

The Trifecta of Shit.

That's how I like to refer to it.

The end of my marriage. My own heart attack. An under-the-influence driver on a collision course to destroy the life I had just started to rebuild.

And all within six months.

The Triple Crown. A trio. Isn't the third time the charm?

Heart, body, soul: I was marked.

But I couldn't let—scratch that—I *wouldn't* let the Trifecta define my life.

“Only after disaster can we be resurrected.”

~Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*



August 2012

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I stood naked on a wooden box in the meat-locker cold of the plastic surgery prep room, where two nurses watched as the surgeon marked my body with a black Sharpie.

He sat on a stool, eye level with my abdomen, leaning forward, drawing slowly. He paused, rolling the stool backward with his heels, and took in the surgical map of my front in its entirety.

I was freezing, and self-consciously I wondered if he had noticed my nipples, erect from the cold. If he had, he wasn't showing it. Instead, he moved forward again and resumed the process of grabbing skin, charting lines, and scrutinizing the results. He took his time, but it was okay. I wanted him to go slowly. I wanted him to make sure the markings were perfectly placed.

In just minutes, he would be cutting those lines and "revising" the scar that ran the length of my torso—the scar made to save my life two years before.

Actually, there were more than ten scars all over my body from that night. Places where bones punctured skin and chest tubes inflated lungs. Where a seatbelt held me fast. Where crushed, sharp metal scored skin. Where an eight-inch plate braced a snapped humerus and a three-inch pin secured a fractured pelvis. Where wires and screws held a dislocated foot in place. Where IVs found the perfect veins to tap.

Some of the scars were short, some were long, some were hard to see—but almost all of them were vertical.

At right angles to a horizontal plane. Perpendicular. The same angle at which we collided when he ran that stop sign and into my car, T-boning it and me. My vertical scars, the places I was put back together, stitched back up.

And none of them compared to the disfiguring scar running the length of my abdomen. The scar I worried people could see through my clothing. The scar that hurt to the touch.

I hated this fucking scar.

“Should I try to save your belly button?” the surgeon asked, pulling the permanent marker away from my flesh and looking up just long enough to speak.

I was surprised by the option. No one would even consider it a navel as it was, smashed up and pushed away from its point of origin.

“No, it’s okay.”

Two years before, trauma doctors had not asked me what to save. They had not planned the carved path their knives would take, nor did they plot the route around my belly button. They were trying to save my life. They just cut.

“We had to have them do *that*,” my brother once said, pointing to my abdomen, “to be able to have you here now.”

That.

I could almost picture *it*. Me, unconscious and naked, blue paper medical drapes covering legs and arms, breasts and belly exposed. Me, flat on a stainless-steel table in a cold operating room, where white lights radiated and whispery instructions intensified. A quick surgical cut, the flash of blade piercing flesh, just above the sternum down, down, down around the umbilicus, down still farther to the pubis.

Done. That quick. A way to get inside.

Internal bleeding, lacerated organs, a ruptured spleen. My body left open for the bleeding to stop, the swelling to lessen. Closure of muscle tissue only, a wound vac in place until the outside could be surgically pulled together.

But I didn't want *that* surgery, so the vacuum stayed in—for almost three months.

Maybe I *should* have gone back under the knife. Maybe it was my fault.

This monstrous scar, gaping, was still tender two years later. I thought about the accident every time I got dressed. I cried every time I saw myself naked.

Doctors assured me the wound would grow together on its own, but no one could tell me what it would look like. I imagined a normal, smooth surgical scar. Surely, I believed, since they had cut me straight, my belly would mend together that way, too.

I was wrong.

When the skin of my abdomen finally had closed three months later, a messy, uneven, and ugly scar ran its length: a ten-inch-long ribbon undulating from just above my ribcage to just above my pubic bone. Thick, new pink skin stretched wide like a yawn and bridged the fingertip-deep crevice to smooth the fault line of my abdomen's landscape. The ruched tissue puckered in places and pulled in others, dividing my stomach, splitting subcutaneous fat, then narrowed to semi-thick closures at both ends.

