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selfish

My journey from escort to monk to me

SARAH MARSHANK

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Redefining Being Self-ish:
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APPRECIATION

Writing a memoir is an exercise in truth telling. It's a confrontational reckoning with one's transgressions and triumphs … the stuff of every human life. Converting the narrative of my life into story, and polishing the many drafts into art, has stretched me to develop a new form of creative expression for myself. This experience has shaped me into an emerging writer. The journey has been a stunning pilgrimage … nine years of unraveling, sorting, and crafting.

This book is a modest testimony to the virtue inherent in every life.

I could not have done it without the love and support of many.

My gratitude goes first to my mother. I must acknowledge her famously. It is through her womb that I was gestated into life, and through her generosity that I was raised in a home with plentiful food, clothing, educational opportunities, and love of the most rudimentary and exquisite sort: care. My representation of my mother in this book in less than wonderful light reflects my perception of her through the lens of who I was at the time and what I was capable of seeing. I trust you will take the journey with me as you read and discover how my perception of her changed because I changed — not because she did. What a deep lesson and teaching this has been for me.

Next, I take a deep respectful bow to my beautiful stepdaughter. I entered her life when she was eight and still in the sweetness of childhood. Though I did not feel ready or capable of being a parent, even a "step" one, she showed me I was worthy, even if imperfect. Her sensitive and generous heart continues to spur my own heart's opening.

My father died while I was writing this book, but I still feel his presence, supporting my success in every aspect of my life. Thanks, Dad.

The journey with my siblings and their families has been difficult — evidence of the complexity of blood relations — and I am humbly grateful for their willingness to forgive and begin again. Especially my sister.

A special note of gratitude to my husband's family members, who have welcomed me fully into their hearts, especially my stepson and his wife, for their great kindness and love. And to Edie, Agnes, and Mae, because being Granni Sarah Rose is one of the most treasured experiences of my life.

Many midwives helped me birth this book. My astute and loving writing coach Edyth Friesen, helped me stay with it when I wanted to give up, masterfully guided the process and the content. My editors, Marilyn Simmonds-Cole, Julie Akins, and Jennifer Margulis brought their keen eyes and ability to call forth the perfect sentence or word. My readers and writing partners, Cat Gould, Marga Laube, Jill Chitra, Donna Zerner, and Leslie Caplan contributed their valuable suggestions and loving support. My copy-editor Deborah-Miriam Leff brought her sharp-sighted eye. My dear sister of the heart and soul, Erin, graced me with her steady and supportive presence. And I offer an especially rich debt of gratitude to Kathryn Thomas for being steadfast in her generosity and impeccability as a devoted friend and exceptional editor.

I am grateful to Sam … for providing me the opportunity to experience a decade of uninterrupted introspection, study, and dedicated practice. His generosity was immense, and his injunction to sit down, shut up, and listen has served me well.

I pay homage to all my teachers, some represented in this story, others unnamed. A special thank you to Jun Po and Marlies, dear friends and teachers who continue to be instrumental in the integration of my inner realization with my precious human life.

Finally, I extend my gratitude to you, the reader, for meeting me here, holding this book in your hand, ready to hear my story, in hopes of inspiring yours.

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Being selfish is often considered unbecoming behavior. Understandably. After all, historically a singular individual's selfish act could get an entire tribe or village wiped out. But just as humans have evolved, considerations around selfishness have evolved as well. With the arrival of industry and technology, the sociology of groups has taken new shapes. The individual has been radically liberated — free to find their own tribe and their own path separate from the family or group they were born into.

There are pros and cons to this development.

When the destiny of a tribe's survival is no longer dependent on any one individual's deviance, then what *is* at stake when a person's drive and actions transcend consideration of the group? And what happens when groups perpetuate extreme coercion to keep their people from individuating?

It looks like the world we presently live in.

We live in a world where unique and authentic expression of an individual's creativity and identity is trending powerfully. While the survival of a singular family is not often at risk as a consequence of this trend, we're beginning to see evidence of who and what might be the casualties of such behavior. One outcome is that, as individuals successfully break away from their home group, disturbing backlashes can arise against them. We're also witnessing an increase in polarization between groups vying for membership, along with heightened radicalization within them.

