The past informs the present.

Here is a story of how a person full of light can grow so dark.

I was 11 years old when my stepmother of six years died in a car accident. It was not the first time I became aware of death, but it was the first time I became aware of devastation. The Woman was abusive and manipulative, but somehow her loss leveled what had been built of my father’s life – and mine, and my brother’s – and we were left to wander that wasteland where nothing could grow, and we often lost sight of one another.

It wasn’t long after the accident that I asked my father if I could see a therapist. At school, I would begin crying without explanation. I was withdrawn, afraid to befriend anyone lest they die, and at home my father began his hurried descent into alcoholism. At my question, he turned sharp.

“Why? You’re not crazy! You don’t need to see a therapist. You talk to them, they’ll take you away from me.”

Later that year, I broke a mirror in the bottom drawer of my nightstand and carved a small white (and then suddenly red) line into my forearm. I hid the mirror under my clothes, and I returned to it often in the four years that followed, usually for any great or small failure – like forgetting to put the cat food away.

When I was 13, I saw the HBO miniseries “Angels in America” on DVD for the first time. It offered a bleak picture of a gray New York City in the clutches of the AIDS epidemic, and the angel of the Bethesda Fountain presided over it all: fierce, terrifying and sexual. This was my first conscious exposure to New York City, the desolate hours of sickness made brighter by urban fashion and the idea of what Central Park might be like with a scarf around my mouth to beat the bite of the cold.

I grew up a child of the working poor of the South, all cheap cans of Bud Light and turbulent spousal abuse, holes in the floor of the trailer, which sat next to the pear tree in the sun (blend of memories like muted watercolors – green, yellow, brown and red are the colors of my past).

I wept for the city, wept because I’d never been and felt I never could.

Each punishing cut was a mark of hopeless despair crisscrossed now with the faded initials of my high school boyfriend.

I stumbled gracelessly into teenhood, and by that time, I had been caught self-harming more than once – some you can hide, some are too gaping, too wide
and green with infection, and I couldn’t tend to wounds so alarmingly lippy. Also more than once, I had asked to see a counselor.

*A plate of taco salad careens into the wall, my father’s elbow bleeding from a thrown lamp.*

The complications of Dad’s relationships and drinking made volatile his cruel words, which, confusingly, alternated with soaring praises for my being on the all-A Honor Roll.

The insomniac and malcontent that I was self-medicated with Benadryl, and life was an uncontrollable, thrashing tempest that coalesced into a bottomless depression at the age of 15.

In the small school library, I borrowed books on depression and anxiety. I could feel myself now on the edge of something terrifying.

At home, I convinced my brother to meditate with me in the evenings. We would take turns laying down, hovering our hands over each other’s bodies to push love and healing and tranquility into each other like mimes pressing against an intangible box.

It is strange how depression moves through you. In daily practice, it’s like two heavy hands weighted upon your shoulders and the tickle of sinister, whispering lips at your ear. In the long term, it is the proverbial boulder rolling down the hill, the air whipping against it as it gains speed and force. All that can stop it is a collision, and mine came in the form of a geometry grade.

A small number, faded on thin paper, printed there like a little death.

I was a sophomore in high school, moping around in an over-sized leather jacket with safety pins in my ears. I had always excelled academically, save for when facing the Monster of Math. Failing. Failure. There is something cataclysmic in that word. The very sound of it is like a needle pricking the skin.

I didn’t even fail. I passed with a C; a high C.

Somehow, it was more devastating to me than all I had seen and suffered before.

Death.

My father’s alcoholism, and his erratic behavior.

“*Fat Bitch!*”

“I’m so sorry, I love you more than anything.”

The bruises on a family friend’s legs, her missing hair, the bags under her eyes.

“But I can’t leave him. I love him.”

A beer can thrown at a golden-haired toddler.

A smack! A threat from The Woman’s mouth!
“Do you know why your sister’s front teeth are missing in that photo? It’s because she back-talked me, and I’ll do it to you, too.”

More devastating than all this, was that C, and so because of it, I surrendered myself.

I cleaned my room, dusted my bookshelves, and left a long letter of apology in which I divided anything of personal value (a 16-year-old has no assets) amongst my family and close friends.

It was done in the bathtub. Fully clothed, the method was gruesome. This memory is red and yellow and full of dead skin, but it gives me that black feeling inside – the color of nightmares.

Upon entering the psyche ward (after two days in the hospital, constipated from charcoal with a nurse napping at my bedside, and all the familial “why’s” as visitors drifted in and out between psychiatric interviews) my Grandmother placed her hand upon mine and whispered: “Just think of this as a vacation.”

Returning home after my brief stay was bizarre, as if I had been strapped onto a spinning wheel and was watching the world right side up, upside down, right side up.

Therapy helped. The anti-depressants helped. My entire life I had learned pain and guilt as easily as I learned cursive – always ahead of my classmates. I learned to forgive myself the way I learned math – that is to say, I learned it quite badly.

At 17, I self-harmed again.

This is the first memory I have of the light breaking over my life: the warmth of the sun on my brown skin. Reading on a beach, on my stomach, the bright yellow blinding across the page. I drank water in front of a stagnant lake whilst children played and laughed around me the way all children should, and inside I felt reborn for the first time, and on the outside the 19 staples in my leg, tight and itchy, were holding me together, holding me together.