Wow—*such a poetic description, Aimee*. And what bullshit.

The scar made me look as if I had another ass, but this one was in front. I still had my belly button, but it had been pushed to the side, forgotten. The entire area still hurt to the touch; the tissue of my

abdomen had been bruised that deeply. My clothes even fit differently. I shopped for maternity tops—twelve years after my last child was born.

I fucking hated it.

The plastic surgeon drew huge circles on my flanks, what he called the areas of skin just under the ribs and above the waist, where he would also perform liposuction. Then he traced dotted vertical lines around the scar and my smashed-up navel, along with another line, horizontal this time, from hipbone to hipbone.

This was for the tummy tuck—another scar to add to the canvas.

After he finished with his magic marker, I stepped down from the box, turned, and looked in the mirror, avoiding his and the nurses' eyes. I had never been completely naked in front of this many people before—at least not awake—and with each minute that passed in the cold, I became more embarrassed by my nudity. All of my flaws had been highlighted by a map of black ink stretching across the flesh of my abdomen, and somehow, I understood this strange picture. The skin around my scar would be cut away, the rest pulled together, smoothed tight, and stitched closed. The “disfigurement” a psychologist had once noted would be corrected, the excess fat and extra skin discarded.

“Okay,” the surgeon said, tucking the pen into his pocket and slapping the palms of his hands on his thighs. “It’s time! I’ll see you when you wake up.”

He stood up and smiled.

“You’ll be great, Aimee,” he reassured me, and I knew in that moment that he was the one who would be great, not me.

Nonetheless, it *was* time.

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Alice: “How long is forever?”

White Rabbit: “Sometimes, just one second.”

~Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*



Emergency | Tuesday, July 27, 2010, 9:13 p.m.

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Two headlights in my left periphery. No time to react. An almost instantaneous blow, vehicle against vehicle. And then it all went black.

Or did it? I couldn't remember. *Time passed*, I thought.

How long?

Was that someone screaming? She's screaming at me. I raised my head and looked over at her. She asked if I was okay. I couldn't answer. I didn't know.

What I did know was that my front tooth had been knocked out. Cool air filled the gap that once held what I now felt laying on my tongue. It seemed much smaller than a front tooth should.

Who was that beside me, talking through the window?

"Ma'am, can you hear me?" someone asked. "Are you okay?"

I lifted my head to answer him.

I don't know, I wanted to say, but nothing came out. I didn't know if I was okay, but my mouth wouldn't form words. My brain wouldn't let my voice respond. *Why couldn't I talk?*

"Ma'am?"

Jagged pieces of something white were coming out of my leg. Or was it my foot?

I saw it, even from the twisted angle of my seat. Bones coming through skin. Blood. Oh my God.

I knew there had been an accident that warm July evening. I knew I was driving. And I knew my front tooth was gone.

The girls. I had three members of the high school dance team I coached in the car with me. *Were they okay?*

“Who is this?” the voice outside the car asked.

Jorden answered behind me.

“That’s Aimee Young. She’s a teacher at Loudonville High School,” she screamed. “She’s had a heart attack before!”

She sounded frantic, but somehow I felt relief.

Where was Emily? She had been right beside me in the front passenger seat, but she wasn’t now. *And what about Sarah?* She was sitting behind Emily. *Did she get out okay?*

Two silhouettes. One beside me, the other behind him. They wanted to free me from the wreckage. Two arms reached inside my window, and I tried to move my body to help, twisting my left shoulder toward whoever was at the open window.

And then I heard a voice from inside the car.

“Stop moving or you are going to die.”

Who was it? Who said that?

I stopped moving.

I understood.

This was bad. Really bad.

They lifted me out of the wreckage and onto some kind of board. A large, white sheet was draped over the back window where Jorden had been.

Was she out of the car, too? Or were they going to get her?

