

Maybe Band-Aids Are Not Enough

A Memoir

An Excerpt

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The beginning, period

The autumn that I was eleven years old, I believed I had gotten my period. I had waited for my period since I first found out I could bleed for a week or more and be fine at the end of the ordeal. I called it my “monthly hemorrhage” until my brother, a stickler for the accuracy of words in every day context, corrected me at the dinner table in an explosion of pent-up aggression and unheard intellect that I was not hemorrhaging, that it was not a hemorrhage in any way, that if I wanted the attention so badly maybe I should get legitimately injured and talk about that. I wish I had been quick enough back then to spit back at him an endless and haunting list of my injuries, which have all but remained unspoken at the dinner table.

In fact it was not the case at all that I got my first period the autumn that I was eleven, it was rather a tiny tear in my anus that resulted from pushing out a portion of excrement that was entirely too large for my small, unassuming anus. A tiny drop of blood on a conservative ball of generic toilet paper. And yet I wore panty liners for a week because I was too embarrassed to tell my mother that the momentous occasion was a farce. Still she bought me more panty liners and tampons every month even though I never asked for them. I never used them after that first week. Perhaps she thought I was too shy to discuss my period, when the truth was that I was too stunned to discuss not having it. I wasn't a real woman. I could not pretend to discuss the severity, or lack thereof, in my menstrual cramps.

A few years beforehand, I had somehow accumulated a wad of gas so vicious that my entire family thought it was “appendicitis.” I was eight, I was dying, it didn't have to have a name. So I sobbed and called it nothing while my father and older siblings fussed over “appendicitis.” The doctor told my father it was gas, but at that point I was so doped-up on morphine that I was laugh-crying about how nice all my nurses were and how I never wanted to leave the hospital. It would be my new home, the nurses my new mothers and fathers and the

other gas-packed patients my new brothers and sisters. My body likes to play tricks on me. I often wonder if injuries like these are interesting enough to discuss over reheated meatloaf.

Tearing my anus, and not bleeding for a week or more, was sad for me, very sad, because that was one less thing I had in common with a girl named Jordan. She was nine when we met, and so was I. She was half-black and incredibly tall for her age, with a full bush between her legs that I had to gaze at every time we changed in front of each other, which was often. She loved me, and I loved that about her. I was too tall and too fat and not pliable or fragile like all the other girls in my affluent suburban town, but she loved me. My anus was fragile, I suppose, but that was not an outwardly attractive area to acknowledge as fragile.

Jordan had had her period for three full years by the time I eventually got mine, a week before my twelfth birthday. *How do I get my period, Jordan?* I tried to ask her on a few occasions. But she laughed, and I felt too stupid to ask again when she was finally done clenching her eyes and gasping for breath between bellows. I would have lost weight, gained weight, eaten nothing but red fruits and vegetables for a week, anything to accelerate my path to becoming Jordan. My period is something I secretly wished for often after I met Jordan in my fourth-grade class. I fixated on that domineering bush of hers until other things fell away from my flickering thoughts, things that waited for me in every corner of every space and I did not want to nurture any longer, ladybugs found in my garden that I only wanted to squash into the carpet by the end of the day.

Feeding

Often during weekends at my father's home, meals magically appeared in front of my siblings and me. He did not know how to cook more than steak and salad, so he relied heavily on businesses that removed the need for the common working man to cook. Chi's Chinese Cuisine, McDonalds, Foster's Donuts, Burger King, Baja Fresh—there was no end to the take-out menus in my father's kitchen drawers.

It was fast food roulette, being surprised every meal with a different smattering of someone else's cooking. Returning to my mother's at the end of the weekend, I would beg for these things. Cheeseburgers or tacos or donuts or milkshakes, any of the things that tickled my taste buds and clogged my tiny heart. My mother, a woman more beautiful and more self-hating than anyone

I've met to this day, enabled my obsession with caloric utopias at first, seeing how happy it made me. But eventually she had to frown carefully and mumble, "Wouldn't you like some pasta with broccoli? Maybe we can get Burger King this Friday when Scott picks you up from school."

He was my mother's live-in boyfriend. He was too tan and his eyes too blue to trust. I loved him because he too furnished our kitchen with things for me to fill myself, but not exactly in the way my bachelor of a father did. Scott cooked and, when he was sober enough, cooked well for the appetite of a slightly overweight girl like me. His specialty was something called "Tex-Mex," which rolled off my tongue like dew off of the purest California poppy each morning: perfectly, lovingly. I did not have trouble admitting then that I loved his food and his place in our home, and I thanked him profusely every night for adorning our once-divorced home with the smells of baking biscuits, crackling sausages, and roasting garlic-coated chicken. I do have trouble admitting today that I still love him, despite the money he stole from my mother, despite the bruises he left on my brother, despite the hole he left in my heart and stomach when one day—I was around twelve—he was no longer my mother's live-in boyfriend.