When I published the first edition of this memoir, *Being Self-ish*, my husband suggested I title the book *Redefining Being Self-ish*. He held the perspective that my story is about the process of inhabiting an integrative relationship between individual freedom and collective well-being — not solely a glorification or admonition of purely self-centered selfishness. He felt the addition of the verb *redefining* would point to the integrity of that process while taking the emphasis off of the verb *being*. He reminded me that my journey has been about pushing the limits of knowing myself and exploring what happens when that process is engaged with a profound sincerity and willingness to be wrong about my actions or ill attuned to the impact of my behavior on others. It's true, I have a good track record of being willing to reflect and make amends. I call this a wise selfishness — one that is in service to becoming a better, more whole individual, ultimately for the benefit of the greater good. In this regard, the book is not encouraging selfishness in a conventional sense. Instead, it is a tale that poses a possibility of how we might orient our selfishness so that it can be enacted wisely and ultimately yield benefit for the good of all.

At the time of publication, I felt that the hyphenating of the word *Self-ish* was enough to indicate what my husband was pointing at.

Turns out I was wrong.

There was significant backlash regarding the title — enough so that some never read beyond the cover. It wasn't long before I came to regret not having added that one qualifying word.

It's amazing the difference a single word can make.

Now, nearly a decade later, I'm choosing to publish this second edition in order to add that word in hopes that more people will find their way into reading it, and then engage in the important work of enacting a wise selfishness in their own lives. By adding the active verb *redefining* my intention is to highlight the importance of actively engaging in the process of re-defining. Not just redefining selfishness, but redefining pretty much everything we think we know about being human.

Why?

Because humanity feels a bit lost, heading down roads that could lead to some very dark places, reflecting a disturbing tendency towards self-destruction rather than self-realization. Though there are many individuals for whom this is not so, there are millions, possibly billions, for which it is. By adding *re-defining* to the title I aim to champion a more promising future, pushing the needle in the direction of awakening a deeper sanity in humanity.

The notion of selfhood is a broad and deep topic, one that has been investigated and debated since the dawn of humankind. I presume no mastery in defining what the self is. However, I do bring competency in understanding the landscape of the territory of twenty-first century selfhood, and creating favorable conditions for discovering this beautiful and ephemeral quality of our existence.

Current trends in what the Dalai Lama calls an unwise selfishness — where seeking fame and fortune eclipses our inherent generosity and care for all life, and where a drive for power and celebrity overrides our longing for collaboration and authenticity — urge us to revisit how we are attending to the sacred work of growing ourselves into more mature and better humans.

Re-defining Being Self-ish is my gift to you. It's one version of what self-discovery might look like and is meant to call forth the wisest selfishness from inside of you.

May it be so.

Sarah Marshank
Spring 2024

A NOTE TO THE READER

An autobiography tells the story *of* a life, memoir tells a story *from* a life.
All accounts in this memoir are true to my memory.
Some events and characters are a blend of more than one.
All names have been changed except for Steven, Jun Po, and Edie.

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broken

1

I'm pacing the perimeter of the abandoned tennis court behind my small secluded cottage in Bonny Doon, California. I'm alone, hunched over, looking down at the deteriorating concrete beneath my bare feet. I wonder how it is that things fall apart. How it is that I am falling apart. Walking in circles helps calm the incessant chatter in my head. The rhythm of my stride generates welcome space between my thoughts.

I take advantage of the opening and ask for help.

Who are you asking?

I can't say for sure. I only know that if angels or guardian spirits or even a God exists, this is the time for one of them to show up.

Don't you think they'd have shown up by now?

Maybe I'm not listening in the right way.

Or maybe you don't deserve their help.

Maybe you should shut up.

Are you going to have this baby or not?

I don't know!

Maybe you'd better decide.

I'd hate it if somebody else made this decision for me, but I'm not doing a very good job of making it for myself. Despite being raised in a traditional Jewish home, I don't believe in any particular religious code of ethics. I'm searching for my own sense of right and wrong.

A vision appears before me. It's a boy, roughly three years old, with skin the color of caramel. Golden curls frame his sweet face. He has my

blue-green eyes. They're vivacious. I drop to my knees and reach for my child as he extends his arms towards me.