Flat on my back. The night sky. A zillion stars. A head moved over my face like a shadow. Kenny, once my husband of eighteen years but now my ex-husband of one month.

What’s he doing here? How did he know?

“Aimee, you’ll be okay,” he said. “I love you.”

We had known each other since we were both seventeen, and his voice was familiar and comforting, but I couldn’t answer him. I still couldn’t speak. If he was saying I’d be okay, I must have looked okay. *Did he see that my front tooth was missing?* And just as suddenly as he had appeared, he was gone.

They were wheeling me somewhere, but I didn’t know where I was. *Inside? A hallway?* Everything was happening so quickly—*a hospital?* Someone leaned in and told me she loved me. *Natalie.* She was in another car—*behind us? Had she seen it happen?* I thought she was crying.

They were moving me again, through doors—*outside?* A helicopter was there—*for me?* It was so loud. And maybe the back was open. That was where they were taking me? They pushed me in, still lying flat, and immediately I sensed that we had lifted off. *But wait—was the back still open? What if I fell out?*

Then everything went black.

Surgical Intensive Care | Five or Six Days after the Accident

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A cold, bright room where I was at the center. Nothing around me, just the ceiling above. I couldn't move.

Like peering through a mummy's bandages with eyes not completely opened.

Everything squinty and blurred around the edges.

But I felt like I knew where I was. *This place made sense.*

People came and went. *Who were they?*

They spoke in hushed voices, occasionally looking over at me, whoever they were.

Ryan, my daughter Jerrica's boyfriend, was the first person I recognized. Jerr, who'd just turned eighteen, was here, too. So was my sixteen-year-old daughter, Natalie. *Wait—Jerrica?* I thought she went to North Carolina on vacation with her friend Taylor. *Where was Connor, my son?* He was only eleven, but school was still out for the summer, and his youth league baseball had been over for weeks...

My mom was here. She kept talking in my ear.

"Aimee, you're in the hospital."

Why was she yelling?

She handed me a notebook and pen. I tried to grasp the pen but couldn't. If I lowered my eyes, I saw my hand—barely—and it was swollen, almost unrecognizable.

"What happened?" I scrawled.

“You were in a car accident. You’re going to be okay,” Mom shouted, as if doing so would make me understand. As if it would make me “okay.”

Now I remembered. *My tooth. The helicopter.*

We had been on our way home from dance camp. I was the one who wanted to commute. It would save money for the girls and for me, since Natalie was also on the squad. But she had driven Jerrica’s car.

Thank God she wasn’t with me. Thank God that car didn’t hit her.

Beside me, a small, stuffed lion moved into my line of vision. Jerr held it. On the other side, Nat had an elephant, maybe.

Ryan grinned at me. He cracked a joke, something about chardonnay and an IV. I gave him a slow “thumbs up.” My mom wasn’t smiling. And the girls seemed so far away.

I wanted to talk to them, but I couldn’t. And my eyelids were so heavy.

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How many hours passed? How many days?

A male voice, kind and encouraging, coaxed me awake.

“Aimee, I need you to wake up and breathe.”

I heard him, and I turned my head, trying to see him. *Who was he?*

“That’s it, Aimee. Breathe,” he urged.

I heard him again, but I couldn’t do what he asked. I couldn’t stay awake.

And then sometime, he was back—*the next day? the next hour?*—explaining that it was time for me to breathe on my own. The tube going down my throat was coming out.

Wait a second. I hadn't been breathing on my own? And there's a tube down my throat? How bad was this?

"I need you to take a deep breath in, Aimee, and then blow out through your mouth," he explained. "It's probably going to make you cough. Are you ready?"

I nodded.

I breathed in as much as I could and blew, and he pulled the tube from somewhere deep down my throat. I coughed and then felt a kind of freedom. Breathing on my own again didn't feel any different, unless I did it too deeply—that hurt. He placed long, skinny tubes into my nostrils and around my ears.

"Oxygen, to help you breathe," he said.

Something was on my tongue. I could feel it now.