Considering the amount of injuries sustained by my family in this particular reign of terror and satisfied taste buds, in retrospect I'm surprised my brother never found a way to introduce this era's many traumatic tales into dinner-table conversation.

Where I Sleep

"Do you want to play a game?" Jordan asked me one night in my "bedroom" at my mother's house.

As the youngest child, I got screwed in the bedroom department, and it pains me to this day to admit I did not have a room of my own—not even a room to share with another of my siblings. There were not enough bedrooms in either house where I grew up, and I do not know how or why, but my siblings were not made to share theirs with me. But there was an office off my mother's apartment-sized bedroom, so that is where they put me until I was ten.

At any point, my mother would be able to overhear my friends and me swearing or talking about things that little girls shouldn't talk about when they think no one can hear. My room was not my room, but rather an extension of my mother's. And it was in this panoptic cell where Jordan confidently asked me one night, "Do you want to play a game?"

Yes, Jordan, I want to play a game with you. I want to die for you. I want to live for you are all things I did not say aloud that night, but perhaps my eyes gave me away. Sometimes I do not have to speak for my heart to pour itself out in plain sight, and I will never forgive myself this character flaw, even at age nine.

"Sure," I said aloud.

"Okay, so we're brother and sister on a stranded island off the coast of, um, off the coast of Wyoming—"

"Wyoming isn't on the coast, Jor—"

"—and we're going to be stuck here a long, long time, and it's scientifically proven that if people go too long without touching then they get sad, really sad, and die," she said and stared at me with wide, scheming eyes.

"Okay, are there Indians we find on the island?"

"No."

"Okay so let's hug so we don't get really sad," I suggested and clung to her, unwilling to get so sad I'll die.

"So you're my brother and I'm your sister, my name is *Lola*," she proclaimed exotically after a few moments of desperate, not-ready-to-die-yet, but still child-appropriate embracing.

"Wait," I cut in, "why am I the boy?" I knew why. Truly I did, but I needed her to admit it. I needed her to admit that I was less of a girl than she was. I needed her to admit that I was frumpy and not beautiful, or "cute" at the very least, like almost all the other girls in our class. There was one girl more painful to look at than me. Her name was Aggie, and she was physically deformed. Half of her face was scarred and discolored from what I still do not know, but I used her to feel less disgusted with myself on days where boys ignored me more than usual. Most of the time it worked.

Jordan, however, surprised me and jolted my innermost insides when she responded, "You're the boy because then I get to touch you like *this*," and then she kissed me on the mouth like my mother and Scott do, like Marie and John do.

The “game” went on as all of our games had beforehand, enthusiastically and without inhibition because a child’s mind is an unbreakable, unstoppable thing. She was Lola and I was Lola’s brother, every few minutes of chatting about our island’s bureaucracy we would cling together and, if I was lucky, kiss for a second or two, so that we would not get so sad from lack of human touch that we died. My mother’s office, my bedroom, had bunk beds just for sleepovers. That night Jordan and I were so busy trying to fulfill our island destiny of staying alive that we fell asleep in each other’s long and slender, pale and chunky arms in one bed.

I was so loved by this person, who was so beautiful and fast—she always beat even the fastest boy when we ran the monthly mile at school—and funny and smart and half-black, that I didn’t even stop to consider why she was okay with this but not listening to Tori Amos. Why she was okay with this pretend incest but not watching dirty, naked shows.

I did not ask her why this game was okay for the same reason I did not ask her anymore, “How do I get my period, Jordan?” I needed her love inside me, not her confused, hysterical, mocking laughter. I would say and stop saying, do and stop doing, anything to get her love to fill me up like my father’s donuts on Saturday morning.

Something good can happen to me now, I remember thinking every time Jordan asked if I wanted to have a sleepover soon.

The Fall

“You’re such a good friend,” Jordan whispered to me one night long after my mother had fallen asleep.

My stomach grumbled and she giggled, a laugh that was not mocking but genuinely enthralled in the way my stomach acid cut through and vanquished the “Tex-Mex” Scott had whipped up for the special occasion—my best friend was over. Jordan was always over, but it was still a special occasion.

“Oh, sure, you’re wel—thanks,” I said and frowned.

“I’ve moved around a lot with my mom, and none of my friends in other places have this much fun with me.”

“Yeah I have a lot of fun, too,” *and it’s so easy because I love you* I did not say.

Not too many weeks prior to this night, Jordan had given me a book called *The Young Adult's Bible*. We went through it together, pointing out the immaculate details of the elephant on Noah's Ark, the realistic guts of the whale that Jonah was stuck inside. Jordan had sucked me into her heart whole. My whale.

