JONI RODGERS

CHAPTER SAMPLES

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“Skydiving” from *Paris: The Memoir* by Paris Hilton (message-driven memoir focused on trauma/sexual assault survivorship and advocacy) “Surprising depth and purpose…inspiring and empowering…a masterclass in owning your story.” KIRKUS (starred review)

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“Prologue: The End” from *Kill Smartie Breedlove: a novel* by Joni Rodgers

From the balcony of the Lady Bird Johnson Suite on the 44th floor of the Bonham Hotel, the city of Houston was an ant farm teeming with red taillights. It sheered upward and expanded outward at the speed of glass and steel, an unstoppable network of cross streets and skyscrapers, parking lots, palmy backyards, broken bayous, taco trucks, shaved ice stands, girls in flip flops, folks on porches. There was nothing in this corner of Southeast Texas to stop the parade of eroding neighborhoods and shiny shopping malls. Not a mountain nor a river nor a God nor much of anything until you got to the Gulf of Mexico.

From the 42nd floor, Smartie Breedlove could see it all.

Houston, the fourth most populous city in the United States, arm-wrestled Los Angeles for the dubious distinction of having the worst air quality. The metroplex was more than a hundred miles wide with six million busy people, eleven thousand restaurants, and almost as many churches. Smartie had gathered these factoids while conducting research for her first novel, *Get Wilder*, in which late night classic rock disc jockey Smack Wilder solves the murder of the Pentecostal televangelist with whom she’s been sleeping.

By the 38th floor, Smartie’s silk slip dress had ridden up

under her arms. She wore no panties, and wickedly, she was glad for that. She'd gotten her roots done a day or two earlier and was sporting a fresh mani-pedi just a few hours old. This was good, because whatever remained of her would undoubtedly splatter YouTube and the rest within nanoseconds. Smartie's life flashed by in the lighted windows like comic book panels: the secret struggles and boozy hijinks of her youth, fleeting lovers, book covers, contracts and rejections, fan mail and hate mail, blogs and twitter streams, screen shots and publicity stills from movie versions of the "Smack Wilder: Voice of the Graveyard Shift" series.

By the 21st floor, her eyes were as dry as red clay on account of the wind, so she couldn't see the couple on the 18th floor balcony, but she heard the woman's scream whip by like the startled shrill of a seagull. Loud music from a 13th floor stag party rose and fell past her ear like a speeding train.

As the glass roof of the dining solarium rose up to meet her, Smartie remembered that the human brain is believed to function sixty seconds after decapitation, firing fine electric signals, searching out its last sight, registering every fast-fading sensation. She'd learned this while researching Smack Wilder #7: *Splatter Cat*, in which Smack solves the murder of a Jackson Pollock forger with whom she's been sleeping. Or maybe it was Smack Wilder #9: *Doggy Style*, in which Smack solves the murder of the Weimaraner breeder with whom she's been sleeping. The men in Smack's life were handsome and caddish and rarely around long enough for a second martini. The same could be said of the men in Smartie's life, though they were fewer and far between, and little mystery surrounded the circumstances of those hasty departures.

One man in particular did cross her mind at the moment she breached the steel-framed ceiling of the dining solarium, which gave way in a cascade of shattered glass and scattering voices.

Brightness.

Then darkness.

A precious presence of roses.

Sixty seconds later, Smartie Breedlove was dead.

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"Worlds Within" from *Going to the Mountain: Life Lessons from My Grandfather* by Ndaba Mandela

One of the last known photographs of my grandfather, Nelson Mandela, was taken at his home in Johannesburg on a Saturday morning in 2013, just a few weeks before he died. In that photo, my three-year-old son Lewanika sits on the arm of the Old Man's easy chair, looking with great interest at his Baba. My grandfather smiles a crooked smile, holding Lewanika's small hand, the same way he held mine the first time I met him at Victor Verster Prison when I was seven years old. I have to smile at the similarities I see in the two of them: a very specific hairline, the same shell-shaped ear, and the way their eyes crinkled at the corners when they laughed at each other.

On this particular Saturday morning, the Old Man was quieter than usual. He was ninety-five years old and had been fighting a lingering upper respiratory infection, but the strength of his spirit was still evident in the way he held himself, and the strength of his character was evident in the way he held Lewanika. My grandfather loved children. To the end of his days, if you put the Old Man in a room with a baby or a little kid, you might as well not exist. Suddenly this great man—this revolutionary leader, this president, this historic agent of change—became as silly and softhearted as any granddad. He had eyes only for those little ones.

When I was a kid and it was just my granddad and me at the long dining room table, he said to me more than once, “All those years in jail, I never heard the sound of children. That is the thing I missed the most.”

One dining room table, no matter how long, could not possibly be inhabited by two people who were more different. He was born in rural South Africa in 1918. I was born in urban Soweto in 1982. He was a giant, a national treasure; I was one of a thousand scruffy kids kicking cans down the street. It would have been easy for anyone to ignore me, and plenty of people did, but it wasn’t in Madiba’s character to ignore any child, no matter how poor, scruffy, or seemingly insignificant. He spoke with great longing and regret about being absent while his own children and grandchildren were growing up. He’d been in prison all of my life and most of the life of my father, Makgatho Lewanika Mandela, the Old Man’s second son by his first wife, Evelyn Ntoko Mase. His intention, I think, was to make up for that a little by taking me in and becoming, in all functional aspects, a father to me. As with most good intentions, there were downsides he didn’t anticipate, but somehow my granddad and I crossed the valleys that separated us.

Madiba’s children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren brought out a deep sense of hope in him, but also a deep sense of responsibility and a fresh respect for ancient tradition. He looked at us and saw both past and future: his ancestors standing alongside his descendants. I never fully understood that until Lewanika came along, followed by his little sister Neema, but I think I started to understand as the Old Man passed from his eighties into his nineties, and the roles we played in each other’s lives began to reverse. My granddad was my protector and caregiver when I was a child; now I was his. During his final years,

he didn't want a lot of strangers fussing over him. He wanted my older brother and me to carry him up the stairs and preferred to have his wife, Graça, help him with personal needs. If he was leaving the house, he wanted me to arrange security. If he was sitting up in bed, he wanted me to bring him the most relevant newspapers. I was that guy.

He often said to me, "Ndaba, I'm thinking of going to the Eastern Cape to spend the rest of my days. Will you come with me?"

"Yes, Granddad, of course," I always answered.

"Good. Good."

He never did return to the place of his boyhood. Perhaps he and I could never accept the concept of "the rest of my days." I wanted to think about the remainder of his life in terms of years, so the final moment took me by brutal surprise.

Even as he approached his mid-nineties, he never lost a bit of his zest for life, but he was pretty frail those last few years, and that frustrated him. He occasionally got quite combative, yelling at the nurses and caregivers. He even punched one male nurse in the face, much to everyone's shock and dismay. It was like the old boxer inside him had suddenly had enough of all this nonsense and—*bam*—he let loose a surprisingly strong left uppercut before anyone realized what was happening.

