Untold Stories: Life, Love and Reproduction

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Introduction to Untold Stories

“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.”

—Maya Angelou

An untold story can be something that we carry with us through our lives, worried about what our friends or families would say if they found out. It can be a story we’re desperate to share, hoping that someone will give us a hint that they’ve\textsuperscript{1} been through something similar. Some stories are left untold to protect ourselves or other people we love. Other stories are pushed to the margins, not so much untold as unheard. The pain of carrying an untold story can be deep and sustained or intermittent and surprising. Despite the challenges associated with sharing these stories, it is also true that many of our greatest moments of connection come from being on the receiving end of someone else’s untold story.

Perhaps the area of human experience that is most replete with untold stories is that of reproduction. Sexual taboos, gender norms, expectations around ability, and racial prejudices create a world of unwritten rules and proscriptions related to family creation and these rules carry enormous weight. People who transgress these rules are encouraged to remain under the radar, or to interact only with similar folk, and the absence of their stories creates a distorted culture.

“The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue,”

\textsuperscript{1} We intentionally use they/their/them as a singular pronoun when referring to a person to reflect that some people do not use male or female pronouns nor to assume their gender identity if it is unknown to the writer.
but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.”
—Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Creating a family, whatever that means to you, is deeply personal and unique. Yet stop anyone on the street and they can tell you a single story of what the “ideal” American family looks like. There are two parents: a cisgender woman and a cisgender man. They are white. They are Christian. They are in their mid-thirties and live in the suburbs. They are upper middle class with comfortable jobs; maybe the mom works, or maybe she doesn’t. They had kids exactly when they wanted to—they didn’t even need to “try.” Maybe they use birth control, or maybe they don’t. They certainly don’t share the intimate details of their reproductive lives with anyone. It’s private.

Yet, if you asked these same people what their own families look like, what families in their community look like, you’d get a completely different picture: single parents raising children with friends and extended family; queer families with two gay dads, a lesbian mom with a gender non-conforming partner; two friends deciding to co-parent but not be sexual partners; people choosing not to become parents at all; parents who placed babies or older children for adoption; heterosexual families where one or more parent is trans; families that are bi- or multiracial; couples that chose to have an abortion and later decided to have children. The stories and experiences would move outward from the narrow American norm in all directions like an exploding star. Too much life to be contained in a single story.

"Prejudices, it is well known, are most difficult to eradicate from the heart whose soil has never been loosened or fertilized by education: they grow there, firm as weeds among stones.”
—Charlotte Brontë

The problem of untold stories around reproduction occurs on both the demand side and the supply side. On one hand, through our own prejudices and lack of awareness, we often ensure that certain people and stories are left unheard. Many people learn the unwritten rules around family creation as children, and the resulting judgments and prejudices are hard to shake no matter how hard we try. Because creating our own families takes so much strength and sacrifice, it’s easy to believe that the way we did things is the way everyone should—that our methods, experiences, and feelings should be universal. Despite our best intentions, we may find ourselves judging our friend who has had children with multiple partners, shaming our cousin who decided to give birth at home instead of in a hospital, and believing that our neighbor who is experiencing infertility deserves it because she’s had three abortions. These judgments and prejudices close us off from stories and experiences that may enrich our lives, connect us with people, and challenge our beliefs.

“Shame derives its power from being unspeakable.” —Brené Brown

On the supply side of the untold story problem are experiences of shame and fear.

Deciding to have an abortion, not be a parent, or claim your sexuality are not easy things to do in a world that tells us that we are wrong if we fall outside of the norm. Sometimes, when we form our families in ways we think other people won’t understand, we decide to keep secrets, to leave our own stories untold. We think this rational decision will keep us safe from judgment, shame, and misunderstanding.

In all of our lives, there are moments where shame creeps in. Even if the people who raised us gave us the emotional tools and resilience to recover from those moments, we still won’t bypass the fear of not being good enough, of not meeting other people’s expectations. Often the parts
of our lives where there’s the most opportunity to create meaning for ourselves are also the parts that are imbued with impossible expectations.

This collection of stories comes from The Sea Change Program, a nonprofit organization committed to a world that upholds the dignity and humanity of all people as they move through their reproductive lives. In this book we seek to address both sides of the single-story problem: the prejudice and the shame. We all have our stones to throw and our closets to bear. This project aims to put people in touch with both sides of themselves simultaneously and explore what happens when we are strong enough to listen and brave enough to share.

**The Untold Stories Project: Engaging Reading Circles**

“Circles create soothing space, where even reticent people can realize that their voice is welcome.”

—Margaret J. Wheatley

We developed The Untold Stories Project based on a simple and often overlooked fact: every circle has untold stories. In 2011 we piloted a first version of this project with people who regularly sit in a circle with one another: book clubs. Advertising our project on Facebook, we reached out as wide as our social networks could carry us. We heard from book clubs in Arkansas, Alabama, California, Maryland, Missouri, New York, New Jersey, and Utah. Fourteen book clubs, including 120 members, signed up for the project, and we shared with them an anthology of true stories about pregnancy, birth, abortion, adoption, miscarriage, infertility, and contraception.

The conversations were rich as participants explored sexual and reproductive taboos, norms, and prejudices, as well as the diverse array of reproductive experiences in the reader and in their own lives. They also learned new things about one another, even if they had known each other for many years. One group discovered that five of their six members had previously had abortions, though none had ever shared these stories in their book club before. Another group explored teen pregnancy through the book and through the experiences of one member who had become a parent at a young age. One book club made up of female members explored how the attitudes of their male partners had shaped their ability to talk about their own reproductive experiences. Another group made up of men discussed how difficult it was to feel fully involved in the reproductive decisions that took place in their own marriages.

In these groups, people reflected on the pain, isolation, and silence that result from keeping our untold stories a secret and the ways that these secrets diminish our ability to connect with one another across experiences and values. Participants noted that the silence and shame surrounding untold stories doesn’t just impact the secret-keeper; they saw the consequences in their neighborhoods, communities, and country. They pointed out that stigma creates fertile ground for discriminatory policies, insufficient health-care services, and stereotypical media portrayals.

Reading and discussing untold stories, both their own and the ones they read in the book, brought these readers closer together as a group. They reflected on how shame and fear in sharing their untold stories slowly dissipated over the course of these conversations. Openness and curiosity took hold as members learned more about one another.

**The Untold Stories Project: Developing the New Book**

The success of our initial project gave us the inspiration to create a unique anthology that explored a broader range of reproductive experiences. In January 2014 we posted an advertisement on Twitter and Facebook seeking new storytellers. We received stories that moved and inspired us. We selected stories based on their ability to provoke discussion and encourage people to connect across different experiences and investigate their own opinions, attitudes and beliefs. All of the initial submissions were from ciswomen; we noted there were no stories by trans* or gender-nonconforming authors. We went to work and did additional outreach. Though this book does not fully reflect our desire to include various trans* and gender-nonconforming perspectives on parenting and
abortion, we are glad to have included experiences from straight, queer, trans*, and intersex people.