At my kitchen table, she had tutored me on the importance of careful love and protecting our bodies from those who lie in order to abuse them. She taught me how her God's love is bigger and more wonderful than any real person's love could be. I nodded faithfully and felt my mother's narrowed, Jewish eyes boring a disappointed hole into the backs of both our heads. Of course she wanted me to learn good morals, but at what cost?

Back in my mother's office, my bedroom, Jordan whined, "I only wish you understood how close I feel to you, like sisters—no, better than that."

"Yeah, totally," I said, feeling the extra chill of that year's winter bite at my toes. I pulled my legs up closer to my grumbling, unsatisfied stomach.

"Do you think of us as best friends?"

"Duh."

"So I could ask you for something that I would never ask anybody else, not in a million years, 'cause you're my twin, my best friend, so I know I can trust you?"

"Sure, Jordan," I said. My heart raced. I was moments away from sleep before this profession of closeness, of sisterhood, of uninhibited love. But now I was miles off the ground, my head and heart were stuck up in the 20°F clouds miles above my sleeping suburban street.

And before I could think anymore of what she was about to ask of me, anything from making *best-friendship* bracelets to building a fort only the two of us were allowed entry to, only the two of us *ever*, she was grabbing my face. I let my face be grabbed. She kissed me like the night we were brother and sister on an island off the coast of Wyoming, like so many Saturday nights afterward, but she kissed me different, with tongue. She moved against me and made me feel how I did sometimes when I watched shows and movies with naked people in them. But I had never felt that tingling around another person before. Only alone. Only watching things I knew I wasn't supposed to be watching, but did anyway because they made me feel a little bit more alive.

My face was in her hands and she started to guide it away from her lips. I didn't know where I was going, but I was Jordan's girl, Jordan's best friend and twin and I was sure it would be a game just as fun as every sleepover before. Sometimes my father put his mouth on my stomach and blew, making farting sounds until I laughed so hard I convulsed, and then he would chase down my brother and sister and do it to them, too, until they also shrieked with uproarious torment. I thought for a moment that was where I was going.

But it wasn't.

When she stopped pushing I was snug between her two legs, facing the premature bush I had faced so many times before but from a considerable distance. Up close it was another beast entirely, something I still loved because it was hers but no longer envied because it was now mine, mere inches away. It stared me down and made me feel small and misplaced.

I breathed unsteadily, confused and nervous and uncomfortable now that my stomach was grumbling in such an inappropriate context. *This is not the Tex-Mex from tonight, stomach!* I wanted to scream at it. I did not scream anything for fear of my mother hearing and thinking me too delinquent to be any daughter of hers. I did not even speak. I breathed.

"It's ok. Do you know what to do?" Jordan asked.

"No," I said and suddenly the smell of it seized every inch of me.

"It's ok. Do you love me?"

"Yes."

"Pretend like it's ice cream. It's 31 Flavors, ok?"

No it's not, I thought and did not say.

I wish I could feel anything good about what followed. Today when I make love to my girlfriend, it is nothing like what followed. It is worlds away from this. I wish there was a way for me to explain that what I do now has nothing to do with what I did then, but I don't know if it would be true.

My tongue went and went until it was sore. I lapped and sucked and tried to revive something that seemed dead to me now: a girl that would never do anything to hurt me, my best friend, my half-black twin. I was the best friend

she'd ever had. After not very long at all, I felt myself grow nauseated. I gagged and swallowed it back down: Tex-Mex should not be wasted. I feared that if I gagged, my mother would hear and rush in, screaming at the ordeal and waking my siblings to come and witness the charade with her. I could not subject both myself and my family to the humiliation. I would carry it alone, and some day maybe they would thank me and tell me the good I did.

As I explored the dank, dark innards of my best friend's temple, I imagined Jonah pushing at the walls of the whale's stomach, too hot and flimsy to trample down as you would a locked door. I wanted to get out and I couldn't. I was being tested and I knew not why. I was being filled filled filled with something that felt nothing like fast-food runs at my father's house, as much as I wanted—nay, needed—it to.

"I feel sick," I whimpered when I thought I couldn't take anymore. I tried. I failed Jordan and I failed myself. I did not love what she was doing to me now, right now, with my mother so close, with my stomach so upset. "Can I stop?"

"Nonono please, please just a little more, I promise, almost," Jordan squealed and she smiled at me, a big genuine smile as if I had just told a joke about one of our classmates, not as if I was weak with nausea and shame and confusion and love and sleepiness.

I went until she told me I could stop.