"Get out of here!" he bellowed at the poor bloke. "My grandson will take care of you if you don't get out of our house! Ndaba! Fetch that stick!"

"Granddad, Granddad, whoa, whoa, whoa." I always tried to get in there and calm him down, but sometimes there was no soothing him. That big, deep voice could still rattle the roof. It was startling for those who didn't spend a lot of time with him, and for me, it was a terrible reminder that the Old Man was seriously

getting *old*. I didn't allow myself to think about where that was leading. It's not our way for the men in my family to be nostalgic or sentimental. For five generations before I was born into apartheid, members of my family withstood every form of struggle, oppression, and violence you can imagine. This sort of history tends to thicken a man's skin. We go forward. We don't flinch.

"*Ndiyindoda!*" we shout at a crucial moment in *Ukuluka*, the ancient circumcision rite whereby a Xhosa boy comes of age. It means, "*I am a man!*" The declaration defines us from that moment forward. *Ukuluka*—"going to the mountain"—is a celebration, but the *abakwetha* (the initiates, usually in their late teens or early twenties) must survive a month of rigorous physical and emotional trials. My grandfather described *Ukuluka* as "an act of bravery and stoicism." The moment after the *ingcibi*, the circumcision specialist, makes that critical stroke of the blade, the initiate shouts, "*Ndiyindoda!*" and he'd better mean it. There is no anesthetic, so there can be no fear. Flinching or pulling away could cause disastrous consequences. An infection can be fatal. There is some controversy surrounding the practice; young men have died. For many generations, it was shrouded in mystery, because let's face it, if you knew all the details, would you want to do it?

I won't lie: I felt a certain amount of dread during my teen years, knowing that someday I would be the one going to the mountain. I would be given my circumcision name and claim my place in the world. I would be a man. It sounded like a lot of work, to be honest, and my grandfather let me know he expected nothing less than this from me, but he didn't just tell me, "Be a man!" During the years that I lived with him—and during the years that I didn't—he lived his life as an example I couldn't ignore. He showed me that no ritual could make a boy a man. *Ukuluka* is the outward expression of an inner transformation that has already taken

place, and for me, that transformation was by far the most difficult task.

How strange to find that, at the end of this great man's life, taking into account all that he gave and taught me, the greatest privileges were in the smallest moments. His hand on my head when I was lonely or afraid. His somber eyes as he lectured me across the dinner table. His rolling laughter and theatrical way of telling stories—and he did love telling stories! Especially the African folktales he grew up with. He even made a children's book, *Nelson Mandela's Favorite African Folktales*, and in the Foreword, he wrote, "A story is a story; you may tell it as your imagination and your being and your environment dictate, and if your story grows wings and becomes the property of others, you may not hold it back." He expressed a sincere wish that the voice of the African storyteller should never die, and he recognized that in order for that to happen, the stories themselves must evolve and bend to the ear of each new listener.

That is the spirit in which I offer the stories in this book—my story about my life with my grandfather, along with some of the old Xhosa stories and sayings—and in doing so, I hope to share the greatest life lessons I learned from Madiba. As I grow older, I see all these events in a new light, so I understand why others who witnessed the same events might see them differently. Human memory is more changeable and mysterious than any of those old stories about magical beasts and talking spiders and rivers that flow with souls of their own, but inevitably a story reveals the storyteller's heart, so even those fantastical tales tell very real truth. As I sit down to this task, I'm humbled by the knowledge that people all over the world—most important, my own children—will read this book, and I'm reminded of the Kenyan prayer for the spirit of truth: *From the cowardice that dares not face new truth,*

from the laziness that is content with half-truth, from the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth, may the gods deliver me.

The stories of the Xhosa run deep with themes that resonated for Madiba and still strike a chord in me: justice and injustice, hidden truths revealed and grave wrongs righted, amazing metamorphoses and mystical happenings. Master storyteller Nongenile Masithathu Zenani, a curator of Xhosa oral tradition, says the storyteller's power is in *ihlabathi kunye negama*—"the world and the word." My grandfather understood a man's power to change his own story and the power of that story to change the world.

When I was a child, my story—my small world—was defined by two things: poverty and apartheid. When I was eleven years old, I went to live with my grandfather, who helped me reclaim a different vision of the world and my place in it. My early childhood was sometimes terrifying. My teenage years were complicated. I struggled in school. I partied hard to drown out the noise of the crowd and the painful absence of my parents. Some of the choices I made broke my grandfather's heart, and some of the choices he made broke mine. But over the years, always, always, there was a bond of good faith between us. He saw a good man in me and refused to let up until I saw that man in the mirror. I saw a great man in him and worked hard to be more like him.

I believe Madiba's words have the power to change your world too, and by that I mean both the world around you and the world within you, the undiscovered universe that is your own possibility. I believe Madiba's wisdom, amplified and embodied by you and me, still holds the potential to reshape the world we share and the world our children will inherit.

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"Humble Pie" from *I'm No Philosopher by I Got Thoughts: Mini-Meditations for Saints, Sinners, and the Rest of Us* by Kristin Chenoweth

My very first day in Florence Birdwell's class, she said, "I'm going to have one of our upperclassmen sing for you in a moment. I want everyone to know where they're headed. But before we do that, I'm going to ask Kristi Chenoweth to sing."

Uh…hummana-hummana-wha?

She was putting me up there with someone I knew to be her star pupil. On my first day. Because apparently, I was just that good.

Feeling pretty chuffed about the whole thing, I went to the accompanist and gave him a few brief instructions, and then I went to the front of the room and delivered my exuberant 18-year-old first-day-of-school rendition of "New York, New York."

A lot of people were belting that song at a lot of auditions at the time, because that song is just…a lot. I knew I could belt it out bigger, louder, and a-lotter than any of those other little Pippin-heads, and I owned it.

Owned. It.

Wow-point-*oh!* on the Richter Scale.

Those little town blues—they were melting away. I think I saw a crack appear in the ceiling. Plaster dust frinkling down.

Go, little 18-year-old-me!

I hauled that sucker in with a big finish, and everybody applauded like crazy. Everyone except Flo Bird. She pressed her hand to her heart and said, "Oh. I can't wait to teach you how to sing."

And then the star pupil got up there and delivered some transcendent Puccini wrecking ball of an aria, and I was like, *Ah. I see what you did there.* This was a "before" and "after" type thing, and there was zero doubt about which one of us was the unbleached muslin in the tie-dye demonstration. I was the raw potato on *Top Chef*—full of starch and fresh potential.

I knew I could sing. No one could take that from me—and that was never Flo Bird's intention. Her intention was to prove to me that there was a better way to use my instrument, and in order to do that, she had to feed me a slice of humble pie, which the star soprano served up with a side of Cool Whip.

Swallowing that was painful. I was humbled, and being humbled is unpleasant in the moment, but if we're willing to unwrap it like the gift it is, it can be transformative.

Now, just to clarify—*Danger, Will Robinson! Danger!*—I'm not talking about *humiliation*. Humiliating another person is never okay, and it's particularly egregious when you're talking about a kid.