We're almost embracing when I notice his father, Malik, beside him. I freeze. Behind Malik stands his whole family. Strangers to me, they crowd together like an angry mob. They're African, wild and impossible for me to understand. I want to grab my son and run.

"GO AWAY!" I shout as I reach for my little boy. But they surround him and won't let me through.

I collapse beside the crumbling tennis court and cry. I wish my tears could wash away this entire mess and leave me free to get on with my life.

If only.

I roll onto my back and stare at the redwood forest surrounding me. This patch of land was cleared to build this tennis court almost forty years ago but the owners stopped maintaining it at some point. Now the forest is slowly reclaiming what was hers.

I roll onto my side.

I recognize the weed growing in front of my face.

"Plantain's great for skin irritations," my herbology teacher taught me. "Chew it to a pulp, then place it on inflamed areas."

I want to rip it from the earth and plaster it on my brain. Console the hysteria plaguing my psyche like a rash gone rogue.

Get up.

I stand, brush the dirt off my soft cotton dress, and redo my ponytail. I continue pacing.

If I don't have this baby, then I can just get on with my life, continue along the path I've been on.

And what path is that?

You know! The path I'm on. MY path. The path that doesn't have me birthing the child of some Rastafarian man I hardly know and certainly don't love. The path that doesn't have me living through another abortion.

The path that leads me to fulfillment of my dreams, to a meaningful career, to my perfect mate, to happily-ever-after. THAT path.

Shit. You're starting to lose it. Relax. You can handle this. Neither decision is the end of the world. Do you hear me?

"Not the end of the world," I repeat like a mantra, planting one foot in front of the other.

Not the end of the world.

"Just the end of MY world," I shout, this time out loud.

Less than a year ago I had my first abortion. My boyfriend Mark and I had been practicing the rhythm method, exploring natural birth control as an alternative to latex or hormones. I took my temperature daily to track my ovulation. We abstained when I was fertile. The rest of the time he religiously pulled out. Until the time he didn't. Even though my temperature indicated we were safe, we weren't. I got pregnant.

Moving to California three years ago was supposed to satisfy my longing for a life eluding me in the Midwest. Even though I couldn't name precisely what I was yearning for, I could feel it. When I left the University of Michigan in the middle of my junior year and moved to Santa Cruz, my ideal future felt closer. Until I got pregnant.

I'd been dating Mark longer than any other lover, but six months isn't enough of a foundation for marriage. Committing to him *and* a child felt scary and reckless. I was madly absorbed in my studies in Alternative Education at UCSC, enjoying my job at a popular restaurant on campus, and passionately involved in protests against the proliferation of nuclear power. The life I imagined for myself was materializing, but becoming a mother at twenty-two was never a part of my vision.

Terminating that first pregnancy was a relatively uncomplicated decision. After a very brief consideration to run away with Mark and become barefoot and pregnant for the next ten years, I chose the procedure confidently. Abortion isn't a big deal in my world. After all, it's the eighties.

Roe v. Wade is ten years old. I knew two other women who aborted their pregnancies. I viewed the undertaking as casually as having my wisdom teeth pulled; something I didn't need was going to be removed.

Simple.

Mark and I split up soon after. The abortion hit us harder than we imagined. Not knowing how to cope with our feelings, we each withdrew. Mark trekked off to India and I dove deeper into my studies at school. The decision to end both the pregnancy and the relationship was mutual. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that somehow I'd failed. I was inconsolably sad. I tried therapy, which provided some support, but hiring a professional to ease my pain only succeeded in distracting me from it in the moment. As soon as a session ended I was buried under a certain bewildering sorrow.

Slowly suffocating.

I'm not the same person I was a year ago. I'm not sure who I am now. All I know is that having experienced one abortion, I can't so casually choose to have another. Not because I feel it's morally wrong, per se. It's more the uncertainty around knowing how to make this decision that troubles me. I'm not sure if I believe abortion is Wrong, capital W, or just wrong for me. I need more time to sort this out and time is something I don't have. I'm already three weeks pregnant. I'm afraid if I have this abortion and I realize afterward it was a mistake, I won't emotionally recover. I'm equally afraid if I have this baby out of fear of punishment or to avoid the psychological consequences, then I'll resent my child and be a horrible parent.