I said nothing at all when I finally came up and wiped my face. I went to my bed and slept for what seemed like weeks. We said nothing about that night ever. Not during Bible Study. Not during dinner-table conversation. Eventually we stopped being friends, but I know, sadly I know for a fact, it had nothing to do with that night and the injuries that were done to me by someone, someone my age, that I thought I knew and thought I loved. Jordan left me in middle school when she found a group of friends more suited to her lifestyle than I. Meaning they were Christian and ran track and were tall and beautiful, unlike me. All unlike me in so many ways. I still wonder if her sleepovers with this new group were anything like the ones she guided me through. If she told them she loved them and then asked them if they would do anything for her, even this.

Even this.

Remembering Why I Forgot

Using Memoirs to Approach Trauma

Introduction

Inspired by Susanna Kaysen's memoir *Girl, Interrupted* (1993), I set out to research the state of memoir in contemporary society and how it functions not only in the realm of literary studies, but in feminist studies as well. With so many definitions of morality and good ethics, memoir presented itself as the most honest way for me to understand how women in particular deal with love, touch, and perception in a radically shifting social context. In her memoir, Kaysen details her voluntary stay in McLean Hospital and reflects upon the many ways this 1960s period has shaped her perception of sanity and insanity, happiness and unhappiness, good and bad. After reading Kaysen's account, completed almost thirty years after her stay, I embarked on my own attempt to understand and resolve a tumultuous part of my past. Although the natures of each account are very different—I never voluntarily admitted myself to a famous mental institution—I will use them equally to analyze and justify how reading memoir allows the reader to reconsider his/her moral standing. Furthermore, I defend how writing memoir allows Kaysen to uncover herself in full, without sacrificing aspects of her mind deemed inappropriate or unsavory. It is arguably this mindset—feeling that we need to eradicate parts of the self which do not belong—that so often triggers psychological distress in the first place. Yet embracing memoir as a legitimate interpretation of life invites society to accept the human mind's perceptive diversity, and furthermore to conceptualize new ethical relationships between self and other, right and wrong, real and fake.

Daring to enter Kaysen's world, we learn to question modern perceptions of a traditional, polite lifestyle. In her memoir we see her pre- or post-institutionalized life seldom, seeing rather how she interacts with her fellow patients and their interpretations of their immediate realities. Furthermore, entering a foreign and possibly "insane" mind such as Kaysen's beckons us to reevaluate how we develop trust in authorship. Surely we as the never-incarcerated public should logically dismiss her account as beyond our belief, yet we do not put down the book as soon as we learn of her compromised mental faculties. The details of *Girl, Interrupted* reveal a story not so farfetched from

most people walking down the street; after being released, Kaysen went on to get married (and divorced) and hold down a respectable job (129). And yet, it is a story so incredibly farfetched because of its refusal to ignore that which evades explanation. For a time, Kaysen was mentally unwell enough to be admitted to McLean Hospital and she apologizes for or excuses exactly none of her traumatic journey: she merely addresses it and therefore brings it back to life in the present.

Analyzing my own writing experience, I address how it reshaped my understanding of memoir in general and my own past in particular. More and more, women in Western cultures have been acknowledging the myriad ways in which their trust and bodies have been violated. Often those trespassing against women are family members or friends, so their hatred of the act is coupled with unmoving love for the person. Traumas such as these, as one could imagine, are nearly impossible to analyze, resolve, and file away. When I was very young, a friend I knew and loved took advantage of my trust so that she could sexually assault me. I have never called what she did a "sexual assault," and the words still feel strange in my mouth. This is the primary reason I knew it would be the perfect memory to use: I wanted to do my agitation and confusion more justice than continuing to ignore them. With Kaysen as my guide, I wrote a short account of my life at the time of the assault, apologizing for and excusing exactly none of it. Twelve years after the fact, it is still not possible to fully understand the trauma, yet by forcing myself to write about it I grant myself the power of authorship as opposed to the weakness of victimization. It is no longer a memory I deal with; rather it is now a story I own. The difference between the two phenomena seems arbitrary but in actuality feels immense.

Reading Memoir

Introducing a foreigner to one's world requires finesse. Unlike fiction, wherein we may placidly continue along a given plot with the comfort that it is not real life and therefore cannot threaten us, memoir inches itself one step closer to home. While it is still not my life, it is most definitely someone's life. It is real and happened to someone, and could therefore happen to me. Kaysen addresses this anxiety when she writes, "There's always a touch of fascination in revulsion: Could that happen to me?...Someone who acts 'normal' raises the uncomfortable question, What's the difference between that person and me?" (124). The reader cannot forego such dread of reality when reading memoir. Interestingly, Kaysen poses herself as a kind of detached observer through much of her writing, such that we feel shocked for a moment when we remember that

this is happening to her and she is not removed from it at all. One way Kaysen eases our entry into her Hitchcock-esque setting is humor, which she employs delightfully when she tries to make sense of her diagnosis: "What does borderline personality mean, anyhow?...to quote my post-Melvin psychiatrist: 'It's what they call people whose lifestyles bother them.' He can say it because he's a doctor. If I said it, nobody would believe me" (151). Upon closer inspection, especially regarding her narrative style, Kaysen's life truly is not so different from mine or yours: she is a woman unsure of her next step in life. Of course, she loses us again for a moment when we remember that she was admitted to McLean in the first place for attempting to kill herself with a bottle of aspirin (39).

