a Hurricane*. Under the stage lights, I felt like a real rocker, a grownup, famous. Not the unsophisticated fifteen-year-old with dental braces. Also, our friends and other teens applauded like we were Def Leppard. Moreover, I was also doing something for me—instead of for my ill mother.

Still, Mom was supportive. She came to our show that first night and stood in the back of the high school auditorium, alone. Dad had to work the night shift. She congratulated me and never mentioned my use of foul language.

8

NOTHING BUT A DREAMER

When I was a little girl, my mom made a mania-induced promise to take me to New York City—a promise she kept in 1984 when we visited my Aunt Nan, an actress. By that time, I'd already expressed my desire to move to New York after high school graduation next year and pursue a career in rock music or theater. Mom acknowledged my dream but would caution me back to reality. Her mental health was more stable these days. She said, "Honey, I've told you many times that you'll be famous, but you know I was sick? Just because I said you'd be famous doesn't mean it will happen." I ignored her comment and her tapping hand on my seated leg. I gazed out the airplane window descending into New York City. The high noon sun sparkled off the high-rise metal buildings of Manhattan in the far distance like fine jewelry on display. All I saw was glitz, glamour, and opportunity. *Sorry, Mom, you've already planted that fame seed.*

The first second we walked up out of a subway by 5th Ave and The Plaza Hotel, I was knocked into by a passing stranger. I nearly

fell over. No apology. He never looked back. I didn't care. I liked the oblivious manner of strangers. Mom, not so much. "Hey asshole, you almost knocked my daughter over!" she yelled, thrusting her middle finger at him. "That would never happen in Waterloo!"

"Mom, neither would this." Spellbound, I pointed to the endless array of buildings, Central Park and white decorative horse carriages waiting for passengers. It was like a fairy tale. I looked left, then right. City blocks extended for miles with endless opportunities on the streets: break-dancers performing to hip-hop blaring from a giant boom box; musicians, guitar cases open, busking. It was extraordinary: people yelling over loud taxicab horns; the strong smells of street food, car exhaust, garbage; the enthralling energy of New York City. This was where *everything* was happening: music, life, people, people and more people. My eyes dried up from not blinking.

"It is extraordinary, isn't it?" Mom said. With her arm in mine, she appeared caught up in the energy, too. Her eyes were big and full as she looked around at the city.

"Mom, you know I can make it here, right?"

"Honey, you're sixteen. Just hold your horses and calm down. Let's move slow, okay? Also, I've heard we shouldn't be near Central Park after dark so let's get to Aunt Nan." She squeezed my arm tighter.

I always idolized Aunt Nan. I had vivid memories of her and Uncle Wally, my dad's younger brother and their visits. They'd sweep in from the Big Apple to our sleepy farm town. Aunt Nan and Uncle Wally always looked dashing: he in a tailored suit and her in trim black bell-bottom pantsuits. Their attire was far different from farm town clothes: denim jeans, plaid shirts, baseball caps and muddy boots. She spoke with a smooth, long-winded, theatrical tone, and her evening cocktail was a martini, not the typical Wisconsin Schlitz can. She used a long cigarette holder, delicately balanced at the end of slender fingers.

Nan was petite, and her straight dark brown hair pulled back tightly into a neat bun. She embraced life, always smiling, laughing, hugging. Also, she carried herself the way I assumed a real stage actress should, with class and dignity. She always looked stage ready, with shoulders back, head held high as if performing a monologue. As a young girl, I had no idea what it was like to be an actor, but I was intrigued.

During my birthday trip to New York, I witnessed the stark reality of living the artist's life in that city. And the demise of my elegant aunt. My uncle Wally had passed away five years earlier of a massive stroke. It left Dad heartbroken and my aunt a widow, trying to survive on a limited income in an expensive city.

After Uncle Wally died, Aunt Nan moved from Manhattan to Forest Hills in Queens. Her tiny studio, all that she could afford, had one window, and it faced the elevated subway tracks.

Every time a train passed, the floor would shake, and pictures rattled on the wall, and we'd raise our voices to speak. Her entire cluttered apartment was no bigger than our living room in Waterloo.