My philosophical reflection is overridden by my body's desperate plea.

"Not another one," it begs.

How will I ever reconcile these various parts of me?

Good question!

* * *

My attention is drawn to another hallucination. Malik appears on the other side of the court walking towards me. He glides his small tight frame over to where I stand trembling and smiles at me with dazzling white teeth.

He looks so real.

His eyes are dark, like his skin, and angled, making him look part Asian. His matted black hair is bound up high in a tri-colored knitted cap with one long dreadlock hanging down his back.

"Leah." The ghost calls me by my Hebrew name.

I close my eyes and try to remember Malik's affection towards me. Memories of his kindness are fading.

"I don't think we should have this baby," I finally whisper to him. "I'm not ready to be a mom. There's so much I still need to learn. And, no offense, but you know I don't love you the way I want to love the man I marry and have kids with. Besides, you're a black man, and a Rastafarian. My family would freak out."

I'm scratching the cuticle of my thumb raw with my index finger.

"I understand," Malik says in his Jamaican-British hybrid accent. "But there's another alternative. You can give birth to our child and then give him to me."

I open my eyes and turn away from the vision, feeling unhinged. The sun is low in the sky and a chill grabs me on the front of my neck. I start to walk fast again, trying to get warm.

Malik and I met shortly after Mark left for India. My friend Laura introduced us. Malik is her boyfriend. I met Laura in a World Religion class last semester. I came to class curious about how other religions view death and find meaning in life, whereas Laura had already found her answers. Through Malik and Rastafarianism.

Malik suggested we have sex. He said having sex would erase my body's memory of Mark and help liberate the grief from the abortion. Laura

said it was okay with her. She agreed that making love might heal my soul. I was willing to give it a try.

Malik and I did it only once.

The sex was awkward. Forced. I closed my eyes when Malik entered me, hoping his thrust would break through my sadness and make me feel happy again. But my body remained tight, my hope for even the tiniest amount of pleasure thwarted by his instantaneous ejaculation.

When Malik rolled off me, we discovered the tear in the condom.

It wasn't your fault.

I wish I would've used my diaphragm for added protection.

W*ishing won't change a fucking thing.*

"I can't have this child and then just give it away," I decide aloud, imagining a life separated from the child conceived in my body.

If I birth it, I raise it.

Malik's invisible presence still hovers above me.

"GO AWAY!" I scream as I swat furiously into the sky.

"I warn you, Leah," the voice is loud. "If you kill our child, you'll go to hell."

I begin to run, rattled by this curse. His condemnation infiltrates my psyche and lodges in the cracks forming there.

I'm familiar with Malik's moral beliefs because I've been studying his religion for months now. Rastafarians claim to be the lost tribe of Israel and the carriers of the authentic messianic teachings of Judaism. I began re-reading the Old Testament with Malik. Malik's interpretations of the Biblical stories offered me a whole new perspective on being a Jew. I was an eager student. Malik and I covered a lot of topics during our studies together. But he never mentioned hell.

The sun has dropped behind the trees and I feel painfully cold. Wholly abandoned.

"*You're* to blame," I cry out to Malik, wherever he is. "*You're* the one who should go to hell. It was *your* bad idea, *your* stupid penis, and *your* defective condom that caused this."

But the aftermath of those irreversible ten seconds lives in my body now. It doesn't matter how it got here or who the father is. I am pregnant.

Whether I have this baby or not, I am ruined.

You should've known better.

I brace against my inevitable breakdown, desperate for a clear and confident decision to miraculously appear. But I'm tumbling fast with nothing to hold onto.

2

My brother Jacob turns up on my doorstep the next morning uninvited and unannounced. Although I'm startled, I'm not surprised he's here. Showing up for one another began when we were little. Once when he was two I accidentally locked him in the bathroom. I stayed home from kindergarten that day and sat outside the bathroom door, my eye glued to the keyhole so I could see him. I told him stories until the fireman arrived to break the lock.

"You okay?" he asks me now as he drops his backpack on the floor and pulls me in for a hug.

"No," I admit. "I'm a mess."