There's a difference between *humility* and *humiliation*.

Humiliation lies. Humility speaks truth.

Humiliation silences you. Humility empowers you.

Humiliation is a byproduct of conflict with someone else. Humility is a byproduct of peace within yourself.

The goal of humiliation is to make you hate yourself. Humility requires us to love our *me of the moment* selves with compassion and good humor, making way for better selves we know we can be.

Humiliation is a weapon, slung in anger, incited by fear. Humility is a schoolbook, offered in hope, motivated by love—hopefully, with a side of Cool Whip.

There's a great moment in Luke 14 when Jesus is out to dinner with his disciples, and they're all jockeying and nudging, trying to sit next to him and the wealthy person who was hosting the banquet. Jesus told them, "Simmer down, y'all. If you bulldoze your way to the head of the table, chances are the host will come along and tell you to move aside for someone more important. Take a seat at the foot of the table and hang out until someone invites you to move up. Meanwhile, it's more fun hanging out with regular folks anyway, so get over yourselves, and let's eat."

Yes, I'm paraphrasing, but I'm pretty sure that was true to tone.

It's hard to reconcile that advice with the constant hand-waving of social media. Being seen is now a hobby, a business, a monetized obsession. Ever since *platform* became a verb, the desire to be noticed has overtaken the desire to be noteworthy. Everybody's clamoring for attention, craving that seat at the head of the table. Perform first; pay attention later.

"Visibility these days seems to somehow equate to success," Michaela Coel said when she accepted her 2021 Emmy for writing *I May Destroy You*. "Do not be afraid to disappear from it, from us, for a while, and see what comes to you in the silence."

She nailed it, didn't she?

…*afraid to disappear*…

The reflex that compelled the disciples to jostle for a spotlight seat at the table is the same thing that compels us to Instagram our damn Corn Flakes—*fear of disappearing*—and in that environment, humility is an act of supreme courage.

The need for attention is a hungry little skeeter that doesn't care where it gets its next gulp of iron-rich blood. It could be from the deliciously exposed cleavage of Gisele Bündchen or it could be from a dog's butt. Whether you're loving or being loved, there's

difference between a click and actual caring. I worry that we're settling for a very dog-butt level of affection a lot of the time, simply because we feel the itch of this need to be seen—to be a part of something—and we've been offered this stupidly easy way to scratch it.

I also worry that young performers internalize criticism and/or outright hate that comes their way without evaluating context. "Consider the source" is the first rule of evaluating and applying constructive criticism on stage, on the page, in the fitting room mirror, and in the perilous territory of the smart phone.

Ironically, humility is possible only when we love ourselves—as we are, as we have been, as we hope to be—independent of the approval or disapproval of anyone else.

So, lately I've been asking myself:

- Am I allowing the kneejerk likes/dislikes of other people to inform my ability to like myself?
- Am I settling for love that doesn't live up to the word?
- Do I have the guts to take a seat and let my work speak for me?
- Can I accept and celebrate myself as *enough* in the presence of only me, myself, and God?

Ummmmmm… Let's just say I'm working on it.

Follow me on TikTok for updates! ☺

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"Movies, Myths, and Monuments" from *This is the Fire: What I Say to My Friends about Racism* by Don Lemon

General Williams Carter Wickham was a reluctant rebel; he voted against secession in 1861. When his fellow delegates

approved Virginia's resolution to leave the United States, however, Wickham did step up to command a Confederate cavalry division and was elected to the Second Confederate Congress. A collection of Wickham's letters (archived by Special Collections at Virginia Tech) show that immediately after the official end of the Civil War, he renounced the Confederate cause and vowed allegiance to the Republicans. He became the president of a burgeoning railroad empire, expanded his agricultural dealings, and served as a United States senator until his death in 1888. Wickham was born and died at Hickory Hill, a 3,300-acre plantation, where he raised the next generation of his affluent Southern family with his wife, Lucy. Like my own forefather, Wickham also had a host of descendants who never made it into the family Bible. He fathered six children by a slave woman called Bibanna.

In 1891, three years after his death, a statue of Wickham was installed in Monroe Park in Richmond, Virginia. The *Norfolk Landmark* covered the unveiling and described the 17-foot monument as "suggestive in every particular of that solidity, massiveness and determination that characterized General Wickham." It was an "artistic triumph," they said. "Very impressive and realistic." The 8-foot square pedestal was inscribed:

WICKHAM

"Soldier, Statesman, Patriot, Friend"

Wickham's sword was stolen in 1956. Other than that, he stood forever battle-ready in full Confederate bombast with a pair of field glasses in one hand, poised for reconnoiter, and a pair of gloves in the other, as if he was prepared to hurl the proverbial gauntlet.

I recently spoke with two of Wickham's descendants: 67-year-old musician/storyteller Reggie Harris, a Black descendant of Wickham and Bibanna, and 28-year-old Clayton Wickham, the

White great-great-great-grandson of Wickham and Lucy. Reggie says the ongoing dialogue about their shared family history and how it reflects the broader history of the United States has been a "powerful, heart-shifting experience." He sings about it in "Hickory Hill," a song he wrote after visiting the old plantation with several of his White Wickham relatives:

So now our stories come together

across these fields of broken dreams…

"We can't change history," Reggie told me. "We can't alter what is true. We, in fact, are related. What we decided, on that day and every time we talk, is that we won't let that history define us. But we have to acknowledge it."

Clayton says there was "a lot of silence" about the Confederacy when he was growing up.

"For much of my childhood, I didn't even really know he was there in that park," he said. "I can remember my middle school teacher telling us explicitly during our history class that the civil war was not about slavery."

"Yeah, it's not about slavery." I had to laugh. I grew up hearing the same party line applied to the Confederate flags and Robert E. Lee High School in Baton Rouge. "It's about Southern pride, right? Is that the story?"

"Southern pride," he nodded. "States' rights. It's framed as a kind of patriotism, and people ignore the fact that the patriotism was grounded in White supremacy. But I also think that there are people like me and my family members whose complicity in White supremacy is partly due to ignorance. And to some extent that ignorance is willful. Because I think, as a White person, there have been times in my life where I've just turned my head."

The moment when Clayton could no longer look away came in August 2017, when self-identified neo-Nazis, White nationalists,

and others who shared alt-right ideology descended on Charlottesville, Virginia for the Unite the Right rally only a few weeks after a resurgent Ku Klux Klan marched there with Confederate flags and white robes. Faith-based organizations and civil rights activists came from far and wide to stand with local merchants, students, and UVA faculty in peaceful counter-protests. After state police ordered the crowd to disperse, 20-year-old James Alex Fields Jr. intentionally plowed his 2010 Dodge Challenger into a group of counter-protesters, injuring nineteen people and killing 32-year-old Heather Heyer.

The final post on Heather's Facebook profile said: "If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention." And finally, Clayton Wickham was.

Within days, Clayton and his younger brother Will, who grew up on Monument Avenue in Richmond, emailed Mayor Levar Stoney and all nine members of the city council, stating their position as Wickham's living legacy: "The removal of these statues is long overdue."

