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Cekpa

A Memoir in Beaded Essays

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Cekpa: A Memoir in Beaded Essays

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Content Warning

The book you hold in your hands tells a story about my truth—the best and worst parts, the ugly and the beautiful—all mixed up in one narrative that makes me human. Telling it takes courage. There are discussions of child abuse and neglect, navigating abusive environments, self-harm, mental illness, and sexual assault. Please take care in your reading, and know when and how to engage and disengage as you see fit. Only you know your own battle wounds.

For my daughters.

Preface

When your great-grandmother is telling a good story, she makes creases in her napkin like an accordion. She's almost always at the dinner table, when she is most likely surrounded by family members on an occasion during which we are all gathered, like Christmas or a birthday, or just the general Friday night gathering. (A common phrase in our family: "Are we doing Friday night?")

In place of a napkin, any small bit of fabric will do. A piece of paper, even . . . a doily, one of the ones she tatted herself lifetimes ago and that cover every surface in her living room.

She pauses—a long, dramatic pause—until she has all of the attention in the room, looking down at her napkin or paper or doily humbly, and waits until every eye is on her, and then she begins.

Someone once told me they caught me doing the same thing in a work meeting and commented on how effective it was. They mistakenly thought it a cultural thing, because I'm Native American. More specifically, I am Lakota. Our family on my birth father's side is from Pine Ridge, South Dakota. Your great-grandmother—my grandma, your grandma Gigi's mom, my adoptive mom's mom—is not my blood relative.

That doesn't mean they aren't our family. It means that they chose us. In fact, they had to go out of their way to get us—they had to really, really want a baby. And that baby was me, your mama.

Almost a Car Crash

I was flying up the freeway in my little 1992 Nissan Sentra hatchback. The windows were rolled down, and it was a beautiful spring day. The cool air felt good on my hot skin.

The Nissan was my very first car. I picked it out when I saw it sitting outside one of my favorite little bookstores in southeast Portland near Cleveland High School less than a year earlier. It had a sign on it that read "$1,000 OBO." My dad bought it outright, a grand in cash, for my sixteenth birthday. He didn't believe in negotiating.

He took me to a parking lot right after we bought it, down the street at the old K-Mart. The gigantic parking lot, bigger than a football field, was mostly empty. He showed me how to drive stick; I cried and cried, because I was so frustrated. And then suddenly, it clicked.

About ten months later, accelerating on the freeway, the wind blew my long hair around my face. It tangled in clumps when it mixed with my thick, salty tears. I kept thinking, *just make it until you get home. You can hold it together until then, can't you?*

My first high school, Parkrose High School, hadn't worked out. I started the school in honors classes and soccer, and quickly dropped out because of skipping classes. I also got caught smoking pot in

Spearfish. This is why I came, to find . . . I gave some tobacco to a lady out here. She's an instructor at the school. She's a sun dancer. I asked her to help me find a sweat lodge."

"Well, be careful," she warned, "of who you get involved with out here, okay?"

"Okay."

Another pause. We both held our breath. When she spoke next, it was very quiet, very unlike the voice that was speaking before.

"You know, you gotta be strong now. People never turn out to be how you expect them to be out here. Everyone's really . . . poor. I bet you grew up in a middle-class family, huh?" She wasn't wrong. "What do your parents do?"

"My mom's a nurse, and my dad is a warehouse supervisor."

"Well, yeah . . . then things are definitely going to be real different out here for you. Are you ready?"

I laughed. The laughter broke against the walls of my chest. Wanda was silent.

"Probably not," I admitted.

When I hung up the phone, I sat, stunned, watching the second hand on the clock gently push the minute hand closer to the time when class would start, and then farther. I couldn't think, I couldn't breathe. If I could think, I wouldn't know where to begin. The floor beneath me suddenly seemed as if it were on top of my head and slanted sideways, falling off into space, and with it, everything I knew to be true about my life.

I felt the rush of tears coming up like after a night of Jack Daniels and dancing, when everything around me would be spinning; and crying, like throwing up, was a release. It was like trying to breathe underwater. I came out the other end of my pool of grief feeling fresh, yet still very raw. I clenched my fists around my elbows and across my stomach as I headed late to class, barely remembering to breathe and to look both ways at the crosswalk. I forgot my book bag and didn't care; the academic value of the class meant nothing to me just then. I just didn't want to be alone with what I was feeling.

The class was a long one, so it was dark when I got back to my on-campus apartment. My phone, still on silent, buzzed in my

her straw-colored hair a wild puff of cotton candy crowning her forehead, her pink cheeks flushed against light skin. She's so different from me. I wonder what her mother looks like.

According to Wikipedia, methamphetamine is a stimulant drug that effects the central nervous system. It was discovered in 1893 and exists as levomethamphetamine and dextromethamphetamine (dextromethamphetamine is stronger; levomethamphetamine is available over-the-counter as an inhaled nasal decongestant). Methamphetamine is also used as a second-line treatment for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and obesity.

(I tried meth for the first time when I was eight. I did it several times as a child. My younger adoptive brother, Ben, has ADHD. When we were kids, he used to hide his pills under his tongue and then spit them out later and give them to me, because I liked them.

I forgot about that until just now, writing this. I've always prided myself on having never touched "white drugs," anything that comes in pill or powdered or liquid form. That's a lie. I just didn't realize it until this moment.)