In developing this collection we aimed to avoid the single story of reproduction and family creation. Yet we know that it runs the risk of reproducing single stories along other lines of identity and experience. Likewise, important stories and perspectives are missing from this book altogether. Though we are proud of this book, we also know that these words are not enough. Our long-term commitment is to lift up voices that go unheard and increase exposure to stories that go untold.

Another commitment we have in this book is to the individuals who have shared their experiences with us. Many of the authors are publishing their work and personal stories for the first time. Their bravery and commitment to changing the single story of reproduction is evident in their writing. But behind the scenes, storytellers shared their own fears that contributing to this reader would invite negative attention or uncomfortable moments. Some authors struggled with going public, and others struggled with their honesty in characterizing their own actions and experiences. Their gift to us is an invitation to experience their stories in all of their perfect imperfection.

The Untold Stories Project: Reading Together

At The Sea Change Program, we call Untold Stories a “project” for a reason. As we noted in our description of the book, this work is incomplete. Without discussion, consideration, and exploration, this collection has no life. This is where you and your circle come in! We invite you to explore and reflect on your own beliefs and views by reading this book with people you know. Like most conversations about personal experiences, we think that exploring this book with good friends and good food will help you get the most out of these stories. We know that when people can sit together and share what they think, know, believe, and have experienced, they feel more connected, open, and engaged.

For some people, the existence of these stories and the culture of shame and silence will come as no surprise. However, this anthology will add context to what we think we know about pregnancy, birth, adoption, infertility, loss, and parenting, exposing readers to stories that have been traditionally on the margins of our society.

Come on this journey with us. Don’t be afraid of what you might find. Grab some friends and settle in for a conversation about the things that matter most. And let us know what happens.

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I was thirteen years old when, according to most everyone here in the Deep South, I became a slut and a killer.

That was long ago. I am fifty-four now. Through all these years I have composed whole collections of tomes in my mind, hoping to conjure a magic potion of words that would grant others the willingness to understand and reach a different verdict about me.

As I sit here, my fingers poised over these keys, this white page confronting me, I once again face the immutable fact: Most people in this conservative Christian region never will understand—not even the neighbors, colleagues, and friends I love dearly. Their hearts are kind and their intentions are good, but their minds are made up.

Only a woman with a life like mine would understand, a woman who has spent decades terrified that others—including her own husband and children—will discover her past and abandon her in disgust. I’ve never met such a woman, but I know she is close by in this middle-class suburb where I am a wife, mother, and teacher’s assistant in a kindergarten classroom.

She is so near, in fact, that we’ve probably bumped carts in the supermarket or sat next to each other at our kids’ soccer games. There are millions of us, yet we are grand masters at hiding in plain sight, gold medalists at social camouflage, and so we remain strangers to this day.
She would understand everything, even if I never opened up my heart and poured out the thick mix of circumstances that produced the foundation of my identity—the accidental pregnancies that I ended at the ages of thirteen and nineteen.

We would tell each other every detail anyway, just to release what we’ve locked in our hearts and minds for so long. However, now that we are in the second half-centuries of our lives, facing into our sunset years, we would not linger long on the stories of our unplanned conceptions. Two tall glasses of sweet tea later and we’d be moving on to the truly afflictive theme of our lives.

Our stories are no longer about the pregnancies we stopped. They are about what it means to live in coerced psychological isolation amid everlasting mental and emotional punishment here in the Bible Belt.

Our stories have a beautiful bright side. We were born into middle-class white families. We could afford and access legal reproductive health-care services that existed through the efforts of compassionate people who understood the real lives of girls and women. We had the freedom and the means to make wrenching but morally responsible decisions in times of crisis.

We were able to pursue basic human happiness, to reach for the dreams common to all humankind—to get educations, work in fulfilling jobs, nurture stable families, and forge healthy, loving relationships. Millions of other girls and women—for no good reason other than being born into different circumstances—were deprived of reproductive health care and denied options. They faced the ruinous devastation of their hopes and aspirations, but we were spared.

This gift of privilege renders me morally duty-bound to help improve the future for the little girls of today. I have such scant power, but it’s just enough to generate a flicker of light that I can shine into the dark force that underlies every injustice, every cruelty that girls and women confront in their reproductive lives. I can tell my story of stigma—how it entered my world and consumed it like kudzu, how I coped with the raw fear it provoked, and how compassionate people helped me overcome it.

Maybe the best place to begin is in church in the sweet summertime of childhood. I was about eight years old when I heard our minister preach about Christ’s call to turn the other cheek. The memory is vivid not because of his eloquence or the superhero aura of his black robe, but because of what happened later—an event that foreshadowed my future.

I skipped out of the house, the screen door slamming behind me, and headed to the playground, following a dirt path that snaked around the edge of a pond. I stopped to admire the cattails, their velvety stalks ringed with little assemblies of dragonflies.

Then I saw two boys on the opposite shore. They squatted at the water’s edge, their bare feet sunk into the dark mud. They leaned their heads together, fixing their eyes on me as they whispered. The enchantment of the afternoon vanished.

The boys began to laugh wickedly. Like a strange species of waterfowl stirring to take flight, they sprang up and whirled their arms in broad circles. I felt a thud on my shirt, a heavy thump on my head, and stings like needles pricking the bare skin of my face and arms. They were bombarding me with mud.

But I was fresh from the sanctuary, filled with faith in Jesus, so I did not run. Instead, I turned to present my cheek in all of its freckled glory. As the mud kept raining down, I began to wonder how the savior would rescue me from my enemies as the preacher had promised. I recall looking up at the blue heavens, hoping he might appear like Superman.

Finally, I bolted. I can still feel how my hair, all clumped and matted, slapped like ropes at my face as I fled. I ran until I was choked for breath, until cramps pierced my sides, hot tears of humiliation rolling in dirty streams down my cheeks.

This is what stigma feels like, only the mud is made of messages that strike at the heart and mind. The malicious and unwarranted messages never stop. They keep flying out of every corner of everyday life, but there is nowhere to run for refuge. Inwardly, I am ever dripping in their muck; outwardly, I am ever turning to present my freckled cheek.

My troubles started when I was born a female, but the inequities of our gender are self-evident. So I’ll jump ahead to the 1970s, when I failed in spectacular fashion at the game of life. This game, a sport in which all of the rules have been written by human and heavenly men, is rigged against us. The object for males is conquest—to have sex early, often, and by any means possible. The males almost always win, and they have nothing to lose. The object for females is purity. They must refuse all male
advances—be they gentlemanly, aggressive, or violent—until marriage. The females rarely win, and they have absolutely everything to lose, from their self-respect to their reputations to their promising futures.