The brothers were not alone. Rev. Robert W. Lee IV and other descendants of Confederate stalwarts have also spoken out, requesting the removal of monuments and decrying the slow-to-nonexistent response from local officials, who drag their feet for fear of alienating conservative voters. Three years after Clayton and Will petitioned for the removal of the Wickham monument, the general was still standing, impassive as ever, on his pedestal—until the summer of 2020, when protesters slung ropes around the thick, cast bronze neck and heaved the statue off its perch. Wickham lay sprawled on his back, half on the manicured lawn, half on the grit pathway. Tattooed with white and orange spray paint, his resolute expression was transformed to an air of startled dismay.

This was the first of several Confederate monuments torn down in Richmond, where peaceful protesters had spent the day speaking, listening, singing, and cooking out in the shade cast by a massive statue of Robert E. Lee on horseback that towers above Monument Avenue. At the time, Virginia hosted more Confederate monuments than any other state in the union, a dubious distinction protesters were determined to change. Weary of waiting for state and local governments to do the right thing, protesters across the country were taking matters into their own hands.

"We have an opportunity to take another step forward," said Reggie. "Maybe, now that the statues have come down, the conversation is reopened. Maybe we can use this opportunity to make a new start."

On the 4th of July, Trump stood in front of Mount Rushmore, bawling out those who'd engaged in this "merciless campaign to defame our heroes, erase our values, and indoctrinate our children."

I'm willing to own that. If your heroes are murderers and armed insurrectionists who sought to overthrow the United States government by force and violence, I hereby volunteer for a merciless campaign to defame them. If your values are grounded in White supremacy, yes, let's erase that. If your children never heard about the German Coast Uprising or Sojourner Truth, if they were taught in school that this country was torn in two—and is now being torn in two again—over some nebulous tenet of "states' rights" and that neo-Nazis from Michigan display Confederate flags for the sake of "Southern Pride," then I pray for their indoctrination.

The mythology of White supremacy rode into the South on bronze horses during Reconstruction, but let's not pretend folks up North ignored the hoofbeats.

In *The Devil Finds Work*, James Baldwin wrote: "I cannot be blamed for an ignorance which an entire republic had deliberately inculcated." Mythology is the modus of that inculcation, satisfying our need for stories that sedate the conscience, setting up patterns whereby we deconstruct and justify circumstances as needed. The myth of julep-fueled antebellum politesse, for example, promotes the laughable idea that slaves were happy, banjo-picking participants in some benevolent patriarchy. As the pattern evolves, the myth of good cops and bad neighborhoods sets the stage for a no-knock warrant leading to a terribly unfortunate misunderstanding for which no police officer could be held accountable.

More than 150 years after the official end of the Civil War, the United States is engaged in what many people call the uncivil war, an unceasing pitched battle over the same old issue: White supremacy. Now, as then, the trenches are dug by goaded fears, learned hatred, loaded rhetoric, and bare-knuckled politics. The foot soldiers—desperately angry on one side, desperately ignorant on the other—are the distant children of obsolete martyrs and forgotten foes. It's no longer a war between North and South, and it never was a war between Black and White; it is an ideological conflict between those who cling to a barbaric ethnic caste system and those who are determined to progress beyond it.

Greed has always been and will always be the soul of this struggle. Its architects are oligarchs, who raise up generals without decency and lieutenants for whom decency is a minor inconvenience. As in every war, the first and last blood spilled is the thinnest: slum scions without pedigree, poets without a dime, scholars clinging to their threadbare standards, and a *World War Z* horde of marching bereaved and walking wounded. Those on the front lines have no motivation but the stories they've been told:

myths and legends presented in middle school text books that should be subtitled “A Redacted History of the United States” or maybe “A Conveniently Selective Memory of What Went Down.”

Faced with the challenge of reuniting South Africa after apartheid, Nelson Mandela created the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) as part of the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act in 1995. Under this umbrella, a Human Rights Committee conducted nationally televised hearings allowing those who’d suffered human rights abuses to be heard, ensuring that recorded history would reflect what actually happened to Black people under apartheid. An Amnesty Committee considered petitions for pardon so that some of those—not all—who’d committed human rights abuses could be forgiven, ensuring that White people would be able to embrace a post-apartheid society without fear. A Reparation and Rehabilitation committee worked on finding ways to restore dignity and in some cases property. Knowing that justice in its narrowest “eye for an eye” definition was not possible, Mandela focused on cultivating Black forgiveness and White empathy as a way forward. Results achieved by the TRC are still being debated, but it was an indisputably powerful first step away from civil war and stands as a revolutionary act of covenant and absolution.

Empathy is key to the kind of social evolution we can and should strive for in this moment, and if we’re going to change the American capacity for empathy, we must question storytelling that adheres to the old caste system of heroes and villains. We must challenge iconography based on tropes of conscious and subconscious White supremacy. These tropes are inherited, embedded in family lore and religious mythology, written so deep in our bones, we don’t even flinch when we see them play out. So those tropes need to be called out. It doesn’t matter if the

storyteller's intention was malevolent or benign, blatant or subtle. If those tropes are woven into it, the effect is the same: perpetuation of ideas that undermine the struggle for justice and equality.

"Correlation does not imply causation," as they say in the study of statistics, but correlation does imply co-relation. Without implying cause and effect, it's worth our time to examine how images and ideas coexist in the same cultural ecosystem.

I'm a huge film nerd. I grew up watching classic black and white movies with my mom. Even though I almost never saw characters who looked like me in these old films, I always found elements of character that resonated for me. I could relate to the curiosity of Charlie Chan, the derring-do of Captain Blood, and even the stalwart uprightness of Mingo, even though all these characters were played by White men.

My mom prefers old movies over new ones, which are "full of all the killings and shootings and cursing." She'd rather see the gauzy noire malfeasance in *The Maltese Falcon* or *Casablanca*. I get that, too. There is something of an oasis in those grayscale images and tinny soundtracks. Sometimes, at the end of a long day, I'll send Mom a text: "Hey! *Double Indemnity* is on TV."

She's willing to turn it on, no matter how late the hour.

"I'm a nighthawk," she says.

We get on the phone and watch it together, chatting back and forth. If Mom sees a Black person on the screen, she texts me immediately: "Gee whiz! They got one in there."

Of course, the Black person is almost always in the background, quickly passed over, and their lines have little substance beyond the service they're rendering to the White movie star.

"Or they're dancing," Mom says wryly.

She's saddened by the fact that great Black actors never had the opportunity to play roles that would have presented strong Black characters.

"They were not being portrayed as an image for Black children," Mom says. "That they can make it in life and be other than a maid or a cook, or whatever they are."

People always told Mom she looked like Lena Horne, and Mom loved that, but she always wondered what Lena Horne could have achieved—how the lives of both these beautiful women could have been different—if Mom, as a teenager, could have seen Lena Horne performing the kind of roles that propelled lesser talents to stardom.