Despite her suicide attempt, the rest of her memoir can fairly be categorized as a psychoanalytic *bildungsroman*: she develops from a girl confused by her unhappiness to a woman confused by her mental illness. With McLean as her home, patients such as sociopath Lisa Rowe add to and reconfigure her understanding of life as she knows it. Claiming that she first enters her suicidal depression because she could no longer "see things clearly," Kaysen's admission to McLean merely succeeds in showing her several cases in which reality cannot be seen clearly (41). Not seeing clearly takes precedence over the entire narrative, as she goes from scenario to scenario where another female patient's tantrum shows her another way to interpret life's trivialities and traumas. Discussed in *Intimate Reading: The Contemporary Woman's Memoir*, memoir represents the chance for one to psychologically redo what one has formerly tried to undo: "...[T]he memoirist must fill in the blanks, explain the ellipsis—those unaccountable years" (Ellerby 159). By publishing for public eyes that which even she has tried to eradicate from her way of thinking and living, Kaysen calls for a reevaluation of social (and medical) assumptions. She could have easily embraced the stuff of *Girl, Interrupted* as no more than a sabbatical from life—in fact, we could still interpret the memoir that way, as even the title's usage of "interruption" tempts us to overlook this phase in her life as an accident. Yet even more so, this memoir's title and contents tempt us to analyze the state of contemporary life's progression.

A young woman graduating high school in the 1960s, Kaysen sees many of her male schoolmates drafted into the Vietnam War. Fittingly, she has been drafted into her own social death sentence. An aspect of modernity that one cannot ignore is the continuous interruptions: phones ringing, wars drafting, psychological diagnoses inhibiting. Yet it is ironic that Kaysen addresses her

stay at McLean as an interruption in her life, for it is quite possibly the most stable aspect of her life thus far. Prior to McLean she has an affair with her English teacher, hallucinates, illicitly writes poems instead of essays for school, and violently bangs her wrists as a form of self-mutilation, to name a few (41, 85, 152, 155). By giving this time in her life the spotlight, a time she has hitherto despised discussing in conversation because it makes her audience question her mental faculties, she imbues it with the strength to stand on its own, without her shame stigmatizing it. Interruptions in life instead become chapters making up the whole. She allows the trauma of feeling trapped by a psychoanalytic categorization to instead take form as another part of her mental development. One writer analyzes the positive message of Kaysen's account:

In turn, she questions the ways in which psychological and popular discourses about adolescence attempt to press adolescent girls into positions of vulnerability. In this way, Kaysen provides a text within which she embeds alternative gendered pedagogies that teaches about the ways in which the adolescent girl is compelled to occupy the position of traumatic subject. (Marshall 129)

Whereas feeling silent shame and guilt for twenty-five years succeeds only in making her distrust her self-awareness more, recalling her confusing memories diminishes her own fear of the unknowable traumatized mind. Furthermore, publishing such memories also diminishes the reader's same abject fear. The reader's anxiety towards entering this real account lessens when, at the end of the memoir, Kaysen can be seen as another woman who successfully lives through another traumatic interruption and then redefines it to become part of her journey, not part of her psychological downfall. This publication asks us to ethically respond to our comfortable habit of ignoring uncomfortable interruptions. How much are we as a society willing to ignore in order to keep our respective stories appearing calm and trauma-free?

In addition to ameliorating the reader's anxiety about entering an unfettered account of mental recovery, *Girl, Interrupted* invites us to reimagine the "trustworthy" authorial voice. The healthy ability to show emotion has been condemned as a symptom of insanity throughout history. Women especially receive extra negative attention when they scream, cry, or negate Western standards of withdrawn "propriety" in some way, and America's patriarchal society thereafter condemns those who emote as unreliable, irrational sources (Haste 85). Kaysen redefines the reader's relationship with insanity by eloquently and honestly guiding us through a believable account of insanity.

Although she does suffer from hallucinations and suicidal tendencies, her doctors do not begin to show an interest in the root cause of her suicide attempt until months into her stay at McLean: her permeating, ignored, and mocked sadness. Overlooked as “teenage rebellion” by her parents, school counselor, and boyfriend, Kaysen’s utter emotional discontent goes unnoticed until she overdoses on aspirin, wherein her desperate act immediately earns her the glamorous title of mental patient for almost two years (37). Yet as a memoirist, Kaysen uses her autobiographical authority and introduces the reader to a new way of relating to and trusting literature.