Nonetheless, with pride, she showed us around her oasis. She made it her own, with lovely trinkets lining the lone bookshelf that separated her living area from her bedroom. The walls were adorned with framed performance photos, celebrating years of acting. Her home was far less luxurious than what I'd fantasized. Cockroaches crawled the sinks and the only living room furniture--a loveseat and armchair--were both covered with new throw-blankets. (The store packaged creases gave away their freshness.) When we'd sit on either piece, the blanket collapsed and exposed the shabby furniture underneath. However, all I saw was the love in my aunt's eyes for her home, her city, for us.

Aunt Nan was in her early sixties and her acting opportunities had diminished to character roles. To make ends meet, she found side work at a department store selling cookware. Her cigarette smoking and alcohol consumption had reached a new level well beyond what I remember from childhood visits. On this visit, a lit cigarette never left her unsteady hand, and she'd start the late afternoon with a highball. Evenings would end with slurred speech and an overflowing ashtray, which included my mom's contributions.

Thankfully, my mom drank minimally, shooting me a look when Nan poured another round. Mom said, "Oh, Nan. Please enjoy your cocktail. No more for me."

“Oh, Mary. You’re on vacation. Enjoy!”

My mom would smile and let her pour the vodka, but Mom would only take sips to appease Nan. The drunker Nan became, the less my mother pretended, and all together stopped sipping. I could tell it was difficult for Mom. Her hands trembled, and I imagined the unfamiliar environment and small apartment made her uneasy as well, being claustrophobic. Yet, at night, there was laughter and many good stories between the two over those cigarettes and cocktails. Moreover, there was love--lots of hugs and words of endearment. Late into the evening, their rousing conversations about family, politics, and love would finally drive me exhausted to Aunt Nan’s bed, just on the other side of that bookshelf. On her thinning blanket, I comfortably dozed in and out, fantasizing my adult life in New York City. Mostly, I listened to their sweet voices, which occasionally shrieked in laughter or gained in volume as a train passed.

When morning came, and my aunt leaned against her dresser gasping, straining to put on her work clothes, I realized her life in the big city was difficult. My aunt and uncle never made it beyond *off, off* Broadway. Maybe I would? I’m a musician and a singer! They were only actors. Would I have more options?

While visiting, Mom and I took in Dustin Hoffman in *Death of a Salesman*, and *La Traviata* at The Metropolitan Opera. I was impressed with both performances and felt even more inspired to pursue the arts. Now, if only we could go to a rock bar. It was a long shot, but I asked Mom if we could visit CBGBs, the rock

club I'd read about in *Hit Parader* and *Creem*. Her reply was, "CB what? Hell, no."

Even after seeing my aunt's hard life, I still wanted to move to New York City after high school. Maybe if I went to acting school, I imagined, I could appease my parents. Of course, I'd also hit up the rock bars.

But as the days in New York City continued, so did Mom's anxiety. She'd pick at her thumb with her index finger until it bled. She'd cover both fingers with a Band-Aid to stop the compulsion. Also, she added an extra anxiety pill to her morning and evening meds. When we were out in the city, she would hold me close while we walked, frequently commenting, "Oh, there are so many people here, and things move too fast."

After returning to Wisconsin, and in the months preceding my graduation, I secretly wrote to Aunt Nan, expressing my interest in moving to the city. She was supportive, even offering to introduce me to her agent. "I'll tell Lewis about your talents. He may have more luck with you darling, and finally someone in this family will be famous." She also was a tad discouraging of my ambitions. "It costs a lot to live here. You'll have to work many side jobs before you even set foot on a stage. But this city is for dreamers, sweetheart. And you certainly are one."

9

CRUSHED BIG APPLE

Dad knocked on my bedroom door a few times, interrupting my guitar practice. He politely asked me to meet him and Mom at the kitchen table for a talk. The kitchen table had always been the family meeting place, the location of all household discussions. At times, their outcomes had been delightful, like learning we'd vacation at Disney World. Also, there were times of despair, like when Dad told us his brother Wally died, Aunt Nan's husband.

