

Lunchtime

I am six years old. My boyfriend, soon to be fiancé, calls my father to ask for my hand in marriage. He says we're going to have a motorcycle wedding. My father wants to know how we'll transport children on motorcycles. Dickie tells him we'll get sidecars.

I am eight years old. My parents hire a watercolorist to paint my portrait. I wear a white silk blouse and black velvet pants. I sit very still, legs in crisscross applesauce on a dining room chair. The painter talks incessantly. She tells me about her sister who was crazy and had a frontal lobotomy and now has no memory and lives in an institution and is pretty much an empty shell. I vow to never have a frontal lobotomy.

I am nine. I wear a navy-and-white-checked one-piece bathing suit, pink bathing cap with rainbow tassels that I flip about pretending they're a ponytail. My normally long brown hair is cut short because of the head lice I caught from my red-haired freckled-faced best friend. A teacher at school, not my teacher but some other lady with a creepy voice, straight out of a horror movie, growls, "I know why your hair is short." I stare back at her, don't utter a word.

I'm ten and a horrible thing happens to me. I feel dirty. And violated, except it will be years before I learn that word and understand what it means. As instructed, I tell no one.

I am 14. Alone in the bus station in Atlantic City, I sit on a stool at the lunch counter, get an iced tea and grilled ham and cheese sandwich on rye.

I am 21. My mother takes me out to a bar to celebrate my birthday. She orders us Brandy Alexanders and grasshoppers. I get drunk and lay my forehead on the bar. She tells me that's not appropriate behavior.

I am 24. I move to Florida with my boyfriend. I play a lot of tennis and eat a lot of eggplant parmesan. My new best friend is an eighty-four-year-old man from West Virginia who smokes unfiltered cigarettes, reads paperback westerns and eats Vienna sausages out of the can with his penknife.

I am 38. The lady who sells me the brand-new fancy crib says, *it will change your life*. She doesn't mean the crib. She means the baby. She's right. It does.

I am 41. My second daughter is born. In the delivery room, my doctor says next time let's go for a boy. It seems like a solid idea at the time.

I am 42. I am standing in the hallway of the community center talking with the art studio manager about a class I will be teaching. The conversation takes a supremely unexpected turn. It is not my intention to reveal my over thirty-year-old secret to a woman who is barely more than a professional acquaintance. I imagine myself a cartoon character, whirling around, looking behind me to see who has spoken. It's me. The sky does not fall on Chicken Little. I'm not swallowed by an enormous sinkhole. So that's it. I can say it out loud now. I can. I do.

I think, huh, is this one of those profoundly pivotal moments? Do I need to get a therapist to unearth a lifetime of trauma, setting me free to live an exalted life of freedom and wisdom that I elegantly impart to my children? Nah. I'm okay. And I'm hungry. I'll walk home. The warm sun on my face and breeze on my arms will feel the same as usual. I'll make lunch.