According to popular (but antiquated) views of insanity, this title should forbid Kaysen from acting as a reliable source in this narrative. Madness typically serves only as that “other” perspective that comically and temporarily undoes the reasonable main perspective: “[M]adness is no longer considered in its tragic reality, in the absolute laceration that gives it access to the other world; but only in the irony of its illusions” (Foucault 29). When presented with a text, we are open to madness as comic relief but never as correct. Yet in all of her mental incapacity, Kaysen still gains the reader’s attention and trust by delivering her truth without any apparent aim except to tell us her story. Although possible, taking control of one’s diagnosis—allowing it to influence but not deteriorate one’s interpretive and analytic faculties—is not an easy feat. Dr. Amy Rutstein-Riley, director of the Adult Learning & Development Specialization at Lesley University, discusses one of her patients coming to terms with a Bipolar Disorder diagnosis:

[Her] conflict is clearly articulated. On the one hand having a label, a name to assign to her previously unnamed emotions and behaviours provides her with an explanatory model and a means for controlling and addressing them. However, on the other hand, the power and impact of the label in our contemporary culture, and more specifically, within the familial and cultural context from which she comes, makes this simultaneously very difficult to own. (20)

Kaysen repeatedly considers the consequences of her illness (Borderline Personality Disorder), such as being ignored, being locked up, etc., yet in her memoir she embraces this psychological self-doubt as part of her nature and therefore part of her valid perspective as an individual. Simply taking command over her narrative suggests that Kaysen has the potential to command any situation, a privilege which most of her fellow patients do not receive after society dismisses them as unwell, and they allow themselves to be dismissed. As

we reconsider what it means to disregard “insane authorship”—that perhaps foreign mentalities have equally significant points of view to offer—we also reconsider what it means to be “socially acceptable.” To see reality differently often poses a threat to social order, yet to eliminate passions such as Kaysen’s (described throughout the memoir) poses a much more pressing ethical threat to modern human multiplicity.

Kaysen’s America in the 1960’s suffers from a bipolar disorder of sorts. In a very real way, she is caught in the crossfire between the impending social revolution (Civil Rights Movement, “hippies,” etc.) and the ruling mild temperaments of her parents’ and psychiatrists’ generation. A setting like this proves highly problematic: those caught with too much of a “free” mind become labeled as psychologically corrupt if one action crosses any blurry social line. For example, Kaysen’s various doctors label her with BPD, passive aggression, dysfunctional nihilism, etc., all because her swept-under-the-rug, adolescent sadness progresses to a suicide attempt. Yet what I maintain, and what I believe Kaysen concludes by the end of her memoir, is that psychological stability is impossible when society clings to one narrow ethical compass. It is not surprising that she writes about an almost comical disconnect between her philosophical negations and her doctors’ remedial, authoritative solutions to “see clearly.” She is preaching “realities” to an audience that only sees one “reality.” Memoirist and cultural critic Janet Mason Ellerby defends, “As readers, we become the wider, diverse interpretive community for their stories. Deliberate or not, the memoirists’ ideological mission is to produce new mental habits” (128). *Girl, Interrupted* illustrates this futile attempt to diagnose and cure the country’s youth at a time when relative “madness” and radical perspectives were desperately needed in order to break down antiquated codes of racial, gender, and even psychological oppression. Kaysen even makes a joke about feeling “insane” when, in an office where she works as a typist, she is a victim of sexist rules (women are not permitted to publicly smoke, whereas men are) before there was a word for sexism: “It was my job. Not only that—I was the one person who had trouble with the rules. Everybody else accepted them. Was this a mark of my madness?” (132). Certainly in some circumstances, feeling mad simply reflects that one’s environment cannot yet embrace the impending social shift.

In most of our stories, there is an event or series of events we cannot label as good or bad, right or wrong. Such an equivocal interruption occurs for Kaysen in the form of mental institutionalization, which for practical survival purposes she chooses to ignore for decades. But revisiting her past (and publishing it) grants

her audience the choice to deal with its own traumas in a similar way: owning an event without rationalizing it, without casting blame and innocence in a gray area where such labels would truly resolve nothing. These interruptions and Kaysen's account of them serve a very real purpose in today's culture, and that is to legitimize the various ways in which modern human minds interact with the self and the other. With honest, intellectually stimulating accounts such as *Girl, Interrupted* paving the way for a radically different, yet still "socially acceptable," way of dealing with inner turmoil and trauma, society can much more easily develop new ethical codes for handling psychological differences. After all, what is more insane than denying something you felt, witnessed, or experienced ever happened? Kaysen and her tantrum-throwing, tradition-despising peers' stories offer progressive insight crucial to our ethical evolution. The more Kaysen acknowledges her perspective as valid—if only for the reason that it is hers and she owns it—the more we as readers acknowledge the multitude of perspectives on the inexplicable interruptions in life.