My first failure was as a freshman in high school. I was uneducated about sex and worn down by a boyfriend who was a senior. The physical pain of it was horrifying. One day I woke up with an illness so odd that I told everyone about it, including the principal. I can see myself approaching his barrel chest in the hall, the gray lockers aligned around us like uniformed witnesses. As we passed each other, he asked how I was doing. I babbled on and on: ‘It’s so strange. I throw up in the morning, but I feel fine after I eat. Isn’t that so weird?’

My parents made arrangements without discussion. We had a single conversation in which they swore me to secrecy for the rest of my days. We never spoke of it again—not of the events leading up to it, not of the fallout afterward. Their world proceeded as before, but mine was never the same. I knew that girls have only two social ranks here in the South: good or bad. Once a girl is bad, she is bad for good.

The second failure was with an aspiring pilot who treated me terribly. I was prepared to marry him and become a mother, but he dropped me off at the clinic instead. I was filled with a primal sense of relief as I awaited his return to drive me home. Time passed. The lobby emptied, the phones hushed, and the receptionist tidied the coffee-table magazines. The clinic was closing, she said. ‘Are you sure you have a ride?’ I had only one certainty. I was profoundly and terrifyingly alone, regardless.

My humiliation was so heavy that I could barely rise from the chair. I stood up and moved as if through syrup, down the hall and out into the blinding sunlight. I wandered back and forth, traveling what seemed like many miles over the cracked and weedy sidewalk. In the roar of passing traffic, gusts of fumes flew at me from the street like shoves.

All these years later, my heart aches for the frightened young woman I was then, still living at home, panicked that her parents would learn the truth. I can see her as day after day she enters her bedroom closet. She closes the door quietly and sinks to the floor, writhing and sobbing under the hems of her dresses, her face in a pillow to mute the anguish. I watch her riding the city bus, turning her face to the window, discreetly blotting tears with a tissue in her fist. Here she is in the library, taking the elevator to a sparsely visited floor, meandering through the stacks to a secluded study carrel. She sits for hours before an open book feigning to read, catching tears in Kleenex.

I could not go on, yet I carried on. The months collected into years, and the years gathered into decades. I finished college, worked as a journalist, married, raised two children, volunteered in my community, became an educator in the public schools. Yet all was not as bright and shiny as it seemed.

A steady stream of stigma has been pouring into my world, polluting it with cruel messages of shame and fear. It has been piped into every nook and cranny of my day-to-day life through all manner of media—radios and televisions, magazines and newspapers, billboards and bumper stickers. The flow of shame is especially heavy during election cycles, when conservative candidates rally their Christian base around the female reproductive system.

Most of the stigma I experience originates with religious institutions and pious individuals who deliberately engineer it, hoping disgrace and fear will stop girls and women from using safe, legal reproductive health care. This calculated intimidation forces compassionate people into terrified silence, allowing the menace of stigma to thrive. In the public schools, we call this bullying.

The steady drone of overt social shame is so ubiquitous it’s become mere background noise to people who never have and never will experience a reproductive crisis. But the hectoring messages come to me as if through a bullhorn pressed to my ear. No place is safe, and no time of day is exempt from the self-righteous voice of shame.

I’m at home in my family room at dinnertime, eating chicken potpie and watching a disaster flick from the 1970s called Airport. In an early cockpit scene, the pilot mentions he has fathered seven children. The copilot stammers something like, ‘What about the unplanned ones? Did you ever think of doing something about them, before they were born? The response: Of course not! The ones that were not planned are the most special children of all.

I’m riding bikes with a colleague on a spring weekend. We’re pedaling through sun-dappled neighborhoods, chatting about work and motherhood, when she brings up her minister and his spirited evangelism on the evils of ending pregnancies.

I’m at a dinner party where a young man rakes a cracker through the spinach dip while recalling his stellar performance in a college debate
class. The topic was about women ending unintended pregnancies. As a Christian I’m passionately against it, he says, so it was very easy to argue my case.

I’m chaperoning a class of first-graders on a field trip to an auditorium at a private school where young teens are putting on a play about Pocahontas. Near the entrance is a garden of ferns, their tendrils pointing like arrows to a marble statue with an inscription about saving the unborn.

I’m standing on a ladder, hot-gluing a giant number line to a wall as I help a new teacher set up her classroom. She talks of her religious faith and, because an election looms, she announces that she cannot abide women who end pregnancies.

I’m driving to the grocery store, stopping at a red light behind an SUV. The dark glass of the back window is salted with cheery cartoon stickers representing the family ensconced within. The fender sports a familiar bumper sticker proclaiming God’s stance on women’s reproductive rights and the calculated implication that women like me are cheerleaders of death.

I’m sitting on the commode in the restroom at work. Someone has placed a stack of celebrity magazines on the little table that holds the air freshener and a pyramid of toilet paper. The glossy issue on top features a national politician and her teenage daughter, both grinning and cuddling infants under the headline We’re Glad We Chose Life.

I’m rolling down the interstate with my family, heading to a world-famous theme park for vacation. A giant Jesus comes into view on a billboard about fetal heartbeats. Minutes later, the billboard appears again. Further on, there it is once more. Mile after mile, the same billboard of shame keeps up its harassment like a stalker. It’s as if the drive to Orlando is an approach to a women’s health-care clinic. The interstate is like a sidewalk lined with protesters—persecutors, actually—screaming accusations of baby murder at distressed girls and women.

I’m in my classroom, helping orchestrate an annual indoor picnic lunch. The teacher turns on the TV and surfs for the school’s closed-circuit station showing a film about the pilgrims. In a fleeting moment, the TV passes through a religious program, just long enough for the words killing babies to come sailing out over my head as I open a child’s carton of chocolate milk.

As these messages of shame accrue inside the mind, undiluted by any counterpoints of compassion, they create an inner climate ripe for self-recrimination. Innocuous situations unfold in which the mental muck stirs up. For example, I’m in line to donate blood, filling out the requisite paperwork, when my eyes rest upon the question How many pregnancies have you had?

Through all the years of social shaming, I did not regret that I had been able to turn to a compassionate and legal health-care option. Rather, the stigma provoked other kinds of mental and emotional torment—self-loathing and terror. I hated myself for the twists and turns that had brought me to those desperate situations when I was young. And I lived in fear, not only of God’s wrath, but also of complete alienation from the human family.

I’d watch my sons riding their tricycles in the driveway, or see them waving to me from their used cars as they drove off to college, or picture them flying across the country for job interviews, and I always wondered if this would be the time that God would take them from me through a fatal crash. I always waited upon the Lord’s vengeance. Also, I believed my sons’ hearts would harden against me if they ever learned of my past. What a cruel and vindictive belief to have hammered into your deepest consciousness.