"I had a feeling," he says. "I've tried calling you a hundred times with no answer, so I hopped on a plane last night."

It was just a week ago when I saw Jacob in Detroit while visiting our family for Passover. I wish I hadn't gone. I'd discovered my pregnancy only days before and wasn't planning on telling my family until after I'd decided what I was going to do. But I caved and told my mom while we were preparing a *matzah brie* together. Being in my childhood home must have lulled me into believing it was a good idea to share it with her.

I broke the unleavened bread into bite-sized pieces and dropped them into a bowl of cracked eggs. Then, as if I'd been held under water and finally surfaced, I blurted out the news in a gasp — as if confession was like breathing, natural and unfettered, freeing me from the burden of a secret. Instantly I knew it was a mistake. My mother would-not-could-not understand.

But it was too late.

I stood at the kitchen counter coming undone, one part of me reeling with shame for being unintentionally pregnant again and another part frozen behind a stifled panic. I watched my mother fold into herself. Her long fingers wrapped tightly around the bowl as she slid it closer to her.

My mother doesn't care much for discussing inner struggles. Her own or anybody else's. She's built for operational tasks, like shopping and laundry. Though small in stature, she easily gave birth five times and cared for a growing family while working as a first-grade teacher. She was highly praised for her performance at school. Hundreds of former students still pay homage to my mom for the impact she had on their lives.

They got a piece of her you never did.

"Well," she said, carefully pouring the raw egg mixture into a sizzling frying pan. I stared at the back of her neck, imagining the look on her face. "I know a doctor who can probably get you in for a procedure right away."

She didn't ask how I was feeling, how it happened, or even who the father was. I walked over to face her, searched for sympathy behind her malachite eyes, and attempted to embrace her unyielding body. Then I went to my bedroom and had a total meltdown, crying for the mother I didn't get in this life, sobbing into the belly of my tattered Raggedy Ann doll.

I slept fitfully, unable to get comfortable in my childhood twin bed. I rose before dawn and called a cab, hoping it would arrive before anybody woke up. When my father heard the car, he ran barefoot into the driveway to stop me. His striped cotton pajamas and disheveled gray hair made me think of Albert Einstein.

If only your dad had Einstein's wisdom.

"Lis, baby," my father pleaded, his brow tight above worried eyes, "Why not stay a few more days? Let us help you sort this out."

"I can't, Dad," I said coldly, handing my suitcase to the taxi driver. "I need to go. I'll figure this out on my own."

"Let us help you do what's right," he begged as I settled into the back seat and closed the door.

I looked away from his hand pressing on the window, imagining him coercing me into a decision born solely out of his standards of right and wrong.

You and mom have no idea who I am. Or what's best for me.

But as we pulled away, I secretly hoped for him to stop the taxi, rescue me, and make all my trouble go away.

That's not his job.

I turn to my younger brother now. I notice a hint of my former self in his presence. My together self. Jacob's cobalt blue eyes shine like star sapphires. Clear and vibrant. Ready for an adventure. Mine feel heavy and are blood shot.

"I think I might be going insane," I confess. "I feel pummeled, like I've been wrung through one of those bathing-suit dryers we used after swimming lessons when we were kids. Remember those? With the rubber rollers?"

Jacob nods.

"My love of life has been squeezed out of me. And I feel scared," I admit.

He touches my hand. Says nothing.

I hope he can handle this.

"I can't believe I got myself into this mess. I just can't fucking believe it."

Believe it already! Just make a decision, for God's sake.

"How can I help?" Jacob asks.

I have no answer.

He surveys my tiny kitchen for something to eat, but my cupboards are basically empty.

"How 'bout we go get some food?" he suggests.

I haven't eaten in two days.

We drive in silence to my favorite pizza place downtown. I slide into the booth across from Jacob, sinking into the corner, hoping I won't see anybody I know. We order a large cheese pie and two sodas.

"Lisa." Jacob reaches across the table to hold my hand.

Because Malik and Laura have been calling me by my Hebrew name, hearing Jacob say "Lisa" jostles me from a stupor. I take a deep breath to reorient my sense of self.

I wonder if I'm psychotic.

I take Jacob's hand in mine.