I lifted my hand motioning toward it, and a different voice said, "Don't talk."

I kept gesturing.

"Calm down, Aimee. Stop moving. And please don't try to talk. Calm down."

They didn't understand. It was my front tooth. I knew it was.

Finally, a nurse leaned in, and I opened my mouth.

"Oh, well, there's the tooth you lost," she said. "That happens."

Such an offhand, breezy remark about my front tooth, one so vital to my smile. But she didn't care. It wasn't important to her.

Why had no one noticed it before now? And how had I not choked on it?

The nurse reached over, picked the tooth off my tongue, and just like that, it was gone. But I couldn't see what she did with it. I bet she tossed it into the trash can. I bet she even thought, "Welp, she doesn't need this any longer."

But it was my tooth, not hers. And she didn't have the right to do that.

I was pissed.

As soon as she turned her back, I lifted my right arm and stuck up my middle finger. A salute in honor of my front tooth, now gone forever. And I didn't care who saw.

Immature and meaningless, but it was all I could do. And it was enough.

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Sometime during the middle of the night, when no one had been in my room for a while, I could hear music. Were the nurses playing it at their station to comfort patients?

Michael Jackson's "Thriller."

Ohio State University band music. The Best Damn Band in the Land. I remembered. My college alma mater.

Now "Purple Rain." It's Prince.

The melodies echoed from some peripheral place, looping over and over and over before settling in my brain.

A fuzzy nothingness surrounded me. I felt like people I knew were outside my room wanting to talk to me, staring at me as if I were on display. I didn't see them, but I thought I heard their voices.

The music eventually faded away to nothing. Time faded away to nothing, too.

Silence.

A nurse visited and told me they hoped to move me out of the ICU soon.

I was in intensive care?

A dog barked outside of my room. A man spoke, probably a fireman or an EMT. I pushed the buzzer. I wanted to pet that dog, feel its warmth.

“Can the dog visit me?” I asked.

There was no dog. There never had been, the nurse said.

“What happened to the music?” I asked.

There was no music; there never had been.

“You’re hallucinating, a side effect of the drug changes in your system,” the nurse explained.

They were weaning me off heavy sedation to painkillers so I could be moved. A good thing, I thought—my body was doing what the doctors hoped—but it also meant being relocated and transferred to another bed.

The new place was much different than before, more cozy: dim lighting, warmth, and a curtain dividing the room.

Several nurses came into the room. Maybe four, maybe five. They gathered round, grasping edges of the sheets or blankets to move my deadweight body. Grunting, struggling, and maneuvering, they lifted me into a new trauma bed. I was attached to so many sensors that even the slightest movement set off a chain reaction of onomatopoeia.

Beepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeep.

My new roommate, hidden behind that thin patterned material, was not happy with this. I heard great sighs of disgust from her corner.

I faded in and out of a sleep filled with scattered, strange moments and vivid, broken dreams.

The computer in my room turned on, revealing a program that projected over an entire wall. By simply blinking my eyes twice (much like double-clicking a mouse), I could choose a virtual escape that would separate my mind from my body’s trauma. And like the rides at Disney World that sweep you over beaches, cliffs, or

rainforests, I sailed through spectacular oceanfront landscapes for a time, comfortable and free, until a notice popped up that in order to continue, I would have to provide my credit card information or be billed.

I worried that the trip my brain had taken was adding another cost to what had to be an already huge medical bill. I also wondered what kind of place I was in. What kind of hospital offered virtual brain escapes?

Later, God came to me in the form of a woman. Ethereal and fairy-like, she was dark-haired and wearing a long, gauzy white dress. She comforted me and then became Clifford the Big Red Dog. Clifford comforted me, too.