The next year, I left for college, and for the first two years, I was the star of my own life.

One bad relationship in the summer between my junior and senior year was the catalyst for a wave of dangerous promiscuity in bars and at house parties and in other places I don’t remember, not even in flashes, not even in italics. A healed and self-assured version of me shattered to expose the raw wounds beneath my scars, and I became a raging fury.
Like the Angel of the Waters, here I fly, strong and erratic, wielding sexual power; thin fingers curl into claws, claws curl into fists, batting like wings against the exposed chest of Mankind. Hurt me again, just you try.

I wasn’t myself, and yet I was entirely, haunting the hallways of my building at night, paranoid of spiders, and during the day, I cried and was steeped deeper and deeper into despair. I returned to the edge of the cliff I’d visited years before.

I was hospitalized for a second time.

There is the narcissist, flaunting his open hospital gown and strutting like a peacock. There is the schizophrenic who is 9 billion years old. There is the boy like me, legs numbed by anxiety. There is the psychiatrist who tells me that I “seem like a smart girl, so I’ll figure this out.”

I receive my diagnosis at a free outpatient therapy clinic: Borderline Personality Disorder.

I have learned two things from my mother (mostly absentee, but in a way, more effective as a scantily seen apparition in my life than something consistently tangible). The first thing is this: Life isn’t fair. The second thing: Anything you break, you pay for.

In college, I broke a lot of things. I broke friendships, my reputation, and second chances. I broke glasses at the Country Club, and I broke skin with the lit end of cigarettes. I repaired, broke, and glued together unsystematically the pieces of my mind, shattered from the South to the West.

Don’t leave me, don’t leave me. See how thin my hands have grown?

ADDENDUM

The sound of the audience filing out of the theatre is lit with a combination of excited chatter and exhaustion. The curtain has dropped on the 2010 production of “Angels in America,” and some linger in the lobby to meet the cast, shifting their weight restlessly to rid their bodies of the numbness of sitting for seven hours. I am among them, in New York City for the first time, anxiously clutching my playbill as one by one, the cast appears.

I murmur words of praise to those who pass me while outside, my friend shakes Kevin Spacey’s hand and another asks him to light her cigarette. He obliges them both.

I am not present when I stand beside my favorite actor, and the flash of a photo (in which I look stunned and elated) blinds me as it is taken.

Outside the theatre, I look up, my breath blowing in wispy white against a dark sky, and snow begins to fall, the crystals landing on all the woolen hats and disappearing into their yarn. There are few stars, but the tall buildings glisten and the
shop windows illuminate the sidewalks like moons, and the bustle of the city enters my veins, and my skin feels hot like neon in the blizzard.

Overwhelmed, I begin to cry.

The air is so cold, my tears could turn to ice, and I wipe and wipe them, and my body begins to shake, and it is as if my heart has been turned backwards all this time, facing a cold wall, and suddenly it is facing outward, and it is open, and everything, everything is flooding in.

The crowd jostles me, and all the new friends I’ve made in the day appear one by one, surrounding me, and one notices my tears.

Alarm moves through them, and I feel gloved fingers clutching my shoulders, and I feel many arms tugging me, and many other bodies against mine, holding me, and everyone trying to get me to speak.

I clutch back, and I feel them, and I feel the city, and I feel everything, and I say: “I am just so happy to be here.”

Since then, I’ve visited New York five times. On my first visit, I saw the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park, standing like a beacon with the blue sky behind her, wings stretched over me, her face bright with the white of the melting snow.

I live in the urban pocket of the Northeast, the land of busking violinists and seagulls that soar, dipping between skyscrapers, and the salve of chilled air flooding my lungs (the heat in the South can drive a girl mad). 1,500 miles from home and old hospital stays, I can smell the stale dust kicked up by screeching trains grinding against rusted rails.

I have a cat, and a job, and I’m sober, and I live in one of the cleverest cities in the world.

I’ve visited Maine, stood on the rocky crags overlooking the Atlantic, and I’ve taken in the salt, the green, and the lighthouses. The color of Maine is gray and robin’s egg blue.

In the summer, I ride my bike six and a half miles every day.

I have piercings, and tattoos, and I meet friends for coffee or have them over for dinner, or we go dancing in flashing lights or for long walks together along a river rippling in the evening breeze.

Everywhere I look: Possibility and Freedom.

All that came before this seems now like a life that was waiting to happen. I have struggled with mental illness and suicidal ideation for over a decade. That is to say that sometimes feelings come creeping back in. Now, when I am on the edge of my cliff, I try to remember to look up, not down. It is still strange how we live under all the colors of experience. I cannot profess that every day will be good. The trick to life is learning to be okay with that.
I do not believe in leaving the past behind. I wear the germ-shaped scar on my wrist and the cigarette burn on my thumb, and my eyes are deep and brown and weighted with experience. In my life, I have learned that time is not entirely linear. In our day-to-day routines, we often give pause as something triggers a memory, and for a moment we are taken back to that time, to the tastes and the colors and the feelings, and we are children again, just trying to figure it all out.

*The past informs the present, but it does not define it.*