"Why don't you just have another abortion?" he asks, leaning his upper body towards the table. His question tugs at my heart.

"I'm not sure. I think I might be afraid I'll go to hell," I say.

Jacob raises his eyebrows. "Hell?"

"Yeah. Malik says that's what'll happen if I abort. I don't believe in a literal hell, but something's got a grip on me. Since aborting my pregnancy with Mark I've been living in *some* sort of hell."

Jacob is silent. He looks at me with softening eyes.

"I asked Dad what Judaism's stance is on abortions," I continue, "and if I would get into some sort of Jewish trouble for having one."

"Really?" Jacob lights up. "What did he say?"

"He said that in the future when I do have a child, there would be a consequence only if it's a boy. My son wouldn't be entitled to receive the *pideon haben* blessing for a firstborn boy, because he technically wouldn't be first-born."

"That's it?"

"Yep."

"Okay, so no hell," Jacob seems relieved. "And as for that blessing, who cares?"

"Yeah, but what if it's not true?" I counter. "What if Dad just doesn't know, like so many other things about life he doesn't know. Or maybe he knows but didn't want to tell me because he never liked Mark and didn't

want me to have Mark's baby. And forget about Malik. I can't imagine Dad would ever support me to have a child with a black man. Not his daughter."

I pause to consider my own prejudice, tucked away somewhere inside.

Is this why I don't want to have this baby? Does Malik's dark skin trigger only my father's discomfort, or do I also have an issue with it, too?

Worth looking into, don't ya think?

A chubby waitress in tight jeans places a steaming round pizza on the table. The cheese is perfectly golden. Jacob slides a slice onto a plate and hands it to me. I blow on it, then fold and bite. The calories go right to my brain. I feel suddenly sturdier as I watch Jacob silently scarf down his piece.

"Do *you* think hell exists?" I ask.

"I dunno, Lis," he answers with his mouth full. "But if I were you I wouldn't worry about it." Jacob slides another slice onto his plate. "Since you already had one abortion, you've already earned a sentence to hell if that's what happens. So, if you have another abortion, d'ya think God's gonna make you serve two terms back to back?"

"Maybe," I chuckle nervously at the absurdity.

"Well, then, who cares? You're screwed no matter what."

I hate this.

Jacob looks up and smiles at me. His love touches the edges of the panic slowly swallowing me.

"But what if you're not going to hell?" Jacob continues. "What if there's a way to get through this and move on? Don't you think it makes sense to take a chance? Having a baby right now seems like it could be too much for you to handle and unfair to the kid. And to Malik."

I nod.

"You can have children later, Lis, with somebody you love," he says. "You'll survive this. You'll figure things out. If anybody can do it, it's you."

I draw a long sip of Sprite through the straw until I'm sucking air between melting ice cubes. I'm not so sure Jacob is right about me.

"And here's what little I do know about souls," Jacob adds. "It seems like every religion has a way of fixing 'em."

"Such as accepting Jesus as my savior?" I say sarcastically.

"Who knows?" Jacob is optimistic. "Try to stay positive. Be open. Life is full of possibilities."

I push away the thought of becoming a Christian and for a moment envision a life even better than any I've ever dreamed of. I can't see the details, but I'm charged with a wave of hope.

Suddenly my thought stream gets hijacked and I perceive a different outcome. I see a frazzled woman leaning against a pole in an airport. She's waving goodbye to a young child with wild curly hair. The child's boarding a plane by himself. He's off to spend Christmas in Jamaica with his dad.

I feel suddenly nauseous, like I might not be able to keep down this pizza.

I lean into the booth and rest the back of my head on the seat. I close my eyes. Indecision surfaces for the millionth time.

I'm completely drained.

It's time to act.

I surrender to the most sensible choice.

Before I change my mind, I tell Jacob, the one man I'm certain loves me unconditionally, "I'll have the abortion."

"Okay," he says, "I'll arrange everything. Don't worry."

The waitress sets our bill on the table.

We stand to leave.

I reach for the ground beneath my feet.

It drops.

3

Jacob and I catch a red-eye that night and land at Detroit Metro Airport early on a humid Sunday morning. Our parents meet us at baggage claim. I feel so humiliated I can barely look at them.

I wish I had my shit together.