The voices of various family members mingled in conversation just outside my room, and I overheard a surprise being organized in the hopes that I was being moved home soon. *Home? Did they even know what was wrong with me yet?* I was worried, anxious, even in such a dreamlike state. *How could I go home when I couldn't even move my body?*

I dreamt of my family leaving secret gifts all over the room for me to take home, much like when Santa visits sleeping children on Christmas Eve. Two new overstuffed armchairs took the place of the hospital's dismal plastic ones. A shiny, new white fridge sat against the wall. Fluffy, pastel-colored towels were stacked on a table where a beautiful floral arrangement had been placed. There was even a nice set of toiletries left for me at the foot of my bed.

I heard voices of family fighting with nurses about removing the gifts, which nurses said weren't fair to the other patients. Then I overheard plans for a parade at the hospital in my honor—since there could be no gifts. In my sleepy, dreamlike haze I thought about waking up to my very own parade, and I couldn't wait.

But I woke up to stark emptiness.

Had I imagined everything? Where was everyone? Why hadn't they come in to see me?

I heard familiar voices outside the room again. My brother Brian's wife, Laurie. Mom. *Did I hear Connor, too? When would they come in?* I thought it had been a week since the accident, and Connor hadn't come to visit yet. I missed my baby boy.

Just then, my bed began to shake. Someone was underneath it.

"Connor? Is that you? Stop that! Quit hiding and come here. Come see me."

Connor was playing tricks on me, but I was drowsy and didn't have the energy for games.

I continued to float in and out of sleep.

Epilogue

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So.

It turns out that you *can* be the author of your own life story.

It also turns out that in writing your story, you could be providing yourself the therapy necessary to feel whole again.

According to Dr. James Pennebaker, a pioneer in studying the healing nature of writing, expressing what happened to you through words on a page allows you to organize and understand your experiences and yourself. This, in turn, provides a sense of control, something you most likely lacked during the traumatic event(s) that led you to need to heal in the first place. When the writer has given the traumatic experience a structure and meaning, not only are the emotions drawn from the experience more manageable, but the story most likely then has a resolution, or ending, which eases the trauma.

The process worked for me.

I am no longer a character in that old, sad story, defined by trauma, because writing healed me. Writing also gave voice to wisdom I'd gained: *Life can change, or even end, in a moment. That's just the way it is.* And you can *hide in fear and avoidance*, withering away until death, or you can *attempt to live with courage, one challenge at a time*, accepting each moment gracefully.

I came to redefine my trauma narrative as a healing one, hoping that others could take inspiration from me in some way.

I just never expected my mom would be the first.

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“You’re always so happy, Aimee,” Mom says from her cornflower blue La-Z-Boy, a TV tray with toilet paper and potty chair to her right, a table lamp with *People* magazines and her iPhone on the left. “I want what you’re having.”

I am gathering Christmas ornaments and decorations the kids and I put up for her and Dad at Thanksgiving while chattering away about nothing to keep her mind busy. As I collect them, I lay them gently on the living room carpet so Mom can direct me to their correct storage boxes, even from her chair. Dad and Jackson are somewhere outside, taking down lights.

“You mean, Prozac?” I joke, and she laughs.

She needs to laugh. I know she is scared, depressed even, awaiting her next chemo treatment. Twenty years ago, she battled uterine cancer, but she’s stayed cancer-free ever since, a miracle. Three months before Christmas, she was diagnosed with cancer again: Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma.

“No, really, Mom,” I insist. “The Prozac helps—you should talk to your doctor about it—but you know it’s more than that for me.”

I wink at her, and she grins back. We both know there is more to my happiness than Prozac, and his name is Jackson. Mom loves him, too.

“But how did you stay so positive during everything you went through?” she asks.

This takes me by surprise. Positive? That’s not the way I remember it. Maybe because I was *living* it, not observing, like she was. Now, the roles are reversed, and Mom wants to draw strength from me, just as I had from her in the months after the accident. She needs inspiration. Maybe even a pep talk of sorts.

“You know, it’s funny, Mom. I had someone ask me one time how it had felt fighting for my life, and I just didn’t have a good answer. Same as now.”

I continue wrapping fragile ornaments in paper and delicately placing them in their boxes while I mull over her question. Mom watches, calling out every so often which container goes with what decoration.