Writing Memoir

When I began to dredge up my past, the first and biggest worry that paralyzed me at the keyboard was that nobody would believe my story. And what was worse, that nobody would care about a story they did not believe or did not want to believe. I imagine this to be a common occurrence with writers of memoir. An immense amount of anxiety manifests because one has chosen to visit a place of ill repute—a store of memories that do not fit into one's easy, daily cycle. Writing a memoir of trauma is especially troublesome because these locked-up memories call into question the "realness" of our perception. For example, there are things I remember and there are things I forget: I remember loving a girl named Jordan, and I forget being sexually abused by her. This is not so different from Susanna Kaysen's admission that she remembers her "murdered time" in McLean Hospital (from the nurses' 10-minute checks on every bedroom, removing any sense of privacy for the patients, to the humiliating hours spent trying to cut steak with plastic spoons in the cafeteria), and she forgets her inability to act willfully or reasonably within that murdered time (Kaysen 109). Writing memoir allows victims of trauma, like Kaysen and me, to reclaim moments that have been forced out on account of their indigestibility.

To begin, I would like to establish what I consider traumatic. Trauma does not necessarily take the shape of violence or torture, especially in Kaysen's and my memoirs. On the contrary, trauma for the sake of this argument takes the shape

of unfeasible phenomena in our lives that, for whatever reason, we cannot make sense of or digest at the time of their occurrence. As much as it would simplify things, the world is unfortunately not made-up of white and black hues, of villains and victims to which category we all submit. As Janet Mason Ellerby reasons regarding her trauma of being hospitalized, "There was no demon...Nevertheless, the shadow is there. What I did for too long was to deny that [the hospitalization] should have any significance in my life" (144). Logically speaking, I assumed that if I were to regard my sexual assault as insignificant then it would become just that. I was unwilling to rethink my love and admiration for Jordan; thusly the damage done needed to become small, such that my love could overwrite my hurt. So the hurt disappeared and the memory, unwilling to be acknowledged, withered with it. And, as discussed in the previous section, Kaysen ignores but cannot eradicate the part of her that remembers being hospitalized in McLean. By attempting to eradicate it, she gives the trauma more power over her than she over it.

Allowing myself to be sexualized, to put it harshly, carries with it several social implications. As far as I recall, I did not equate performing cunnilingus on Jordan with submitting to abuse. I saw it as an act of love, at least as an act with the potential of finding its origins in love. Like every social creature, I am largely a product of what I see, hear, and read on a regular basis. I mention in the memoir that I frequently viewed pornographic films when alone with the TV remote control, and that I was not immune to their sexually and emotionally alluring subject material. At that age I cannot imagine that I realized the disconnect between adults performing sexual acts on each other and children requesting sexual acts from other children. Yet, as in pornographic films, my relationship with sexuality has been warped: rape, force, and violence have all been exceedingly romanticized by both pornographic film and literature. Critiquing the "harlequin romance" novel uprising, two writers warn, "The heroine is raped and coerced into sex by the hero and often sold into slavery or prostitution. She is dragged across deserts, swamps, and oceans. All of this is presented to the reader as romantic, and is perceived as romantic by the heroine" (Castagna and Radespiel 301). I cannot speak for Jordan's intentions, but I can affirm that receiving Jordan's vastly inappropriate request did not occur to me as a rape proposal. In fact I felt chosen, and this because I learned from endless pornographic rhetoric that being the object of another's sexual manipulation is a blessing at any age. The vital piece to take away from pornography's involvement in my story is that we—children, women, writers, human beings—are irrevocably influenced by the rhetorical acts placed before us. If a scene of a

woman “romantically” being forced to have sex demands our attention constantly, then that is what we will consider normal, regular, good. Yet if a scene of a woman proudly walking away from a compromising situation (or ascertaining that her mental faculties are valid, or admitting that a sexist office rule is socially unjust) is perpetuated in the media, then what should logically follow?