Lena Horne proved herself in her nightclub acts and a series of small films with all-Black casts, but the roles she played in her seven major films with MGM were carefully contained in nonessential scenes that were removed for segregated Southern theaters. That's right: They actually invested the time and budget required to remove her beautifully crafted scenes! It simply wouldn't do to have a glamorous Black starlet towering over an audience full of White faces; that might have given a Black girl in the balcony uppity ideas.

During WWII, Ms. Horne was kicked off a USO tour when she complained about Black American soldiers being seated behind German prisoners of war. She continued touring anyway, paying for it herself. When the war was over, she worked with Eleanor Roosevelt on anti-lynching legislation. In 1963, she stood with Martin Luther King and John Lewis at the March on Washington. If ever there was a great, golden goddess of a role model, it was Lena Horne. But Lena Horne was not the role model who fit the White supremacist narrative, so we got Aunt Jemima and Uncle Remus instead.

Mom refers to *Song of the South* as "that zip-a-dee-doo-dah mess." All these years later, it still gets under her skin.

"He's got all these little kids around," she says, "and he's reminiscing like slavery was so great, and I'm like, *really?*"

We watched these types of portrayals over and over again, because that's all there was. The alternative was to stay home and read books in which Black people were portrayed with dignity and respect, like *Huckleberry*—oh. No. Bad example.

Okay, like *To Kill a Mocking*—whoa. Even worse.

Catcher in the… no. That's a WASP's nest.

Tale of Two… okay, forget it.

When I was a kid, the few Black characters I read about in books or saw on television and in the movies were nothing like the Black people I saw in my real-life Black community. Our neighbors were doctors, engineers, and business owners. My father was an attorney. The Black people I knew were well-educated, middle-class citizens. I never saw a Black neighborhood like mine on television, but I immediately recognized the White version of my world on *Leave it to Beaver*.

"What I didn't like is why we always had to be *Uncle* and *Mammy* in movies," says Mom. "Uncle who? Who's Mammy? I ain't none of your mammy. That bothered me. It was like we were always played down in everything."

As much as she disliked the Mammy stereotype, my mom still loved *Gone with the Wind* and bristled when it was temporarily removed from HBO Max in June 2020. She felt it was unfair to the Black actors, Hattie McDaniel, the first Black person to win an Oscar, and Butterfly ("I don't know nuthin' 'bout birthin' no babies") McQueen, who, in Mom's estimation, stole the whole show. My take on McQueen's performance is closer to that of

Malcolm X, who said, “When Butterfly McQueen went into her act, I felt like crawling under the rug.”

Even more cringe-worthy were the performances of White actors in blackface, a grotesque practice that began in minstrel shows of old and somehow continued into 21st century. I’ll cut Judy Garland some slack for that “Way Down South” moment from *Everybody Sing* in 1938; she was only sixteen years old. But what’s the excuse for Fred Armisen playing Barack Obama or Jimmy Fallon playing Chris Rock on *SNL*? Or Jimmy Kimmel playing Karl Malone and Oprah Winfrey on *The Man Show*? Remember the 2012 Oscars skit where Justin Bieber is hanging out with Sammy Davis Jr., who’s played by Billy Crystal?

Recently several stars, including Jimmy Fallon, Sarah Silverman, and Jimmy Kimmel, have apologized for appearing in blackface, and that’s a start. These onscreen portrayals shape expectations, reinforce stereotypes, and validate racist tropes that translate to real life prejudices in the workplace, on the playground, and in encounters with law enforcement and the court system. But those portrayals are out there, from *Huckleberry Finn* to *Saturday Night Live*, and trying to erase them is not the answer.

For one thing, the moment we skew toward censorship or “cancel culture,” we lose something of our most precious liberty: freedom of speech. I’m not about that. Moreover, if we erase those images—remove *Huck Finn* from school libraries, yank *Gone with the Wind* from streaming services—we create gaps in the essential story of how an economic system based on White supremacy developed in the United States and maintained its chokehold on us well into modern times. The damage has been done. We can’t undo it. We can only learn from it if we face it for what it was.

Context is key.

Gone with the Wind returned to HBO Max with a new introduction by film scholar Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, a professor of cinema studies at the University of Chicago, a host on Turner Classic Movies, and author of *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity*, which explores the evolution of Black characters, audience members, and behind-the-camera creators of film in the 20th century. When I asked her to help me sort out my own love/hate relationship with Scarlett and Rhett, she didn't try to take anything away from the film itself.

"If you look at *Gone with the Wind*," she said, "the costuming, set design—no expense was spared to produce this romantic image of the antebellum South. And then you have extraordinary acting in this film. It has this enduring quality as a classic. But I think what some of us have known all along, and more people are learning, is that we have to always look at these things through a historical lens."

Gone with the Wind operates as a historical document, not because of the bullshit portrayal of slavery and the nobility of the Confederate cause, but as an artifact of Depression-era Hollywood.

First, it stands as evidence of the highest level to which any actor of color could aspire in that moment: the Oscar-caliber Mammy. We need to acknowledge this in order to mourn the loss of the great performances that never happened. (Note to Hollywood: It's not too late for a Black remix of *Mildred Pierce* starring Taraji P. Henson.) The indignities and struggles suffered by the Black actors and actresses during the making of this movie—segregated rest rooms, exclusion from community events, abysmal pay—mirror the indignities and struggles of Black workers in every industry.

Second, it begs us to question: Why was this film so wildly popular? Why were White audiences, still reeling from a devastating economic collapse, so hungry for this story about the

implosion of the slave-based economy? Why did they find such comfort in the vanilla romance and one-dimensional conflict? Why were they so smitten with the brazenly privileged White characters and the buffoonish Black characters who served them? What's the difference between *Gone with the Wind* and *Birth of a Nation*, the 1915 film that told a similar story of the "gallant South" during Reconstruction, spurring the resurgence of a dormant KKK? For that matter, what's the difference between these two films and *Forrest Gump*, a famously charming movie in which two White men—one being feeble-minded, the other having lost both legs—are still able to survive and thrive while all the intelligent, able-bodied women and people of color crumble and die?

Lately, I find myself returning to old movies I love with a freshly analytic eye. It bothers me when Black characters seem to be incapable of uttering a single grammatically correct sentence, but I also see how much a talented actress like Hattie McDaniel was able to do within the confines of a painfully limited role. She's there to get paid, every eyelash engaged. She's there to represent, a monument to the struggle, if nothing else.

"But what's the difference between representation and stereotype?" I asked Jacqueline.

"Stereotypes are a category of representation," she said. "Kind of like shorthand."

She recommended Donald Bogle's book, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, which explores the fundamental Black archetypes we're all too familiar with, tropes inherited from literature and minstrelsy, ingrained in everything from opera to advertising.

"Clearly," said Jacqueline, "these are limited roles in so many ways. They don't have the kind of depth of psychology that

the White characters have. They don't have the same amount of screen time, but they're doing what they can within those confines—the gestures they make, what they do with their eyes, the inflection of their voices. There's a real mastery that audiences definitely recognized, and it's consistent with the way Black people have found creative practices inside all kinds of systems of restraint."