I hate that my parents are involved in this. I should be able to handle life on my own, without their help.

We drive in silence from the airport to a red brick office building. The parking lot is deserted except for one silver Mercedes. A man gets out. He's short and stocky with a receding blond hairline. He takes off his sunglasses to greet us.

Dr. Levine is here to repay a favor to my mom.

My family waits in the car while Dr. Levine leads me into the empty building, turning on lights as we go. He takes me to a treatment room and starts arranging objects on a surgical tray. I can't bear to look. I'm concentrating intently on getting through this. I feel like I'm buried underground, waiting for this whole thing to be over so I can dig myself out and find my way back to the living.

I undress from the waist down and get on the table. I know the routine. I place my feet in the cold metal stirrups.

I close my eyes, vowing to hold my tears for later.

Not the end of the world.

"I'm going to numb the surface area and then insert a small rod into your cervix to dilate it a bit before I proceed." He speaks to me but I'm barely listening. I'm holding my legs steady and whispering a desperate

plea to whomever or whatever is listening that I'll be okay when this is over, that I'm not fucking up my life forever.

Dr. Levine drags a wheeled gadget close to us. It looks like a small portable vacuum. The air in the room is stifling. He inserts a wand-like object into my womb and flips a switch. The machine's whizzing sound startles me and I grip the sides of the table.

In less than three minutes it's over.

My second child is gone.

Both the man who fertilized my egg and the man who just sucked the fetus out of me have dramatically impacted my life. Meanwhile their lives go on as usual.

This pisses me off.

You have no idea what Malik is feeling.

Dr. Levine hands me a maxi pad and a prescription for Vicodin, then leaves me alone in the room to dress. As I step into my underpants I reel from a chilling wave of dread.

What have you done?

The irreversibility of the last ten minutes overtakes me. I confront the reality that, in my efforts to clean up the mess I got myself into, I've just made it worse. Like washing my mistake away with a dirty sponge.

I place the pad in my crotch and begin to weep quietly.

Dr. Levine escorts me back to the parking lot mumbling something about "Michigan weather" and "enjoy your visit." I want to smack him.

What if I were your daughter?

He reaches out to shake my father's hand, then hugs my mother.

She thanks him for his kindness.

I lie down in the back seat of the car and rest my head in Jacob's lap. He strokes my hair as I dream of Vicodin and sleeping for as long as possible.

As night arrives I'm awake in bed with a deep ache in my pelvis. The house is quiet. My parents are in their bedroom watching TV. Jacob is out

with friends. My older brother David is away at college. My sister Ellen, a junior in high school, can't be bothered with family drama. She's spending the night at her best friend's house. My youngest brother Adam, an eighth grader stumbling his way through puberty, is holed up in his room. I'm not sure he even knows what just happened to me. We sat together earlier at the dinner table and spoke about nothing real.

Just like old times.

My mom made her signature chicken soup. I sipped from my bowl, hoping for comfort, but my stomach refused it.

See, nothing she gives you ends up being what you need.

I look around my old bedroom. It's still decorated lemon yellow from my adolescence. Books I devoured as a young girl are stacked neatly on the shelves: *The Happy Hollisters, Anne of Green Gables, Nancy Drew*. A pink jewelry box with a ballerina who twirls to music when the lid is open sits on the dresser next to my seventh-grade science fair award.

This place is haunted.

Memories begin to unfurl in my mind. When I turned eleven Peter moved in across the street. I had a huge crush on him. He played baseball with my brothers nearly every afternoon in the summer. I would take them cold drinks, then stay for a while and watch them play. I'd patiently wait for Peter to take an interest in me, but he never did. I stood at the curb feeling increasingly invisible, undeniably unattractive.

Then, in sixth grade my mom forced me to wear polyester pants to school when all my peers were wearing Levis. When I heard kids making fun of me I wanted to punch my mother, force her to let me shop for myself, and find my own style. But my parents had opinions about proper school attire. So I tried to ignore the remarks of the other kids and pretend their comments didn't bother me. I acted as if I didn't care.

I'm tormented now by the many ways I never felt like I fit in.

This is why you left Michigan. You don't belong here. You never did.