Every caring relationship I ever formed felt imperiled by a menacing conviction: If they really knew me, they would despise me. My husband would seek a divorce. The neighbors would turn their backs. My colleagues would walk a wide berth. The parents of the boys and girls I nurture in my classroom would yank their children from my hugs. At times the messages of shame and fear trigger physical reactions. My heart might suddenly race, or quiver in my chest, or sink to my feet, or leap to my throat. Sometimes I have the sensation of straining to breathe. It’s like walking around with my mind in an invisible cloud of toxic gas. Even the word abortion sparks involuntary physical reflexes. Its vowels and consonants have melded over time into a weapon studded with spikes and blades, like one of Q’s inventions in a James Bond film. I flee from the word as if I am a fugitive from the law and it is a police siren.

Throughout my life I have dabbled with various coping strategies. I wrote down thoughts and feelings. I drank too heavily and too often. I devoured self-help books. I walked and biked for miles to work out the distress. I mentored adolescent girls. And I built a mental wall of numbness around my inner world, like a Plexiglas tunnel in a tourist aquarium.
On all sides I see the sharks and piranhas circle, yet I smile cheerfully through my day-to-day life.

Another strategy was to build up my Christian faith, so I immersed myself in church life. I became a lay minister, taught vacation Bible school, cooked food for the needy, attended worship services twice weekly. Most important of all, I spent a year reading the Bible from beginning to end. After that, I wanted to tell the good news to everyone, like this: I pull into a parking spot next to a car with a bumper sticker that says God is pro-life. A woman gets out and hurries toward her destination. I grab my Bible and leap out of my car, beseeching her to wait. I apologize breathlessly for bothering her. But I couldn’t help noticing your bumper sticker, I say. She glances at my Bible and smiles. Well, here’s the thing, I continue. You cannot possibly be aware of what it really says in here. Wait till you hear this. And then I read the myriad scriptures in which God calls for the slaughter of infants and children.

This scenario is a fantasy, of course. I would not try to argue people out of their religious beliefs. But reading the Bible—thinking critically about its content, its origins, and its use through antiquity to manipulate and condition human behavior—empowered me to stand up for myself in my mind. Imaginings like this, in which I face my attackers, have helped arrest my habit of beating myself up.

Another miracle graced my life in church. I met a new friend—a minister’s daughter ten years my senior. One summer day we went for a fateful walk. Down a red clay road we traveled, our voices mingling with the trilling of sparrows on fence posts. It seemed like a simple summer stroll, until she made a startling confession. She had become pregnant in her teens. Her parents had sent her away to live out her pregnancy and then arranged an adoption. Years later she tried in vain to find the child.

Here was a woman who understood an accidental pregnancy, who knew the anguish of shame rooted in religion. My heart began to thrash against my ribs as my forbidden truth, caged in my mind for so long, came winging out of my mouth. I felt insanely terrified, as if I had pulled the pin from a grenade that I could not toss. I waited for an explosion, for the earth to swallow me. But the cicadas continued to hum and the butterflies kept up their airborne ballet. We walked on, sharing everything, without the need to justify or rationalize anything. At forty years of age, I experienced blessed love, compassion, and understanding for the very first time. This love gave me the courage to slowly venture out of my inner prison.

Two years later I told my husband. He did not flee in disgust. He listened, learned, held me in his arms, and became my greatest supporter on my journey to “come out” and to advocate for reproductive health and rights.

Eight months ago, I shared my history with my grown sons—the children whose lives are owed to the precise unfolding of my youth. If I had become a mother in my teens, these young men would not be here, serving in medical and transportation careers, preparing to raise families of their own.

My sons did not reject me. They listened, learned, and understood. They embraced me. One spoke these words now etched on my heart: Mom, I loved you yesterday. I love you now. And I will love you tomorrow. The other took my hand and walked me into the world of social media, where I was stunned to discover that millions of caring people are working around the globe on all fronts of reproductive health care and rights. I felt like Dorothy, stepping out of the gray, battered house of my mind into a strange, dazzling, beautiful place of compassion.

This is how I can believe that God is love and that love is kind. My husband, children, and close friends still love me. They do not believe I am a slut and a killer. They do not believe I need forgiveness for being human. The worst fears contrived by all the religious heckling in my life did not materialize.

As I make these final keystrokes, I confess that I am still scared. But I am resolved. I will not allow shame and fear to rule my life anymore. In my mind, I am already saying farewell to people I expect will shun me. I forgive them.

No longer will I be complicit in the silence that allows stigma to flourish. I will stand up straight and speak out with dignity, because nothing matters more to me now than the future of the little girls I see each day.

They approach me in the classroom bearing construction-paper bouquets of daisies and tulips, sketched in bright crayon under skies of rainbows and butterflies. As they leave my hugs and return to their desks, their ponytails swaying, their light-up sneakers sparkling, the prayers of my heart follow them: May they never be taught to see themselves as deflowered. May they...
Karen Harris Thurston is a teacher’s assistant in a public elementary school in metro Atlanta. For two decades she has helped young students develop self-confidence and a love of learning. She is a former newspaper reporter and freelance writer with a master’s degree in journalism from the University of Georgia. She has been married to her best friend for thirty years, and they have two grown sons, a daughter-in-law, and a pair of rescued dogs. A former lay minister, Karen has served as a hospital volunteer, teen mentor, literacy tutor, and public speaker for Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

they never be taught to believe they are killers. May they live in a compassionate world that grants them the divine human right of complete reproductive justice.

**Story Reflection Questions**

1. What is one moment in the story that stayed with you?

2. What questions did you find yourself asking as you read the story?

3. What challenged you about the story?

4. What surprised you about the story?

5. How does this story relate to your own life experience?
Unplanned

Malkia Hutchinson

I have always admired women who were capable of raising their children on their own. My own mother was single, and, even if I wasn’t fully cognizant of her struggles and sacrifices at the time, I appreciated the magnitude of what that meant. As much as I was in awe of what it meant to parent a child or children while living apart from the other parent, I wholeheartedly believed single parenthood was a fate meant for other types of women and nothing that would ever become a part of my life. I had done everything “right”: I excelled in school, graduated from Cornell University, joined the Peace Corps, and worked at a prominent community health center in Washington, DC. I was planning out my life while also taking time to enjoy my new community in a dynamic city.

During the winter of 2010, I met someone at a friend’s going-away party. He was friendly, and I could tell he was into me, but I wasn’t as interested in him at the time. That night, he was kind enough to drive me around as I was attempting to meet up with other friends; when those plans eventually fell through, however, I decided to go to the housewarming party he was missing in order to spend time with me. Over the course of the next few weeks, we went on a few dates. and, with a bit of persuasion on his end, we committed to being in a monogamous relationship. The official boyfriend/girlfriend label was adopted the following April, and in August I took several over-the-counter pregnancy tests that all came back positive. I had known something wasn’t right but had attributed my
sluggishness, nausea, and mild headache to something I must have picked up from a recent trip overseas.

But there I was, standing in front of four pregnancy tests that finally confirmed to me what I felt in the depths of my being was the cause of my feeling just a little “off.” My boyfriend was not at all pleased.