"Survival," I said, and I could hear my sisters saying, "*Ways*."

When people at the margins create their own images, stories breathe differently. They inhale validation exhale authenticity. Everyone loves *The Color Purple*, but it always made me profoundly uncomfortable. The Black talent manifested in that film is staggering: Oscar-worthy performances by Oprah Winfrey and Whoopi Goldberg, transcendent music by Quincy Jones, the timeless novel by Alice Walker. But I have to wonder how this movie would have been different if Steven Spielberg had used the awesome power of his Hollywood influence to place this film in the hands of a Black director.

I can't criticize one thing about this movie. It's perfect in every detail. But it's a White man's vision of an intimate Black experience. It doesn't matter that the man himself is brilliant and the vision is beautiful. To me, it feels like that upscale ceramic tile that's made to look like wood. It's gorgeous. It's durable. In many ways, it's *better* than wood. But it ain't wood, and neither is *Amistad*. Then you look at *Schindler's List*—there's wood all damn day. Sometimes you're the right messenger for the moment; sometimes you have to be brave enough to be quiet and carry water for someone else whose voice deserves to be heard.

For me, the bottom line is this: I'm over it. I'm no longer entertained by bleak stories about the victimization of Black

people—especially "uplifting" stories about how they grin and bear it. I want to see monuments to the victims of lynching instead of monuments to the lynchers. I want to see stories *by* Black people, not stories *about* us, and I believe it's imperative that Black creators approach those stories with a keen awareness that it's not just Black people watching.

For example, Dave Chapelle's famous hiatus in 2004—that stunning moment when he walked away from a fifty million dollar paycheck—was precipitated, in part, by a sketch in which he played "Black Pixie," a tiny blackface bellhop who torments an airplane passenger (also played by Chapelle) about ordering fried chicken, tap dancing to banjo music, calling him "big-lipped bitch" and other epithets, including the n-word and worse. Almost anything Chapelle does is hysterically funny, so this was too. But when he heard a particular White man in the audience laughing a little too hard, Chapelle was stricken with the reality of how the joke actually landed. Fifteen years later, he told the *Hollywood Reporter*: "My head almost exploded."

I've been chided myself, on occasion, by Black people who think I've spoken out of turn. It's not okay to joke about certain things away from the kitchen table. Sometimes Tyler Perry's Madea character is a little too close to the Mammy archetype for my comfort, but Madea made it possible for him to write his own ticket. Now Tyler Perry is blazing trails for other Black film makers. His Atlanta studio feels like a bit of FU to old Hollywood. In a way, Madea is a monument to Lena Horne, Louise Beavers, Hattie McDaniel, and Butterfly McQueen. She's the bridge between *Gone with the Wind* and *Black Panther*.

As Black filmmakers rise, a new mythology rises with them. The story of Wakanda is the story of African colonialism, a Black vision of Black experience. Jordan Peele's *Get Out* is an inside-out

parable about slavery with a subversive side-glance at White liberalism. Spike Lee's controversial *Bamboozled* was a commercial flop in 2000 but achieved cult status as a fresh generation of film buffs dialed into the intensely uncomfortable truth it tells about the pernicious niceties of new age racism.

Just as my mom watched old movies with me, providing context and pointing out impediments, I feel a responsibility to sit with the young people in my own life. I want to talk to them about those archetypes and how they brought us to where we are now, but more than that, I want to listen and learn from them. I want to provide spaces for necessary conversations. We're not at the mercy of one narrow point of view anymore. Whatever the young people in my life are consuming, I don't want them to consume it in isolation.

The interstitial influence of story on societal development is writ large in a movie like *Birth of a Nation* and quietly footnoted in the form of an Aunt Jemima syrup bottle. It's as tall as a cast bronze general, as petite as teenage Judy Garland. The same flag that rallied Confederate soldiers to slaughter was emblazoned on the tomato-red roof of Bo and Luke Duke's '69 Dodge Charger, affectionately dubbed "General Lee."

Jacqueline Stewart laid this profound truth on me: "If we can get people to embrace educating themselves rather than resisting information that can disrupt their pleasure, then I think we would really get to some actual change that we need in our society."

I thought about this statement in the context of my conversation with Reggie and Clayton and with political analyst Jared Yates Sexton, author of *American Rule: How a Nation Conquered the World but Failed Its People*. Jared talks about foundational myths that have made their way into all aspects of

our culture as an "alternate history" created purely for the purpose of subjugating Black people, in society and in their own minds.

"A lot of it was engineered by Woodrow Wilson, who actually was a complete disgusting White supremacist," Jared told me. "He rewrote American history in this ten-volume *History of the American People*."

Wilson's slanted mythology of Southern nobility, along with Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman*, inspired D.W. Griffith's epic film *Birth of a Nation*, in which White actors in blackface portray newly freed slaves as a ravening menace to virtuous Confederate men and the lily White women they hold dear. It was the first American blockbuster, the first film screened at the White House, and is still held up as a masterful technological achievement that advanced the art of filmmaking into a new era.

White audiences flocked to see it, gobbling up the lore of the Lost Cause. *Birth of a Nation* climaxes with a sickeningly prescient vision of election day. A phalanx of Klansmen on white horses block a group of shiftless blackface voters from the polls, menacing them until they slink away. Then, with White ascendency secured, the Klansmen ride off to a wedding where Jesus Christ himself appears to mingle with the happy guests.

"All of this mythology becomes weaponized and gains a lot of purchase going into World War I," Jared told me, "and that's actually when you start seeing all of these memorials start to pop up."

The Lost Cause mythology seeped into American culture and persists to this day, but an awakening is in progress. The flying of the Confederate flag and hallowing of Confederate "heroes" can no longer be couched as balmy sentiment about the South; it is straight up White supremacy without borders.

Jared, who lives in Statesboro, Georgia, told me that people entering the courthouse there pass by the bronze statue of a Confederate soldier, who grips his long gun, gaze fixed toward the South, on a 25-foot marble pedestal erected by the United Daughters of the Confederacy in 1909.

"As a White person," said Jared, "part of my checking of my own privilege is to imagine what it must be like as a person of color to go into one of these courthouses, expecting a fair trial, expecting justice to be done, expecting justice to be blind. And as they walk in, they have to walk past the knowing visage of a Confederate soldier."

I thought of my Black cousins and friends attending Robert E. Lee High School, not only passing under that name to enter each day but wearing the name on hoodies and letter jackets, seeing it imprinted on their diplomas and the dreaded "permanent record."

I asked Jared, "What do you say to folks who claim these monuments and the Confederate flag are about heritage and Southern pride?"

"It has nothing to do with Southern heritage," he said. "In fact, history shows us that the Confederacy was really terrible to White Southerners. They were held in an oppressive, nightmarish dystopia where they did not have freedom of speech. They weren't allowed to voice opinions that went against the Confederacy. Many of them were punished, hurt and killed. And by the way, we're talking about the Confederate *battle flag*. We're not even talking about the actual flag of the Confederacy. We're talking about the Confederacy on the move, threatening people and carrying out war. So when you see it around the country, it's not a celebration of a region; it's a celebration of an ideology. It's a celebration that White

supremacy still exists within America, even though the Confederacy fell."