According to the website of the Garden State Treatment Center, there are seven phases of a meth high cycle:

1. The Rush
2. The High
3. The Binge
4. Tweaking
5. The Crash
6. Meth Hangover
7. Withdrawal

Chasing the Auroras

Logan, I texted. Did you hear about the auroras?
Yeah! he responded. You can see them from the Gorge right now, right?
It was the night before New Year's Eve.
Let's go find them. I wrote back.
Like right now?
Yes, right now. I can't go in my car, we'd need your truck. And we always said we would chase them if we could. I really want you to see it.
Okay, he replied. I'm on my way.

He picked me up in his dark grey Chevy he just purchased the month before, just a month after we separated. We stopped at a gas station on the forty-five-minute drive up I-84 to the lookout above the Gorge, not far from Multnomah Falls. I bought a pair of warm gloves and thick men's hiking socks and those little heat warmers they keep up at the register that you can shake and put in your gloves or pockets or socks to keep your extremities warm.

Logan kept saying he was going to put one of those bars across the bottom of the truck so I could step up more easily into the passenger seat. It was already getting awkward to bend at the waist… he brought a step stool for me, just in case, and hovered in case I

working a lot. Logan and I knew what we were doing. You and I mostly slept together, nursing and cuddling.

Aurora was told to leave us alone, let us rest. Aurora and I had been attached from the beginning; I wore her in a carrier until long into toddlerhood. Being separated from me in favor of her sister was devastating for Aurora.

And yet, she loved her new little sister more passionately than she resented you. There is a photo of Aurora's face when she first saw and held you—pure joy. I have videos of Aurora singing to you and cuddling you in bed, hugging you and talking to you and singing to you and laughing.

Up until she turned four, Aurora introduced you to people as her baby. "This is Acacia. She is *my* baby!" she would say, trying to pick up your car seat in the crook of her arm, like me. If someone tried to get close to look at you, Aurora would step in between, telling them "No! This is *my* baby!"

Even now, at age five, Aurora speaks for you, telling us what you need and want. You are almost three and don't talk half as much as Aurora did at age three because you don't have to—Aurora speaks for you. But Aurora is about to go to kindergarten and you are going to have to start using your own voice.

her home.

They both are wearing face masks, in the midst of the COVID pandemic. Because we live in a rural county with very low COVID cases, we don't usually think about wearing face masks unless we are walking into a store or place of business, let alone our own home, so the masks at my dining table startle me.

When the realtor leaves, Grandma sighs.

"$420,000," she breathes heavily, leaning back, the tension visibly leaving her body. Now she can get started on having her new home built, one that will be all hers. She's picked a plot on my parents' property in Quilcene, Washington, in the Olympic National Forest, right on the peninsula, right next to a large, wild creek that is lately more like a river as the ice caps melt. She will be able to walk to the water to watch the salmon spawn, to wake up and see a herd of elk out her window. She will also be steps away from my mother, who is a nurse and will be able to take care of her as she grows older.

The last night she stayed in her house, the night before she left for the beach house, I got a call at around 5 p.m. I was on the beach with my brother, Ben, and my friends and their kids. We had spent a few hours during the last river-worthy day of the year, playing in the sand and the water, kayaking in the waves, and watching the kids swim. We had just made a fire and roasted hot dogs, and we were all getting chilly in the cooling wind. We could feel the very last rays of summer leaving the earth in that moment.

I answered, and it was Aunt Dayna.

"It's Grandma's last night at the house," she spoke roughly, "And I just wanted you to know we are making one last fire in the backyard for her. I wouldn't want you to miss it."

Ben and I didn't even think twice about going. We packed up the girls and kayaks, said our goodbyes, and dropped the girls and gear off with Logan back at the house on our way to Portland.

Remember that little tree that used to be at the side of the house, that Grandpa cut down when he realized we were all using it to climb over the fence to get to the pool to go skinny-dipping

in the middle of the night? I used to sneak up there to read and listen in on people's conversations in the driveway for hours.

Remember when they had a hot tub in the back room, and how it smelled like chlorine super strong, and how we would get out and jump into the pool and then go back and forth for hours, how your body froze up when you'd hit the cold water, and how much we loved that feeling?

Remember we used to float on our backs at night and look up at the stars?

Remember Levi kissed me under the water, how people acted like they didn't know, but there used to be an underwater light, so you could actually see everything.

Remember there was a Ouija board that Freya used one time, and she was watching a scary movie, and Grandma said she saw the paper airplanes on the ceiling start spinning? She took away the Ouija board and locked it up in the newalls —an old word my grandma used for the storage space in a house's walls—in the upstairs room where Abbie was staying, and it was there for years. Everyone who has stayed in that room has had bad dreams, except Abbie, because they found it and threw it away right before Grandpa passed, before Abbie moved in.

When we walk through the house to the backyard, Grandma is already a bottle deep, the wine buzz making her throat guttural. She squeezes us tight, telling us it made her night we came. Ben rarely shows for family events, as he is usually working or not in town, but he wanted to be there that night as much as I did. It was about saying goodbye to our youth, goodbye to Grandpa.

My cousins, Allie and Abbie, and my aunts are there, too, and we toast to the house, to Grandpa, to Grandma, to the pool—to all the memories. We use all the rest of the pile of wood, the pile that has always been plentiful, never empty.

When we leave, I cry softly so Grandma can't hear me, realizing this is the last time I will walk across this grass in this backyard, barefoot and buzzed under the stars, warm from the fire and the whiskey. This is the last time I will walk through this kitchen, where my grandma and my aunts and my mother and my cousins have made countless meals, had countless important discussions, shared countless secrets. This is the last time I will use this bathroom, see