I slowly walked down the stairs, not in a rush to get to the kitchen on this late February afternoon. I assumed our talk was about my plans after I graduate high school in four months, and we'd most likely disagree. I paused at the window at the bottom of the stairs and looked out at the end of the winter snow. The once fluffy stuff had now melted down to hard patches blackened by car exhaust, and the lower half of cars look like they were spray-painted white from the salt that splattered up from the roads. The exact salt that was spread to melt the ice also rusted vehicles,

stained boots and if you got a good whiff, it smelled like an over-chlorinated public swimming pool. If you had a collectible car, you never took it out in the winter. But we had a family station wagon, and it was parked in the driveway with salt and rust climbing up its sides like unwanted vines.

Sitting at the table, I provided an audibly loud swallow that held my anxiety down to my stomach. Mom was holding her coffee mug close to her chest, with both hands wrapped around it like she was protecting a baby bird that lived inside it. Dad was sitting sideways in his chair at the head of the oval kitchen table, his legs crossed, and his hands casually placed over each other. The only digit moving was his index finger on the lower hand, in a slow pulse, tapping the fake wood laminate table.

“I know what you want to do, Laurie. You’ve made it clear on many occasions. However, leaving folded notes with NYC circled in a heart on my work desk does not convince me. Neither does your leaving a pamphlet from Stella Adler’s acting school on my bed pillow.”

“Dad, it’s Stella *Adler*. Not *Atler*.”

“New York City is too big, Laurie, and too far away from Wisconsin.” His voice softened like he was talking to a toddler. “Sweetheart, you live in a town of two-thousand people. You’re only seventeen, soon graduating high school. Now is not the time to go.”

He changed strategies. “Look, you’ve shown interest in the travel industry, and there is a reputable trade school in

Minneapolis, and we think it's a suitable alternative to New York. You need to get some education and still be close to home."

"Dad, I've shown interest in travel because I want to get out of Waterloo."

I was frustrated. I knew he was right. In the past, I talked about how it would be cool flying around the world as a flight attendant or working for an airline. I thought their jobs looked exciting and their uniforms elegant. Something was intriguing and sexy about going to new places with new people. But I thought I'd accomplish that by being a musician.

"Dad, I know to work for an airline or travel agency is cool but it's not New York or music."

"Laurie, it's either stay here in Waterloo and find a menial job or go off to the school in Minneapolis. I'm giving you an option, a damn good one, and you should be grateful. Oh, and there will be no more discussing it." He appeared comfortable and unfazed; in this house, he held the gavel.

I sat to the left of my dad. I slowly rolled side-to-side on the armless swivel chair. My hands were out of sight, under my legs. My fingers were scraping along the trim of the dark-brown vinyl seat. *Tom Sawyer*, a song by Rush, was playing in my mind. Anytime I wanted to escape reality, music was the remedy.

Mom sat across from my dad, still holding her mug closely. Her face was flat. I couldn't read her. Then again, I'm not sure she'd debate him in front of me. He was the alpha; and he was fifteen years her senior. He automatically led her--as he should,

she was the unstable one. But I had ways of convincing him: Daddy's little girl tried once again.

"Okay, Dad. I get it. But I've been talking about going to New York forever. After last year's visit to Aunt Nan, I really feel I can do something magical there."

My father crossed his arms over his chest, leaned back in his chair, and raised an eyebrow. Most likely my word choice—"magical"—had not helped. I paused, sensing the tension. His stiff posture revealed he's unsympathetic. On this topic, there was nothing I could say or do to sway him.

"Well, I guess if Minneapolis is all there is, it's better than staying here in Waterloo," I said, resigned.

I glanced towards my mom. She ignored me and looked to my father. His bald head, reflecting the hanging red and yellow iridescent lamp above the table, was a shiny hue of orange.

He looked up and warmly smiled. "I think it's a good option, Laurie."

"But, Dad, you know I want to pursue music and acting too."

He frowned. He's taping his finger again. This time, faster.

"Okay, I'll go to the travel school. It's a good back-up. But I want to see what's happening with music in Minneapolis, too."

"Laurie, drop it!" He slammed down his fist on the table hard enough to be heard but not hard enough to shake his coffee mug. "Go to school and get the certificate before you consider music or theater. Concentrate on school first. And grow up a bit."

He pushed himself back from the table and stood up, tucking his golf shirt into his pants. He sighed, meaning he was done with

a conversation. Before leaving the room, he turned to me, jiggling the keys and coins in his pockets.