“Are you sure?” he asked as he sat next to me on his bed.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure. I took a few tests.”

He looked almost baffled as he said, “I can’t believe this is happening again.”

I didn’t follow up on that, since my own mind was a blur. Later, he admitted to me that this wasn’t his first experience with unplanned pregnancy. The thought of termination crossed both of our minds. After talking to two close friends over the phone, and clinging to the hope that at-home pregnancy tests aren’t as reliable as a doctor’s visit, I made an appointment with my gynecologist. Several days later it was confirmed, yet again, that I was most definitely pregnant.

The term crisis pregnancy was something I said often during my college days as an antiabortion advocate. It was both a state of being and a situation I felt I understood by virtue of wanting to provide abortion alternatives to pregnant women. I volunteered at a crisis pregnancy center (CPC), convinced I was playing a vital role in persuading women to choose life for their unborn children. The word crisis doesn’t seem to capture the sensation of being pregnant when you don’t want to be by a boyfriend you’ve known for less than six months. The feelings of terror, hopelessness, fear, and shame kept washing over me. He saw termination as the only logical solution. He never stopped talking about it. I went to a local CPC with a friend, where they didn’t tell me anything I didn’t expect them to. I knew they would show me colorful pictures of five-week-old fetuses and talk about the wonderful services they could provide. I knew the few things they were offering would be very temporary, but it was the first glimpse of tangible support I felt since finding out I was pregnant.

I visited the Planned Parenthood several blocks away from where I worked just to have someone I could talk to who didn’t have an agenda. The woman I sat with was amazing. We talked about my relationship with my boyfriend, family, job, goals, and the future I saw for myself. “What would prevent you from reaching those goals if you continued this pregnancy?” she asked.
the pregnancy and delivery without the support of the child’s father. She also went through the ob-gyn practice I was in and validated many of my apprehensions. Over lunch one day, she mentioned watching the film *The Business of Being Born* toward the end of her pregnancy but wished she had found it earlier. On her recommendation, I viewed the movie as well and realized that I could have other options for a birth aside from what I had grown accustomed to. I didn’t have to deliver in a hospital. That was an incredibly empowering realization for me during a time when I felt like my power was being sapped out of me day by day. I went back and forth about where I would live when my lease was up. At that point I would be twenty weeks pregnant. I wouldn’t be able to afford to live on my own, so my choices were either to move in with my child’s father or move back home. He and I ended up moving in together, but our relationship never fully recovered. He stayed out late and cheated on me with other women, leaving me at home, growing resentful and depressed.

“Don’t see why you even bothered to move in with me if you had no desire to be faithful to me or be around when I need you,” I’d shout in frustration.

“You gave me an ultimatum and told me either we had to live together or you’d move home and have the baby there!” he responded, which only led to more yelling, screaming, and aggravation.

I had no family in the area and felt like I had no other option than to endure it, with the hope that the baby’s arrival would change things for the better. Even though I was a passenger in my relationship, I was in control of how this baby was going to transition earth-side. The fact that I was beginning to take ownership of my body and my birthing experience was critical for me during that time.

I began to dread the trips to the doctor’s office. Feeling out of place as the only black woman in the waiting room was one thing, but I never felt completely comfortable being an unmarried black woman in a practice that seemed to draw married white women dressed like they had just walked over from their lobbying firms. I honestly believe I was not treated differently by the front-desk staff or my provider compared to these women, but I wanted to see other women who looked like me providing my medical care. I also knew I wanted to work with a midwife and didn’t want to give birth in a hospital. These realizations left me with very few options.

There was a well-regarded midwifery practice out of George Washington University Hospital that met my new midwifery requirement, but since it was in a hospital it didn’t appeal to me. Then I came across a stand-alone birth center located in Northeast DC. It was purposely built in a low-income, predominately black area of the city due to that population’s poor maternal health outcomes. I loved the intentionality behind that.

I visited the birth center and immediately fell in love. The birthing suites were beautiful and homey. The staff was incredibly friendly. The midwives and breastfeeding peer supporters, all women of color, were very welcoming. I could tell these women loved the work they were doing in the community. What I didn’t count on was my reaction to the women who were in the waiting area and in my tour group. My desire to be around people who looked more like me and shared a similar cultural background gave way to a feeling of discomfort at being with women who appeared uneducated and had multiple children by multiple men.

I felt frustrated that I didn’t belong anywhere. I didn’t belong in the predominately white medical practice that would have me birth in a hospital where my movements would be restricted and I couldn’t eat, drink, or do what my body was telling me to do as I birthed my child. But how did I fit in this environment with women of color who seemed disinterested in breastfeeding, hadn’t pursued higher education, and faced yet another unplanned pregnancy while their other children were still in diapers?

This experience was yet another illustration of my life growing up not “black enough” in this space and not “white enough” in that space. Every time I opened my mouth, my speech gave me away as someone who didn’t belong in that community. I may have looked the part, but my internalized classism kept rearing its ugly head as I mulled over making the decision of whether to switch practices. However, I knew I wanted to be with a practice that embraced, not just tolerated, intervention-free birth. Ultimately I committed to the birth center, which meant my prenatal care would look drastically different.

The midwives used a group care model, which meant that all women due in the same month were in prenatal classes together. Every other week we came together to discuss breastfeeding, wearing our babies in carriers, changing diapers, our fears and expectations, and to make belly casts and check in with our midwives. It was radically different from what I was
become dependent upon people and relationships you have no business being dependent upon. In the midst of my shame at my out-of-wedlock pregnancy, I found solace in those biweekly, and eventually weekly, visits to my birth center.

What I assumed were Braxton-Hicks contractions woke me up around two o’clock in the morning a week before my daughter was due. Shortly thereafter my water broke, marking the beginning of a twenty-hour labor and delivery. The majority of this happened at home. In the weeks building up to this moment, my child’s father vacillated between interest in preparing our home for the baby and a desire to be free from the situation. While most of our preparation tasks had been completed, a few had not, like installing the car seat and putting together the changing table. Our parents were set to fly in the following week, which was when she was due. That night it was only us in our home, and he was busy putting together the changing table (I had freaked out that it wasn’t finished yet). I timed my contractions and comforted myself. I rolled on the labor ball by myself, listened to music, and just did the best I could to bear the pain as much as possible.

When we finally got to the birth center, I was nine centimeters dilated, throwing up, and ready for it to all be over. I can’t remember how, but I eventually got into a bathtub full of warm water, which my body was craving. I was told to do what my body wanted. My body wanted the Jacuzzi bubbles on and off at intermittent times. It wanted to lie back as the waves passed over me. I’d planned to be surrounded by friends as I welcomed my child earth-side. But in that moment of labor all I wanted were dim lights and quiet. Finally, my body wanted to push.