What a cop-out, I think. That’s not what she wants to hear. Yes, the passage of time and self-reflection have given me perspective on my experiences, but how could what I had gone through help her? She had already beaten cancer once before.

But it’s the least I can do for her now.

“I mean, at the time, I didn’t know I was fighting for my life. I was just doing what everyone told me to do. I think it’s the same with what you’re asking me. I don’t remember being positive, Mom. I can’t lie. But no matter how much I didn’t want it happening to me, and no matter how much I thought, ‘This isn’t the way my life is supposed to go,’ it still did. And I just didn’t see any other alternative than to deal with it as it came at me.”

No real mystery, I guess, just life. And strength, I think, even though its source isn’t always clear.

“Maybe it’s having enough strength to see—to hope—beyond the moment?”

Mom sighs.

“Yeah,” she says. “I guess you’re right. I’m trying, Aimee. I really am.”

And I know she is.

“It’s just”—her voice breaks—“hard.” She lowers her head into her hands, now crying through the fingertips framing her face, and says, “I don’t want to die.”

But I know she already is.

All I can say is, “I know, Mom. I know. No one does.”

Five months later, when Mom initiates a conversation with me about mortality, I fold myself up beside her in bed and hold her hand. What’s left of her hair, after months of intense chemotherapy, has turned into a patchwork of cottony soft tufts, and she can only lie in one position, her head against a pillow on her right side. Mostly she just listens during our “discussion,” sometimes smiling, sometimes murmuring an “mmmmm-hmmmm” as I ramble on, not really sure of what to say. Time and grief have clouded the memory, but I think I tell her that when faced with death, I’d been okay with it. That I hadn’t been afraid. I think I tell her she shouldn’t be either. And I know I am stroking her arm, just like she often did for me, whether after the accident or ill as a child, to let me know that she was there.

We are quiet then, together but alone in that space, while a surreal awareness envelops us: Her death is imminent.

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In the months after Mom’s passing, I realize why I need to share my story—why *we* have to share *our* stories—with others. For understanding. For comfort.

Because others’ stories not only help us to find meaning in our own chaos, they help us to understand our own emotions. Stories can even keep our loved ones alive—and with us—through our shared history or memories, because for those moments of retelling, time collapses, and the past can be present.

Mom was by my side during that very bad year of The Trifecta of Shit, helping me fight. Helping me to be strong. She witnessed my story. But in her final weeks, Mom wanted to know how I had made

sense of it all. She wanted to know how to not be afraid. She wanted to know she was not alone.

Our relationship led to a significant shared connection, one that eased both of our pains. One that everyone deserves.

Mom helped me to live again, and then I helped her to die.

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Mom's been gone just over a year.

"You are our miracle, Aimee," Dad still tells me—even though it's been seven years since my trauma—often enough to remind me that my loved ones remember my story and are thankful I'm still here. His words also remind me I wasn't alone when I faced my own mortality—not once, but twice—and lived to tell about it. In fact, lived to question it: Why *was* I still alive?

But now I know the answer to my question—finally.

My story—the one I need to share as part of the human collective—isn't over yet. Nor am I done saving others' stories to learn from either.

The stories of my children. My mom. My new husband and his family. My dad. My sister and her husband and their son. My brother and his wife and their three children. My friends, far and near.

My students and colleagues.

The relationships that are a part of my life's narrative.

Through them, I live. I thrive. We share attachments and connections—we share stories—which creates my very being. Nothing is more important.

Everyone has a story. All of us.

It's what we do with our stories—what we learn and how we share it—that matters. It's how we listen to each other, helping to fill the

cracks and crevices of missing meaning for reparation. For healing.
For shared understanding.

Storytelling is at the heart of the basic human condition, critical
to what sets us apart as a life form. So, tell them. Listen to them.
Help revise them again and again and again.

Until they provide answers. Until they feel right.

Until they leave a permanent mark.