“Laurie, it’s a big world. You have a lot of time to see it. And you will. This time, do it for me, okay? Just stay focused on school,” he said.

He glanced at my mom. She set her coffee mug down on the table. She was now looking directly at me, her eyes welled up with tears. I saw the truth in her face. She was the one behind the decision to make me go to Minneapolis--not him. She was leading this cause.

Even though I was unsatisfied, I reached for her hand resting on the table. She took it tightly and let out the deep breath she’d apparently been holding. I had no idea how she must have felt, but she looked frightened. She was so damn vulnerable. I didn’t want to hurt her.

My dad remained in the kitchen, one hand leaning on the counter for balance as he somberly watched us.

“Okay, I’ll go and focus on school,” I said, conceding. “I’m lucky you’re giving me a chance.” I smiled at my dad. He bowed his head in return and left the room. I looked at Mom, still holding my hand. Her face was red and eyes wet; on the contrary, her smile was broad. It took my breath away when she jumped up and hugged me, giving me no chance to stand. I guess she knew I’d push hard for New York. She had told me on many occasions: You can be as stubborn as your dad.

“Honey, I know how much you love New York, but I’m not comfortable with you being that far away.”

“Mom, then why did you take me there? I thought you want me to be famous.” I pulled away from her hug, continuing to hold her hand as she sat back down.

She didn’t reply. She gripped my hand tighter.

“Mom, I would be okay in New York.”

She didn’t shift.

“Okay, I understand. I’ll go to Minneapolis if it makes *you* feel better,” I said. Pushing her hand away, I stood to leave.

“Honey, you, hold your horses. No one wants you to succeed more than me but at the right time. I need you to take it slow. For me.” She stood and hugged me again, even tighter.

Dammit, it’s always for her! But again, even with her mental illness, she’s a smart, wise mother. Possibly she knows something I don’t.

“Okay, Mom. Okay.”

My mother’s hug remained strong, with no inkling it would dissipate soon. Pressed against her large breasts--which only the women on her side of the family were gifted--I smelled her Fendi perfume. It brought me comfort. I will miss her. She drives me mad, yet she is my mom. Maybe New York is too far away. For now.

10

SMOKING HOT MINNEAPOLIS MUSIC SCENE

What my parents didn't realize was the Minneapolis music scene was on fire. It's the city of Prince, Husker Dü, The Replacements, and many others. Paul, my bandmate from our high school band, Trooper, had just moved there. My mind swirled with excitement for the music that would be at my fingertips.

In August of 1985, a few months shy of turning eighteen, I arrived in downtown Minneapolis with my parents as nervous chauffeurs in the family station wagon filled with dorm essentials. My music dreams were forefront but kept hidden from my parents. I stood on the street outside the all-girl dormitory and read the plaque on the building. *The Pillsbury Club--supported by the Woman's Christian Association.* I stared at the tan brick eight-story building in dismay. *Christian Association?* Was this Mom's doing?

I scanned the streets for public transportation options for future escapes.

As my parents unloaded the car, I gaped at the city in front of me. This was not at all like the feeling I had when I visited New York City, but it would do. There were blaring car horns, tall buildings, sidewalks filled with people of all races, classes, and attitude, moving at a pace that left Waterloo far behind. This was an exciting reality for me; I already liked the vibe--except for the girls' dormitory. Although the dorm did put me smack dab in the middle of downtown Minneapolis. Also, I wouldn't be alone in the nunnery; some other high school girlfriends were moving from Waterloo to attend the travel school and live in the dorm, too.

Before my parents left, Mom and I explored downtown, walking to Nicollet Avenue a few blocks away. We walked arm and arm, holding each other close. I was thankful that my mom, now medicated for years, kept her makeup, hair and appearance attractive and conventional. There was a part of me that didn't want her to leave, yet I couldn't wait for her to go. We looked at department store windows, luring us in to ogle and laugh at things we couldn't afford. We left the stores empty-handed, strolling back to the Pillsbury Club dorm.

"Well, my darling daughter, Dad and I need to start the drive back. It's five hours," she stated, her voice serious.

"Yes, I know, Mom. We just drove five hours up here," I said, laughing. Usually, I would expect, "Oh, you're a smartass," at my comment, but this time she was quiet.