I heave myself out of bed and stumble down the hall to the bathroom, the pad in my underpants heavy with blood. I sit on the toilet, elbows on my thighs, forehead cradled in my hands, and close my eyes.

Another memory appears. I am nine years old. I'm sitting on this same toilet and it's the middle of the night. It's the end of summer. Eleven Israeli Olympians have just been assassinated in Munich by the Palestinian terrorist group, Black September. My parents were talking about this at dinner. A lot of people are upset.

I don't understand human behavior.

We recently moved into this house in a developing suburban neighborhood. Built from scratch. Just for us. The brand new shag carpets still smell like rubber cement. I raise the blind on the window next to me. Without the glow of street lamps or city lights, the darkness is thick. I'm intrigued. I open the window and invite the darkness in. I stick my head out and stare at the sky. I've never seen so many stars.

If nobody were here to see them, would the stars still exist?

I sit pondering this thought for some time.

My adult body shivers now. The time and space between that moment and this one contract like plastic wrap too close to a flame. The question about the stars and their observers embedded itself into my psyche that night. I remember trying to imagine myself not existing, stretching to imagine nothing existing.

Now, sitting in the same spot fourteen years later, I open the window again. I peer into the night. I'm filled with wonder. Inhaling the gentle spring breeze, I invite the curiosity of my nine-year-old self to return to me.

The question arises again. Same, but different.

If there's no God to see my sins, do my sins still exist?

I feel surprisingly relieved. Imagining a Godless world triggers some place inside of me. I sense the answer to my question might be so near that all I have to do is reach out and grab it.

Blood leaves my body and lands in the toilet, steady like a metronome. Drip. Drip. Drip. I feel my life force falling out of me, hear the drops splashing, but can't feel what bleeds. I want to touch my wound, comfort it. After all, I caused it. I imagine it would be easier to nurse my torn-up uterus than address my despair. I will never know if this is true.

Despair wins.

now

NOW

Steven and I continue to deepen in our love. We walk steadily through life together, nurturing our individual selfhood while weaving our separateness into an exquisite partnership. We're passionately engaged in our work as agents of change in a complex evolving world, following the call to serve. The process of reconciling with death has us wandering into the final chapters of our lives tenderheartedly, delighting in being friends, lovers, parents, and grandparents.

While writing the first edition of this book, I founded Selfistry, a platform for learning the art of being human, offering simple and elegant methods for self-discovery. Derived from my personal experience, Selfistry maps three essential realms on the journey to radical self-knowledge and authentic selfhood.

Through Selfistry I provide a way into the depths of stillness and silence without needing to retreat from the world. I show the value of cultivating solitude alongside a capacity to objectively witness both internal and external influences. I teach the difference between facing oneself and trying to fix oneself. Selfistry harvests tools and teachings from spiritual traditions throughout history, but strips them of dogma, rhetoric, and ritual, upcycling them into accessible and effective forms of self development suited to the times.

I teach Selfistry worldwide and am an embodied ambassador for healthy and wise selfishness. When not teaching or writing or podcasting or engaging in rich conversations through various platforms, I enjoy traveling and exploring other lands and cultures, eating delicious locally sourced

sustainable food, reading a wide range of fabulous writers, learning from other deep thinkers and practitioners, being in the magnificence of nature, resting in the arms of my beloved, and appreciating the remarkable creativity emerging in our world.

If you want to know more about Selfistry, go to selfistry.com or read *Selfistry: A Guide to Embodying Timeless Spiritual Wisdom*. Available everywhere you buy or listen to books.

My journey from escort to monk to me

Religion preaches selflessness as the path to inner peace, while modern culture champions self-actualization as the ultimate goal. So, which is it? Focus on the self or diminish it?

In Redefining Being Self-ish I confront this profound question head-on. My journey is deeply personal, involving abortions, sex work, family trauma, and a decade living off the grid in rural Oregon. It also delivers a kaleidoscope of insights and information, providing a roadmap for others navigating the labyrinth of life.

In the end, I discovered a life worth living, where the self is finally seated in its proper place — neither diminished nor exalted. What you'll read in these pages is more than a memoir; it's a universal narrative capturing the timeless value of self-inquiry ... redefining what it means to be truly Self-ish.

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