I can’t remember the pain in the way that most women can’t remember their labor pains. I do remember my baby being placed on my chest, looking up at me, and me thinking, “It’s you!” as if I’d always known her, as if she was who I was expecting. It was miraculous and perfect. It didn’t occur to me at that point what I didn’t have: mainly a stable relationship with her father, let alone a marriage. I didn’t want to perpetuate the destruction of the black family with my body and choices. I didn’t want my child to grow up without a father present in the home as I had. It didn’t matter that I was a positive statistic by many measures (educated, healthy, career-driven) because I wasn’t married. I was choosing to bring my child into a broken home. I didn’t want the world to see me in the same way that I saw “those women” waiting in the lobby with their babies, those women going to prenatal and pediatrician appointments without their children’s father, those women without rings on that finger.

Shame can be debilitating. It can keep you in an unhealthy and destructive relationship in which your mental, emotional, and physical well-being are inconsequential. It can isolate you. It can cause you to
after birth, breastfeed for as long as you please, that our bodies during pregnancy are phenomenal vessels to be listened to and respected, not problems to be solved.

My journey into parenthood after my daughter’s birth has been rocky and, unfortunately, not without moments of shame and sadness. I stayed with her father until she was about eight months old. A final act of violation against my body and spirit was enough to finally send me back home to Texas. Nine months of unemployment and a year of living at home often left me feeling discouraged and unfulfilled. I went through waves of feeling like a failure and as if I’d thrown away a promising future. I eventually landed a position at a women’s resource center on a university campus in Houston. Moving south from the Dallas/Ft. Worth area was a huge leap of faith. I don’t have family here and didn’t know many people before moving down. But my child and I have made a good life for ourselves down here. She’s doing very well in her toddler Spanish immersion class and will be moving to the preschool program over the summer.

I have always had a goal of getting a master’s degree and worried about how that would play out as a single parent. Before I got pregnant, I was set on studying public health and had no intention of doing so south of the Mason-Dixon line. However, my interest in politics and public policy intensified after I returned to Texas. In the wake of increased legislative efforts to restrict reproductive health options for women in our state and in researching public education options for my child, I felt drawn more to social policy than public health. Incidentally, the university I work at has a master’s in public administration program with a policy track that appealed to me. I’m now enrolled in my first semester and will hopefully be able to graduate in two and a half years.

I’m by no means fully secure in my identity as a black single mother. But I recognize that I’ve accomplished so much and have grown by leaps and bounds. My daughter, Araiya, is a phenomenal child who never ceases to delight me. I’m a great mommy to her, and we’re an amazingly strong family unit. Everything else can take a backseat while I continue working to make both of our lives better from here on out.
Untold Stories

**Story Reflection Questions**

1. What is one moment in the story that stayed with you?
   ___________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________

2. What questions did you find yourself asking as you read the story?
   ___________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________

3. What challenged you about the story?
   ___________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________

4. What surprised you about the story?
   ___________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________

5. How does this story relate to your own life experience?
   ___________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________
June 2009: Unexpectedly Expecting

For about a week I couldn’t stop blaming the soulful singer Erykah Badu and my new favorite song of hers, “The Healer.” She wasn’t directly responsible, but throughout my first years in college I developed a justifiable crush on her musical brilliance. In a fit of desperation to see her perform live, I invited my musician ex-boyfriend to a festival she’d be performing at. I had met him about a year earlier in a used bookstore, and our relationship had been the definition of unstable ever since. I reassured myself that even though our relationship was finally over, he was a musician and none of my other friends would appreciate Badu the same way he would. Inevitably spending time with my ex during the music festival reignited good memories from our past relationship, and we slept together.

After the festival I promised myself that, for my own dignity, I’d stop seeing my ex. A little over a month after I made that decision, it was too late. One night I found myself alone, curled into a ball, and crying, two positive pregnancy tests sitting in front of me. The timing of this unexpected news couldn’t have been worse, as I was about to leave the country for a summer volunteer trip to Northern Africa. It was a trip for which I had been saving and planning for months. Upon discovering my pregnancy, I felt paralyzed by a reality I couldn’t accept, convinced my life was over.
Planned Parenthood was the inevitable next step. When they confirmed my pregnancy, I slipped out of my body and watched as my face became pale. I burst into tears after a staff member calmly asked, “So, would you like to have an abortion, choose adoption, or parent?” I didn’t realize such a simple question could feel so complicated, and I shivered up at the thought of making a decision. I needed time to process everything. A week wasn’t enough, and I didn’t want to travel to another continent after receiving an abortion, especially because my part-time job offered me no medical insurance. And so I left for Northern Africa carrying not only my luggage, but the weight of a difficult choice.

**September 2009: Choices**

Upon my return to the United States, I needed to make a decision. I had spent about two months away, and although I was scared out of my mind, I decided not to have an abortion. It was a difficult decision and one that I had the privilege of putting a lot of thought into. However, this delicate choice didn’t mean I planned on parenting my child. Despite deciding to carry the pregnancy to term, I knew that I was not ready to be a mother, and I was curious about how open adoption could be a potential solution for me.

There was an adoption agency I had my eye on, and I immediately contacted them. After getting a feel for my situation, they eagerly mailed me a mountain of information. Their brochures advertised birth mothers glowing and smiling down at their big bellies. The adoptive parents pictured were blissfully united with their babies. Beautifully written thank-you letters to the adoption agency from both adoptive and birth parents were common throughout the booklets. It was everything I needed to confirm that adoption was the best decision for me.

A few weeks later, I received hard-copy profiles of prospective adoptive parents. They were each designed and created by the couples themselves, so their personalities showed through the pages. I was giddy at the thought of my child’s future with one of these amazing couples. I took the time to flip through all of the unique profiles and smiled at the diverse array of families and hopeful couples.

My ex-boyfriend agreed to meet me at a café so he could look at the profiles of potential adoptive parents. Overall, he was hesitant about adoption but assured me that he would support my decision. Together we arranged the profiles according to our preferences in the hopes of finding a couple we could both agree on.

**October 2009: My Baby’s Mama**

There was one potential adoptive couple in particular whom we placed at the top of our list. They were both college-educated professional artists and led a healthy lifestyle. Most importantly, they were multiracial. My child would be a quarter Mexican, a quarter African American, and half white. I needed the potential adoptive couple to understand what it meant to have curly hair and to raise a child who would experience the world as a person of color. I told my case manager at the adoption agency that I was interested in meeting them and having them be the parents of my child.

A few days later, I received a voice message from the potential adoptive mother. She sounded bubbly and genuinely enthusiastic at the prospect of meeting me. I called her back immediately to set a date to meet her and her husband. I remember wanting to jump up and down for joy.

My ex-boyfriend and I borrowed a friend’s car to meet the potential adoptive parents for dinner. When we arrived, they greeted me with hugs, smiles, and gifts. At the time I was so grateful that they had gone through the trouble of making me a gift basket and writing me a thoughtful note. There was an instant spark. We talked about their dreams of having a child, their experiences with infertility, and how excited they were to learn that I was interested in meeting them and having them be the parents of my child.