“Laurie, I love you. More than you’ll ever know. We’ll see you in October when you come home for your birthday.” She looked away when she started to crumble and cry.

“Mom, you’ll be fine. I’ll be fine! I love you so much,” I said, pulling her to me. I tried to hold her as tightly as she had held me at the kitchen table.

My dad interrupted the hug--the hug all parents eventually give their kids when they leave home. As a kid, you might wish you could wiggle out of a hug like that. Then years later, you may want to wiggle back in when things fall to pieces.

“Come on, Mary. We need to go,” he said, gently pulling her from me. She obliged and let my dad come forward for his hug. I watched her, in tears, walk away to the car. He pulled my attention back to him, grabbing both my hands and looked directly into my eyes.

“You know where home is. We’re a call away. Stay close to the dorm, study hard, and be safe. Be smart. Always walk on the sidewalk, don’t cut through parking lots. And remember, bad choices will catch up to you. So, don’t do stupid stuff.”

“Jeez, Dad, now I feel stupid when you say it like that. Like I have stupid potential. I’ll be good, don’t worry,” I said as I tried to release his hands. He increased his strong hold on mine.

He looked at me sternly, his eyes not blinking, “All kids have stupid potential, Laurie. It’s expected. Just stay off Hennepin Avenue, here in downtown. I’ve heard bad things.” He grabbed me for a firm, brief hug, and patted my shoulder.

“What’ve you heard, Dad?” He let go of me. His face hardened. He zipped up his jacket to his chin, warding off the crisp autumn breeze.

“Just watch yourself. This isn’t Waterloo.”

“Okay, Dad.” I decided not to push it.

“Goodbye, Laur.” He patted my shoulder again. He appeared uncomfortable to leave, forcing his hands deep into his jacket pockets. He studied my face before he turned to walk away.

I didn’t wait to watch them drive away. I didn’t need to see them leave. I already felt their absence, and I was already thinking about when to go to Hennepin Avenue.

BREAKING ALL THE RULES

Just as Dad suggested, I spent the first month getting accustomed to the sights, sounds, and intensity of big city Minneapolis. The cockiness I had being on my own when my parents drove away turned to waves of homesickness in the first few weeks. I called my mom every other day just to hear her voice and stayed close to the comforts of The Pillsbury Club. Dormitory life was safe, if not bland and boring. Also, quiet. So fucking quiet. By the end of the first month, my desire and curiosity to explore the city had grown. It eventually gripped me and distracted from the *Pillsbury Club Dorm Rules*; the rules by which all wholesome, young Christian women should live by:

1. No men allowed
2. No alcohol or drugs
3. No smoking
4. No loud music
5. No parties

6. No animals
7. 10 pm curfew on weekdays. 11 pm curfew on weekends. Doors lock at curfew and do not open until 6 am
8. If you do not plan to return by curfew, you must call to report your absence

By the end of the third month, I broke rules 2, 4, 5 and 7. I almost broke number 1, but I knew they'd notify my parents because *it puts all the women at risk if a man is in the dormitory!* Rule 7 I broke a lot, because of number 1. So, I broke 8, too. Now the age of eighteen, *my Pillsbury Club rules: dorm life by day, city life by night.*

I hung out more with Paul from Waterloo, who was like a second brother. He made me comfortable in the city. He had the biggest laugh. Everyone was drawn to his great sense of humor and genuineness. His one-bedroom apartment near Uptown, its walls lined with rock posters and beer signs, became a party magnet, especially for us dorm dwellers. He'd also developed into a badass lead-guitarist, with '80s-rocker hair: flawless, shoulder-length, frizzy, spiked on top. He was the quintessential party headmaster.

Paul held ritual weekend bashes, with three expectations of those entering: Drink, laugh, and listen to loud-as-fuck music. He entertained the McConnell Travel School girls, and his fellow Brown Institute buds, with cheap-ass Cold Springs beer or whatever else we could modestly buy from Chicago-Lake Liquors to get us hammered. Zeppelin, Van Halen, Kiss or Cheap Trick

screamed off the vinyl. There was always a knock at the door from the Super to “Turn it down,” or “You kids need to go somewhere else to party!”