"You're White," I said. "You grew up in Indiana. How do you think of your own identity as it relates to the legacy of White supremacy in America?"

I heard a shadow of sadness when he answered. "I come from a poor family. I love my family dearly. I've seen them become more and more radicalized over the past couple of years. It breaks my heart. I'm seeing people that I grew up with and people that I care for sharing not only White supremacist misinformation, but I'm seeing them become more and more radicalized against African-Americans, people of color and LGBTQ Americans. They're starting to talk about straight fascist ideals."

Oh, yes. There's that now. Facebook: The ultimate myth machine. A bilious bastion of bullshit. The great dildo of demagoguery.

"It's a heartbreaking thing," said Jared. "It's made me reevaluate where I come from and who I was in the past. I tell people constantly that being aware of who you are and your own privilege and what America is—it's exhausting. But there's no other way, because to give up, to just embrace ignorance leads to some really dark places. The past couple of years have been really, really exhausting. But I think necessary."

Exhausting. I hear that. I see it on the streets and in the faces of my colleagues. I feel like we've all aged ten years in a single summer. I hear the weariness in my own voice when I ask a final question:

"Where does this end?"

"I would love to see every Confederate monument either toppled or put into a museum," said Jared. "I mean, we're one of the few countries that actually honors treasonous traitors who

have held people in bondage. As long as we're hiding behind this mythologized history, we have no idea where we've been, where we are, or where we're going. We need to not only study the Confederacy, but we need to study the precursors to it, the culture that led to it, which, again, weirdly shadows what's happening now in America."

This, I think, is why some people are so upset to see Confederate flags and monuments fall from grace. The mythology they cling to insulates them from the painful truth about a dark element in our nation's past and in the human heart. To confront that darkness, they would have to accept that they are, in fact, the ones seeking to erase history, continuing a largely successful disinformation campaign that predates the Civil War and Reconstruction. Ironically, in erasing the ugliness of our shared past, they murder the memory of the real people who lived and died—neither villains nor heroes, but actual human beings—who were, in a very real sense, *rescued* by the protesters who tore the statues down.

Whatever good or evil the real Will Wickham did in his life turned to dust the moment his likeness was cast in bronze. Forced to stand on a pedestal he never asked for, he ceased to be a man and became an outsized metal trinket. Whatever family he had—ancestors who preceded him and progeny who came after—Wickham was estranged from them, suspended between living memory and dead ideals, until his people came for him.

There's a beautiful passage in George Saunders' novel *Lincoln in the Bardo*, a surreal conversation between tortured souls who linger, tethered forever to the monuments and markers in a post-Civil War graveyard: "These and all things started as nothing, latent within a vast energy-broth, but then we named them, and

loved them, and, in this way, brought them forth. And now we must lose them."

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"Skydiving" from *Paris: The Memoir* by Paris Hilton

People told me it was stupid to go skydiving the morning after my 21st birthday party in Las Vegas, but back then, I didn't care, and now I know they were wrong. If you want to go skydiving the morning after a Level 9 rager, go for it. Your 21st birthday is prime real estate for stupid, and a lot of stupid things you do in your 20s lay the foundation for wisdom later on. As you wise up, you realize that all the stupid things you *didn't* do—those are the regrets. My 20s were like, *damn*, girl. Leave no stupid behind. Love the wrong men. Hate the wrong women. Wear the Von Dutch.

I have no regrets.

Okay, I have a few regrets.

Skydiving is not one of them.

When I decided to do it, I was thinking it would be a perfect cherry on top of a star-studded, multi-city, balls-out birthday celebration that was lit AF—possibly the greatest 21st birthday celebration since Marie Antoinette—and I can say this with authority because partying is an area of expertise for me, a marketable skill developed over a lifetime of dedicated practice.

Networking—knowing how to work a party—is a critical aspect of growing a business. In my 20s, I was so good at both partying and business, people started paying me to come to their parties. I didn't invent getting paid to party, but I *re*invented it. I'm proud to be called the OG Influencer. Girls need to understand the value they bring to the party. It's a lot more than standing around looking pretty. Mannequins can do that. An accomplished party

girl is a facilitator, a negotiator, a diplomat—she's the sparkler *and* the match.

Know your worth, girls. You're not lucky to be at the party; the party is lucky to have you. Apply as needed to relationships, jobs, and family.

Like my wedding in 2021, my 21st birthday celebration in 2002 spanned multiple days and time zones. I'd already been partying in clubs for years, but I was sick of bullshitting bouncers, passing off fake IDs—as if they didn't know. It made pretenders of us all, and that seems like such a waste of energy. I was excited to be 21 and leave all that behind. This was my first time to go out all nice and legal, so I went big, *planning parties all over the world and getting sponsors to pay for it all.* My coming-of-age birthday bash was a dancing, drinking, hobnobbing multiverse that left people paralyzed with exhaustion.

Obviously, I coordinated an amazing wardrobe. This was a multiple-look event with a whole lineup of design-forward dresses, platform heels, accessories, and diamond tiaras. This was the genesis of my iconic silver chain mail dress by Julien MacDonald—a dress Kendall Jenner cloned for her 21st birthday party in 2016. That's how timeless this garment is. I wore mine again (hell, yes, I kept it!) on my last night in Marabella, Spain, when I was DJing there in 2017.

Julien made me the chain mail dress to wear at my London party at the end of London Fashion Week, where I walked in his show. I was the bride, and the bride's dress was amazing, but the first time I laid eyes on that iconic chain mail birthday dress, I was so blown away.

"This dress is *everything*," I said. "This dress is going to end up in a museum someday."

The weight and construction are exquisitely engineered, incorporating thousands of Swarovski crystals. It moves like a liquid Slinky. The neckline is cut clear down to Argentina, so double-sided tape is needed to prevent nip slip. That usually works pretty well until you work up a sweat on the dance floor, but dancing in that dress is better than a milk bath.

I fell on my face when I was running to hug somebody, so I thought I should get out of those six-inch heels. I think that's when I changed into a floaty blue mermaid dress. Backless but well-built. At GO Lounge in LA, I wore a sheer pink mini studded with a trillion hand-sewn diamante beads. But nothing made me feel the way I felt dancing my ass off that night in the Stork Lounge in London in that silver Julien MacDonald dress.

I want every girl to feel that way on her 21st birthday: free, happy, beautiful, and loved.

Invincible.

Heatherette made me a turquoise mermaid dress covered in Swarovski crystals to wear at Studio 54 in New York. Le Cirque put out this extreme gourmet buffet and made me a gorgeous 21-tier birthday cake. After that, there was a party in Paris, France, because Paris, and then Tokyo, where I sponsored a massive party for thousands of fans, because I could never leave my Little Hiltons behind. Then I went back to L.A. and did a final rolling bash that moved from LAX to my house on Kings Road with friends and family I'd known and loved all my life.