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After the initial meeting, I felt lucky to have chosen such a kind and loving couple.

What I couldn’t tell the adoptive couple was that before dinner, my ex and I had had a huge fight. In the car, he told me he didn’t want to meet them, and he ignored my attempts at discussion by blasting loud music.
After dinner, I eagerly awaited his reaction. By the time we walked out of the restaurant, his mood had completely shifted. He felt very happy about the meeting with the potential adoptive parents and said they were great. I was relieved to hear his positive response, especially considering the huge argument we had had before meeting them.

**November 2009: The Pregnant Student**

“How exciting!” A fellow student in my statistics class had just noticed that my stomach had recently expanded. I gulped. I knew I wasn’t ready for her next question. “Have you decided on any names?”

“Uh, Harmony…” I managed to offer. This was the name that I gave my unborn daughter.

“How beautiful! Are you going to take some time off of school?” She had a look of concern plastered on her face.

Another gulp. “No, that won’t be necessary.” We had a statistics final exam approaching, and I was doing my best to maintain my focus on not only nourishing the growing child, but my own student brain.

She smiled. “When is your due date?”

“February eighth,” I stated flatly with a hint that I wasn’t interested in answering any more of her questions. My heart couldn’t afford to break during statistics class.

After my daily round of classes ended, I took the bus back home. Throughout my first months of pregnancy, I endured an overwhelming amount of morning sickness. As my pregnancy progressed, the nausea diminished, but I’d still suffer from motion sickness on the bumpy bus ride home.

The most excruciating memories from those bus rides were people’s strange and distant glares. Granted, some smiled warmly at my growing tummy, but most stares felt icy cold. I could sense the strangers’ judgments sinking beneath my skin simply because of what I appeared to be: a young Hispanic single mother-to-be, dependent on public transportation. Taking the bus always made me feel vulnerable, both physically and emotionally.

**January 2010: The Beginning of the End**

The holidays passed, and I spent a lot of time talking to the baby. I told her about our trip to North Africa in the summer of 2009. I told her of the gifts I had gotten her. I cried letting her know that I didn’t have any answers, and I hoped that I was making the right decision. I told her that I hoped she would love her adoptive parents and that I knew they were kindhearted people. I introduced her to Erykah Badu and told her that she owed her life to this great musician. Sometimes when I talked to her, she’d respond with a kick or punch to my tummy.

In January I had briefly moved in with my ex due to family issues at my home. While we were living together, he continued to express his concerns about the adoption of his daughter. Despite his reservations, I knew I was making the best decision given our circumstances. We could barely afford to pay for rent with my student income and his sporadic paychecks, never mind raise a child. Reluctantly, he signed the papers that the adoption agency had been nudging him to sign since I first received a copy of the adoptive parent profiles back in September.

Meanwhile, the adoptive parents and I agreed upon potential future arrangements for post adoption visitation and contact. I requested an annual visitation and update. I envisioned picnics, holding hands with my biological daughter during visitations, an informal phone call here or there. I referred to myself as the birth mother, even while pregnant. It was in January that I would have been the perfect walking advertisement for adoption.

**February 2010: Ready or Not**

My due date came and went. I was horrified at the thought of a human being coming out of my vagina, so I was partly relieved.

The adoptive parents were practically my best friends as they eagerly awaited the birth of my daughter. My family was on edge as they prepared for me to go into labor any day. I wanted everyone to calm down, including myself. Still, I didn’t know how much longer my back could carry the extra weight.
On February 12, after my doctor’s appointment, I began to experience what felt like a failing bladder. I knew my bladder had a lot of pressure placed on it from the baby, but I didn’t expect to keep peeing uncontrollably. Finally, a light bulb went off: *maybe my water broke?*

When we went to the hospital that evening, medical staff confirmed that I was leaking amniotic fluid. Apparently I was about to go into labor and I’d had no idea. The hospital staff made sure I was in a scratchy blue hospital gown and insisted that I lie down on my back despite my birth plan preference of being able to move freely. Additionally, they wanted to monitor the baby’s heart rate, which would keep me connected to wires. When I asserted my preferences, the hospital staff reluctantly agreed to intermittently monitor the baby’s heart rate so they could honor my wish.

After we settled into the hospital room, we played the waiting game. The medical staff warned me that if by six o’clock the next morning I was not having strong contractions, they would induce me with Pitocin because they were worried about the baby’s safety. Sure enough, by six o’clock the next morning I was exhausted and there was no sign that the baby was making any progress. I was induced with Pitocin, and I was annoyed at the world for interfering with my birth experience. Everyone was in the room, and I just wanted to be alone with my baby for the last few moments.

The birth itself was very painful, both physically and emotionally. The contractions felt backbreaking, my uterus felt contorted and withering. I refused to take pain medication. By 10:40 a.m., everyone was in the room. The nurses spread my legs wide open, poking and prodding me to make sure it was really happening. I can’t remember what was said or done because the pain was so intense. My mind was also malfunctioning from a lack of sleep.

At 10:43 a.m., she emerged into the world, a wrinkled baby. Her umbilical cord had been wrapped around her neck and she was purple. My heart started pounding with worry. Chaos ensued as the doctor cut the umbilical cord and took her away.

After the purple started melting away from my daughter’s skin, I watched her on the heating machine from afar. The adoptive mother was cooing at her and calling her beautiful. I felt so proud of my daughter and myself for getting through the birth. I still couldn’t believe that another human being had just emerged from my body. She was strong and healthy and I wanted so much to hold her.

While the adoptive mother was cradling her, the biological father announced that his family was going to come into the room, meaning that everyone else would need to leave because the room would reach maximum capacity. Tension began to rise, particularly between the adoptive mother and the biological father. Warily, the adoptive parents left the room.

During the shuffle of curious family members entering and exiting the room, I was finally able to hold my daughter. I couldn’t believe how small and fragile she was. How could something so perfect come from such a flawed human being? The nurses wheeled me into the postpartum room with my daughter and the biological father followed. The nurse helped us to change her diaper and taught us how to swaddle her and I laughed nervously at how clumsy I felt at trying to be a mother for those few hours.

As I was spending time with my daughter, a nurse came in with flowers from the adoptive parents. I imagined them waiting anxiously and probably in fear that I had changed my mind, but it wasn’t me they should have been worried about.

That night after my daughter was born, while we were still in the hospital, my ex-boyfriend declared that he was not going to give his daughter up for adoption. I locked myself in the bathroom and hid under the sink. He had already signed the papers needed for the adoption to continue, so no one else appeared to be worried. Despite those legal reassurances, his words devastated me. I screamed from the bathroom that I didn’t want to be me. The nurses lured me out of my hiding spot, and one nurse, an adoptive mom herself, told me that I needed time alone with my daughter before making a final decision.