A few months after my arrival, Paul and I saved enough cash from our parent’s weekly allowances to hit a budget music studio, where we recorded an original song we co-wrote called *Boy-oh-Boy*. It was my first time in a studio, but I wasn’t nervous, just excited. I felt at ease and at home in a sound booth or at the mixing board. Funny thing is, we had no idea what to do with the song after we finished except play it over and over for our friends. For the time being, that satisfied my rock star desires.

We both attended tech schools by day, but by night we hit every bar we could get in to catch live music. We headed to Uptown, and other areas around the city, for small venues with sticky floors, horrible pours, cheap door prices, and bouncers who didn’t always check your ID. Like Mr. Nibs on 26th. Mr. Nibs became our go-to. We continued this routine for months, mastering an ability to keep awake during school, hungover, and finding live music shows at night. Paul seemed to like the rock star fantasy, but it was not his big dream anymore. “Rock ‘n roll is cool. I mean, I like playing guitar. A lot! Fuck, I wish I was Eddie Van Halen, but that’s not happening,” he confessed one night over some Rolling Rocks. “But Laurie, this is what you came here to do. You gotta find a band.”

I complained that not being nineteen yet, the legal drinking age, there were bars I couldn’t get in. My options were limited, though we did make it to Hennepin Avenue and downtown’s

First Avenue and 7th Street Entry. First Avenue was everything I imagined it would be, just like I saw in *Purple Rain*—this was Prince’s home base: an altar to Minneapolis music. However, since I could only get into all-age shows, we explored further on Hennepin to an area called Block E. It was full of street creeps, homeless, and drug addicts, all floating around outside skanky bars like Moby Dick’s, which had rumors of naked women walking around inside. The endless run of police cars up and down Hennepin recalled my dad’s admonishment to stay away. I could hear his voice: *Bad choices will bite you in the ass later*. Or something like that. The street life entertained me, but I wanted to find bars with live music.

After eight months of studies at the McConnell Travel School, as I promised my parents, I proudly got my travel agent certificate. To have been a more realistic representation of my studies, my diploma should have had beer stains and White Castle grease marks on it.

The backup plan was in place. I moved into an apartment with Paul and another Waterloo alumnus, Amy. The apartment afforded me freedom with men, liquor, and loud music--all of which my former dorm overseers would have found deplorable.

My parents supported the move when I convinced them I’d find travel agent work. I also found a part-time job at Dayton’s Department Store. I had come clean that I was looking to find a band; however, I was not honest about the amount of time I was spending on that goal.

In May of 1986, the drinking age in Minnesota was nineteen. Later in September that year, the state would change it to twenty-one. If you were already nineteen as of September 1, they'd grandfather you in, and you could still get in bars. That was great for Paul and my other friends who were a year older, but I didn't meet the criteria. I would turn nineteen in October, missing the grandfather clause by six weeks. It meant I'd have to wait two years until I was twenty-one to get into bars. I couldn't let a six-week cutoff stand in my way. I wanted to find a band!

Instead of applying my efforts to travel agency applications, proving I knew the three-letter code for worldwide airports, I focused on becoming a fraudulent nineteen-year-old. I took my birth certificate and, ever so gently and precisely, erased the seven in 1967 and added a six to change it to 1966. I made a copy to disguise the forgery. I took it to the Minnesota Department of Transportation and applied for an identification card. For some reason, I imagined it would be illegal to obtain a driver's license with an invalid birthdate, but less so for just a state-issued identification card. Though my logic was skewed, it worked. Besides, I didn't have a car. With the arrival of my identification card in the mail, I became nineteen.

A newspaper ad caught my eye: a local hard-rock cover band was looking for a female singer. The ad took me to a dive bar in St. Paul, where I watched a live show of four long-haired, hard-rocker dudes. They were in their late twenties, wearing ultra-tight t-shirts with strategically placed rips, and red or yellow bandanas tied randomly around their heads, arms, and legs. Their jeans

were so tight, the blood flow to their nuts must have been cut off. Their show was decent, not great. It might be a good place for me to start. After the show, Mike, the band leader invited me to come back the next week to their practice. He told me to prepare *Barracuda* by Heart and *Whole Lotta Love* by Led Zeppelin. Up close, I noticed his long hair was clip-in hair extensions. His façade slightly bothered me, but I was still stoked for the audition.