This phenomenon, being sexually abused and mistaking it for love or even personal empowerment, is not remotely rare in the lives of women. As women voice their stories of rape trauma more and more, a pattern develops that can rightfully be called “shame displacement” (Ahmed 246). Already a vulnerable child—I did not like the way I looked and sensed others’ displeasure with my bulky, awkward appearance—I saw Jordan’s attention as paramount and her ability to hurt me as impossible. I instead turned the shame inward and developed a self-hatred that seemed far preferable to admitting I allowed another person to manipulate and humiliate me. “The feeling of shame seems to make being the victim of rape an act of wrongdoing. When others ask her to ‘hide’ or ‘disappear,’ she has no hope of ‘corrective action,’” quotes Ellerby from Nancy Venable Raine’s memoir *After Silence: Rape and My Journey* (145). Shame manifests when victims of trauma refuse to acknowledge their trauma in full. That is not to say there has to be a villain and victim, indeed that is not the case for Kaysen and I maintain it is not the case for me. Yet this equation, Villain+Victim=Trauma, is all too tempting to use when one first attempts to make sense of our past. In the course of her memoir, Kaysen refuses to pin down one cause for her depression, suicide attempt, and hospitalization. Contrarily, she succeeds at replacing herself as the agent of her own mind by admitting to feeling unwell, uncertain, and apathetic. Launching her memories above a world of simplified black-and-white, she actively directs the public toward perceiving a subject’s strength differently in personal narratives.

Similarly, I do not feel myself to be utterly reborn after facing a memory that eluded my understanding since I was nine years old. I cannot pin down Jordan as the villain, although I could definitely make the argument that pornography caused me to misread an abusive situation, as the Vietnam War causes Kaysen to misread the difference between life and death (92-3). Obviously, approaching trauma through memoir cannot reshape a memory so entirely that we can finally file it away as another rational occurrence in our lives; most memories that comprise personal accounts evade reason altogether. Yet it does provide the chance for traumatized writers to speak for their own perspective, a

perspective that victims have been made to silence for the sake of social comfort. Ellerby explains how sexual-trauma accounts can easily be misinterpreted: "They are also silenced because their stories make women feel too threatened...when we are trying hard to be recognized as competent, empowered individuals" (146). Perhaps not at first, but most definitely in recent years I have been conflicted about my relationship to my body, and then my relationship to other women's bodies. Raised by feminists, I could not imagine that a girl could jeopardize feminist solidarity for her own emotional gain—you may think I am addressing Jordan, but I am addressing myself. Ellerby's passage justifies but does not excuse my desire to maintain a perfect world of women loving, supporting, and empowering other women. Women who silently endure sexual trauma often cannot admit that they might be the clown, the disregarded fool, in their own story. And although this is never truly the case, internalizing this displaced shame still seems far preferable to questioning the status of women as "competent, empowered individuals." While Kaysen tries to convince herself that forgetting her illness and the trauma accompanying it will make her into a stronger individual, her denial only helps perpetuate the social myth that "sucking it up" is the best way to retain feminine agency. Finally writing down and owning her past, however, sends the message that subjectivity comes from accepting ourselves and peers in all of our internal diversity.

Rather than considering trauma accounts as weakening feminism and the image of the modern woman, I defend that recreating traumatic experiences in memoir allows writers to control and redefine socially acceptable authorial voices. Where contained propriety has much to offer in the realm of, say, textbook writing, unfettered honesty has much more to offer in the realms of memoir, fiction, poetry—every genre where there can be no universally "correct" manner of seeing or interpreting. The methods by which we come to conclusions about our realities are vast. Kaysen admits that she can never be certain of her "recovery" because she cannot confidently say she observes and comprehends reality as her doctors and nurses would like her to (154-5). Instead, writing memoir grants victims of trauma to become survivors of trauma, by shifting the focus from denial to ownership. Finally transcribing my trauma with Jordan does not undo the hurt caused to me by her, by myself, or by society's disgust with sexually deviant taboos. But it does grant me the opportunity to have the final word on my experience: I own my past; my past does not own me. Suzette A. Henke labels it perfectly as "narrative recovery," and gives a glorifying example in Anaïs Nin's volumes of journals: "[I]t was the artistic

process of reformulating experience through the medium of her journal that allowed her to achieve a sense of autonomy and freedom" (81).

Memoirists do much more than tell a story when they revisit traumatic experiences such as hospitalization or molestation; they give permission to millions of readers that there is not just one way to endure something that utterly changes its object. Yet we regain our subjectivity when we allow our reaction, our recovery, our perspective to be the dominant authority over the ordeal. Although never undone, and rarely resolved to the point of internal quiet, trauma can most definitely be recalculated in our minds so that we once again become the subject of our own lives. As a species we are constantly evolving physically, socially, and now psychologically (thank you, Freud), and to think that there is one universal concept of ethics that will always apply to civilization is almost laughable. What is beautiful today may be monstrous tomorrow, and much credit is due to those who embraced that shift from beauty to monstrosity. Memoirists perform exactly that deed, inscribing ethical codes for the next generation, when they unveil a truth in their lives that does not fit perfectly into the current social standards of normality. For the self and for the other, memoir allows us the chance to witness, embrace, and promote alternative ways of interpreting those amorphous specters from our past, begging to be understood.

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