I never got as much time as I needed. I spent the night in the postpartum room with the adoptive parents as they cared for our daughter. My head was aching, and I cried silently so they could remain blissfully ignorant of my pain.

The next day was Valentine’s Day, and my social worker wasted no time in bringing over the final adoption papers for me to sign. A part of me had grown so dark overnight, but I painted on a smile as my heart quietly broke. When the social worker and I were alone in the postpartum room, I was finally able to hold my daughter. I couldn’t believe how small and fragile she was. How could something so perfect come from such a flawed human being? The nurses wheeled me into the postpartum room with my daughter and the biological father followed. The nurse helped us to change her diaper and taught us how to swaddle her and I laughed nervously at how clumsy I felt at trying to be a mother for those few hours.

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That night after my daughter was born, while we were still in the hospital, my ex-boyfriend declared that he was not going to give his daughter up for adoption. I locked myself in the bathroom and hid under the sink. He had already signed the papers needed for the adoption to continue, so no one else appeared to be worried. Despite those legal reassurances, his words devastated me. I screamed from the bathroom that I didn’t want to be me. The nurses lured me out of my hiding spot, and one nurse, an adoptive mom herself, told me that I needed time alone with my daughter before making a final decision.

I never got as much time as I needed. I spent the night in the postpartum room with the adoptive parents as they cared for our daughter. My head was aching, and I cried silently so they could remain blissfully ignorant of my pain.
room together, the biological father burst in with my baby and asked me how I could give away my own daughter. He left her in my arms as I cried. The social worker looked like she was in shock. She took the baby from my arms and returned her to the adoptive parents outside the room.

Despite all the chaos, I still chose to sign the papers that day. I don’t know how I did it soaked in postpartum hormones. I do believe that the presence of the adoptive parents and social worker held a power over me, and at that time I just didn’t have the courage to claim my right to spend more time with my daughter before signing papers.

March 2010 to 2014: A Hidden Mother

A heavy depression stormed through me in the weeks following the adoption. It was as if an emptiness had burrowed itself into my belly, replacing the baby I once carried. I went back to work immediately so I could establish a sense of normalcy in my life. I worked at my college campus, and I remember on one particularly bad day, a fellow student with good intentions asked me how my baby was doing. I was uncertain how to respond, so I smiled and lied. My heart continued to grow darker.

I wish innocent questions from curious acquaintances had been the worst part of my heartache, but what followed was an excruciating, year-long court battle between the biological father and the adoptive parents. Most of the time I stood on the sidelines, but eventually I was dragged into the custody battle. I found myself tiptoeing around everyone’s feelings and completely ignoring my need to heal. My relationship to both the adoptive parents and the biological father diminished, and I can imagine that, at times, both parties felt I had betrayed them. Regardless, the adoptive parents won the court battle and thus I was able to attempt to resume the life of a “normal college student” during my final year of college.

It took at least three years for me to come to terms with the pregnancy, the adoption, everything. Right now, I feel privileged to be able to visit with my daughter. I’ve been able to watch her grow through photographs and visitations. I feel blessed to witness the beautiful family my daughter is a part of, but my relationship with her parents hasn’t been without its difficulties. I’ve found that establishing boundaries can be complicated and emotionally draining. For example, the adoptive parents did not want the birth father to e-mail them directly when communicating about the adoption. Instead, they instructed him to e-mail me, and I was to forward that communication to one of their relatives. At one point, I began to feel overwhelmed and frustrated that I was becoming the means of communication, especially so soon after the court battle. It took every bit of courage I had to let them know that I needed to heal, and I was no longer going to be the intermediary for communications.

At this juncture, my regrets are nearly nonexistent. If I could look back to the map of this journey and alter anything, it would have been to embrace my motherhood during my pregnancy instead of simply referring to myself as my daughter’s birth mother. I was her only mother when I was pregnant with her and I should have respected and honored that role. Instead, I disconnected in order to prepare myself for the responsibility of safely bringing her into the world.

The role I play in my daughter’s life today is ambiguous at best. Becoming a birth parent does not come with a set of guidelines. Everything feels uncertain. Am I allowed to miss her? Am I allowed to feel guilty? Am I allowed to be happy? Am I a bad person for feeling jealous that they get to hug her every night—even if I chose for it to be that way? I’ve asked myself those questions throughout the past few years. Other internal questions make me feel as if I am harboring a secret self. Biologically I am my daughter’s mother, but people in my social circles aren’t immediately aware of this unless I tell them. In the midst of my other roles and responsibilities, the thought of my daughter might suddenly flicker through my mind and remind me of how tightly my invisible motherhood can cling to my body. Piled beneath my to-do list and expanding obligations, I’m a hidden mother. And then the question “…but am I really a mother?” filters through my brain and cuts through my heart.

Physically, my body bears marks of motherhood. I remember when my daughter first discovered her belly button, she kept referring to it as “ba.” She was curiously asking to see everyone’s “ba.” She turned to her mother and then her father, who both casually showed her their “ba.” She laughed in bubbles, as if belly buttons were the funniest thing that could ever exist. Then she looked up to me and asked to see my “ba.” My heart sank. If I showed her my “ba,” the small stretch marks from my pregnancy
would be revealed to all. My eyes began to water, and I had to pick myself up after that unexpected metaphorical fall. Over time I have grown to love the stretch marks her pregnancy left me, as they are clear evidence that a part of me is her mother.

When I’ve disclosed my hidden motherhood to others, they have either applauded my selflessness or condemned me for choosing to part with my flesh and blood. Being labeled as either a saint or sinner was initially disorienting as I began to navigate through my adoption journey, and I often felt misaligned. I would ask myself how I could concurrently be both a good and bad woman. As time has passed, it has been both scary and empowering to reject such labels and to instead embrace the messy and complicated truth of my story.

Observing my daughter discover the world has been a comforting experience despite the occasional awkward moments between the individuals involved. To watch her laugh, smile, and learn has been extremely humbling because I have realized that the bumpy ride has been completely worth it. Now every time I listen to Erykah Badu’s “The Healer,” I am reminded of my beautiful daughter. Near the end of the song, when Badu sings, “Say reboot, refresh, restart. Fresh page, new day…” I feel hopeful about all of the possibilities this adoption journey might lead to.

Angelique Miste Saavedra is a birth mother who is passionate about reproductive justice. Inspired by her own pregnancy and adoption journey, Angelique is committed to creating a world where all people with experiences across the reproductive spectrum are able to receive nonjudgmental and compassionate care. She currently volunteers as an after abortion talkline counselor and has previously volunteered as an abortion doula with the Bay Area Doula Project. She received her BA in anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley, and studied international development at the University of Oxford’s Exeter College.

Story Reflection Questions

1. What is one moment in the story that stayed with you?
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   _____________________________________________________

2. What questions did you find yourself asking as you read the story?
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   _____________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________

3. What challenged you about the story?
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   _____________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________

4. What surprised you about the story?
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5. How does this story relate to your own life experience?
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