Nervous but excited, the next week I showed up to their basement rehearsal room below Mike's music store in St. Paul. On limited funds, I worked on the best Wendy Melvoin look I could come up with. I sang *Barracuda* and played rhythm guitar on *Whole Lotta Love*. I knocked both out on their loaned electric guitar and equipment, as I only had my acoustic guitar with me. They offered me to sing lead on girl cover songs, and to play rhythm guitar on the guy covers songs sung by Mike. It was his band, named for his last name: Runner.

It was official! I was in a band! A real band in the Twin Cities. I felt so damn cool. I told all my friends with excitement as if I had just joined Prince's band.

I didn't call my parents and announce the news. It hurt I couldn't tell my mom. I usually told her everything. She'd be excited by this but maybe not just yet.

12

COVER BAND

The band Runner was soon playing local gigs around the twin-cities, at least two shows a week: dive bars to start, within weeks, larger clubs as we got better. My fake ID was paying off. I was singing!

One of our gigs was at a St. Paul bar that shared a passageway, a door between venues, with a strip club. Same owner, different stages. After headlining a weekend gig ending at 2 am, we put off breaking down our gear until the next morning. That next day after loading equipment, the guys in the band wanted breakfast at the strip club: band perk is free food.

It was the first time I saw a female other than myself completely naked. I'd looked at porn magazines when I stumbled on my parent's collection but seeing another woman in the flesh was shocking. She was petite, bleached short hair, big breasts, masturbating with a dildo on an enclosed stage framed by a six-foot-wide by a nine-foot-high cage of Plexiglas. Patrons could feed her money through a bank teller style window. Three burly, unshaven

men sat in front of her, eating their breakfast burritos, watching her go about her business. I sat ten feet away at the bar with the guys, going about our business, eating free food. My bandmates ogled the stripper, although never tipped her. I acted nonchalant although I couldn't help curiously looking up from my eggs at the display. I'm not sure what struck me more: men eating Sunday breakfast watching a woman masturbate like it's a sporting event, or my knowing the difference between her stage performance and mine. While I dressed scantily on stage, I'd never take my clothes off. I used my voice, not my tits.

During the day, when not singing, I offered pleasantries and politeness to customers at my part-time Dayton's job. I wore a below-the-knee skirt and a turtleneck, one-inch-heeled dress-shoes, pantyhose, and minimal makeup. At night, I was a small-time rock-star, in a one-piece lace nightie over torn fishnets, four-inch spike-heeled boots, and black eyeliner streaked an inch wide across my eyes from temple to temple, screaming "Fuck yeah!" into a microphone to an audience that roared in response. My hair was ratted sky high, and I was having a blast, playing guitar, getting my finger-tip calluses built up. I loved to sing lead, hearing the crowd shout with excitement at each song I introduced. I enjoyed seeing people happy. They accepted me. I wished we were playing original music, but I had to start somewhere.

The emotional high I got from playing was unimaginable. I shivered with pleasure with each kick of the bass drum and the roar of the guitars. The sound on stage was ear-deafening, and I

couldn't get enough of it, mainly when I knew I was one of the people creating the onslaught of noise.

I was having so much fun at night, I started to hate my day job in equal measure. Every time I showed up at Dayton's, I thought, *I can't fucking do this*. I wanted to rock out all the time. I considered leaving my job, but this band wasn't making money. I had to continue offering daytime pleasantries to obtain nighttime debauchery. I reminded myself that within a year of arriving here, I was playing live on stage in Minneapolis, doing what I wanted.

As for my parents, I told them I found a band, as a singer. It was casual, I added, part-time and they shouldn't be concerned. They were unmoved, distracted, and that made more sense when Mom told me during one of her phone calls that they were divorcing after twenty years of marriage. It was not surprising. I wondered why it hadn't happened sooner. But she said her illness, while it was better, was too hard for the two of them to continue a relationship. She needed to focus on herself. She tried to reassure me that we'd all be okay. But her words didn't ease my discomfort, however, knowing our family would never be the same. What would happen to our house in Waterloo? To our family dog? I was sad, tearful and I had many questions. Yet I didn't have much time to think about it. I was head deep in music.