My house on Kings Road was piled high with presents. Friends and fans all over the world sent roses, rings, bracelets, stuffed animals. So many sweet, thoughtful gifts. I was so touched by the loving words written in cards, letters, and emails. I wrote thank you notes until my arm was ready to fall off.

Curating a party crowd is a skill. Andy Warhol was the undisputed mastermind of party curation. Prince inherited the title from him and took it to the next level with the secret sauce—music. That's what stays with me from all those parties. The music and the people. My sister and my cousins. Lots of childhood friends like Nicole Richie. The hot matriarchs: Mom, Kris Jenner, Faye Resnick, Aunt Kyle, and Aunt Kim. Random legends like P Diddy and restauranteur Sirio Maccioni. All the family and friends who've been a constant in my life, but also a lot of cool people who came and went because some friendships just have their seasons, and that's okay.

This fascinating assortment of people danced to my handpicked playlist. Every. Body. Danced. This was before my professional DJ days, but I always had an instinct for the ebb and flow. Club music of the early aughts was made for raging:

Chemical Brothers "Star Guitar"

Depeche Mode "Freelove"

DJ Disciple "Caught Up" featuring Mia Cox

Funky Green Dogs "You Got Me Burning Up"

I also had to have my soul song: Ultra Naté "Free."

At the Bellagio in Las Vegas, DJ AM played, so I knew the music would be on point. I didn't want that night to be over. For most of my adult life, if I slept without my dogs—and a lot of times even when I had them with me—nightmares chewed through my brain and tore up my stomach, so I was terrified to fall asleep. I put it off as long as I could, partying on—dancing, drinking champagne, dancing, dancing, drinking, laughing, dancing—until it was morning and my body was like, *Bitch, stop. It is overrrrrrrrrr…*

And the next thing I knew, my phone was vibrating in my armpit.

Someone was pounding on my hotel room door.

"Paris? Paris, wake up. We have to get to the airstrip."

I opened my eyes. The room reeled like a disco ball.

"What? Why…are we…where are we going?"

And then I remembered that I had told everyone I was going skydiving.

No! Ugh.

This was going to suck, but I didn't want to embarrass myself by backing out. I pulled on a track suit. Even after I chugged a bottle of water, my mouth felt like a sandbox. The water made me feel kind of ill, like I was about to throw up, but there was nothing else in my stomach. Maybe a little cake. I'd been so busy dancing, I never really made it over to the buffet. Usually champagne is good hangover insurance, but I also had some shots or martinis or whatever people drink at their 21st birthday party. My right eyeball was in super nova. My hair folicles were screaming.

On the way to a tiny airstrip outside Las Vegas, I kept telling myself: *don't be lame, don't be lame, don't be lame*. I knew that if I vomited or cried or backed out, some of the people I was hanging out with would not keep that to themselves. Someone would be taking pictures and selling them. Some of these people were trusted friends, but others I didn't know that well or trust at all, and the hangover had sapped my energy to differentiate, so I defaulted to my *trust no one* mode and tried to pretend I was super excited.

"I'm really tired," I said. "I'm just gonna…yeah."

I covered my head with my jacket and trembled like a little wet dog.

We got to the private airstrip in the wide, dry nothing somewhere outside the city. I was so dehydrated and wrung out, I

couldn't even comprehend all this information the guy was giving me. Something about "blah blah tandem instructor—blah blah jumping at thirteen thousand feet—blah blah freefalling for the first mile on the way down." And I'm sitting there like *What the fuck have I gotten myself into?* And then they strapped the whole apparatus on me, and shit got real. I was 100% sober, and I was scared.

Going up in this tiny, rattle-crap airplane, everyone else was laughing and talking—yelling because the engine was so loud. The happy yappy voices felt like scissors in my ears. I just sat there. Quiet. I always get quiet when I'm scared. Like a little rabbit going purely on instinct, huddled in a silent ball, ready to take evasive maneuvers. It's humbling to be reminded that no matter how big your life is, you are still a spec of dust that can be swept off the earth in half a second.

The goggles were tight on my face. That would leave a mark, I was positive. *Ugh*. I was sitting on the lap of this guy, a stranger, whose body was literally strapped to my body—our bodies spooned together—so that was weird, and my life was in the hands of this man, and the whole thing was so stupidly terrifying, I wanted to hurl.

Then they opened the door. A blast of freezing cold air roared in.

Now, above this door is the same sign you see above every door of every airplane. Red letters. All caps.

THIS DOOR MUST REMAIN CLOSED

There's a reason! When that door opens, the world ends. Your head gets sucked inside out. Your heart shrivels like a forgotten mushroom.

THIS DOOR MUST REMAIN CLOSED

But now this door is open.

I'm on this bench behind some other people, and every time someone jumps, everyone else scoots forward. Someone jumps. We all scoot forward.

Jump. Scoot.

Jump. Scoot.

My spoon-mate keeps pushing me closer to that door, yelling, "*Doing great, Paris. This is gonna be awesome, Paris. Almost there, Paris. Doing great.*"

And then we're at the door. I feel the edge under my feet. The wind is so fast and loud, it whips away the sound of my screaming, like pulling a loose thread.

"On three!" says the guy, but if he ever said "three," I didn't hear it. It was like, "One," and then—

Nothing.

Everything.

Air.

Light.

Unbearable brightness.

A blessed rush of adrenaline.

I expected to feel like I was falling. Like the ground was flying up at my face. It's not like that. You start out at thirteen thousand feet—literally miles above the earth—so even though you're falling at 120 miles per hour, the space around you is so vast, the distance so great, your perspective is that of a slow-moving cloud.

There was nothing to hang onto. Nothing to let go.

I opened my arms and felt unpolluted joy.

Freedom.

Ecstasy.

Everything you want but will never get from drugs or money or even love.

All the constant cravings of my adrenaline junky brain.

Conrad Hilton was a religious man. He wrote a lot about God. Feared God. Wanted to know God. Craved God. He should have gone skydiving.

The tandem instructor released the chute, and I was caught up in a slow, quiet ride, suspended above the desert like a diamond on a delicate silver chain. I stopped thinking, stopped trying, stopped wondering.

The sky was crystal blue perfection. The distant mountains were wrinkled yellow and ochre iced with midwinter snow. The wide-open desert gave up a thousand shades of gray, sliced with highways, dotted with boxy little structures.

The insignificance of anyone who'd ever loved or hurt me.

The insignificance of myself.

There was no audience to play for.

Only profound peace.

A state of grace.

We descended, riding the wind, borne on soaring updrafts.

Gratitude.

Elation.

Triumph.

I'm here.

I survived.

I'm not afraid.

I love my life.

Marilyn Monroe said, "Fear is stupid. So is regret." In general, I've found this to be true. Many times, throughout my life, the most terrifying moments have led to the most fulfilling. Freefalling over the Nevada desert is just one example. I want to tell you about a few others, even though I know not everyone is going to like what I have to say.

We all have that jump door inside us, and for a long time, I marked mine with red letters. All caps.

THIS DOOR MUST REMAIN CLOSED

Brace yourself, bitches. We're about to pry it open.

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