Close to Home: Reflections on Poverty, Perseverance and Promise

A publication of Crittenton Women’s Union
Our Mission

Crittenton Women’s Union transforms low-income women’s lives through innovative social service programs, applied research, and effective advocacy so they and their families can attain economic independence. Learn more at www.liveworkthrive.org.

These essays are the represented memoirs of the five authors credited, are compiled from their own recollections, and are published by Crittenton Women’s Union in good faith of accuracy. Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals, living or deceased.

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Table of Contents

Foreword: Origins of Close to Home 2

Great Escapes 4
By Lauretta Brennan

The Thinker 14
By Pamala Delaney

The Journey 22
By Anne Desjardins

Red Zone Redemption 38
By Lauren Doyle

Rising 48
By Jennifer McCall

Acknowledgements 55

Scan the codes embedded throughout this publication to listen to the authors read excerpts of their work.
Close to Home: Reflections on Poverty, Perseverance and Promise has been a cathartic and powerful project in crafting memoirs to foster self-empowerment and social justice.

When we first asked Michael Patrick MacDonald, best-selling author of All Souls: A Family Story from Southie and Easter Rising: A Memoir of Roots and Rebellion, to speak at our annual event in 2013, everyone at Crittenton Women’s Union (CWU) expected he would be a dynamic keynote and powerful advocate for Boston’s low-income families. After all, MacDonald grew up in South Boston’s Old Colony Housing Project, which is also the home-base for CWU’s Career Family Opportunity program. He was uniquely positioned, as a son of a single mom who struggled to keep her family together, to speak with candor about the issues facing our families.

What was unexpected, however, was the partnership that would begin that evening. Learning about CWU resonated deeply with MacDonald. It hit home, so to speak. Working together on a writing project seemed to be a natural fit. In the fall of 2014, we officially began a collaboration with Michael and five women from CWU programs: The Close to Home project was born. Michael spent the next year leading an on-going workshop with Lauretta, Pam, Anne, Lauren and Jennifer to help them write about their lives and find their unique voices.

The written memoirs produced during this project are the result of months of contemplation, writing, editing and rewriting. The women participated in deep discussions, journaling, memory exercises, life mapping, and much more, in order to solicit raw and real snapshots of their lives to be included in this publication. Lauretta, Pam, Anne, Lauren and Jennifer were willing to open up about experiences that were not very easy to share, but are important, and have contributed to who they are today: they are mothers, role models, professionals, students and now, mentors to the other women in their lives. They are so brave in allowing us to look in, sharing small parts of the moments that are fueling their determination to face the challenges that overcoming poverty brings.
The workshop has been a pilot of learning not just for the authors, but also for their mentor. MacDonald has now developed a writing curriculum, *Transforming Trauma, Finding Voice* to teach additional groups how to write about their lives, so that they, too, may become better leaders and more powerful advocates for themselves and for others.

It was our hope that, through this project, these women would have an opportunity to heal, to find their voices and to feel empowered in all aspects of their worlds moving forward. We also hoped to offer the public a window into the lives of these five women, who are just a few of the countless families struggling to escape poverty. Lastly, we aimed to educate policymakers in order to implement effective systems change.

We are so very rewarded by the result. It is our honor to be able to share the powerful stories of these strong women who have struggled with poverty, persisted through obstacles and have found hope and the promise of a better future on the other side.

Chelsea Sedani, MSW
Senior Public Policy Associate
Crittenton Women’s Union
“Great Escapes”
Lauretta Brennan
“The phone, Lauretta, the phone!”

I’ll always remember my brother, Russell, ten years my senior, leaning over me, his right hand going up and down, making him look like he was singing those words opera style. Our phone rang off the hook for me when I was a teenager. When I wasn’t talking to my best friend, Gia, I was often screaming into the receiver, hanging out on the “party lines,” crossed phone lines that we kids in Southie had discovered for flirting and gossip long before the internet’s “chat rooms.” The phone gave me one of my only escapes from the chaos going on in the streets of the Old Colony Housing Project, or even within our three-bedroom apartment. And to this day I can still hear Russell’s raspy, fed-up voice announcing, “The phone, Lauretta!!!”

Russell constantly told me he was sick of the phone always ringing for me. I guessed it disturbed his thirty-minute escapes to the bathroom. Whenever he was done, I’d always find a spoon behind the toilet or under a water pipe. I’d soon find out that this was part of his “works” – the kitchen utensil was used to cook the drug into a liquid form, so that it could be injected intravenously. At the time—in the mid-1990s—you’d increasingly find syringes everywhere in my neighborhood, from our buildings’ hallways to the rooftops. People nodding off on the sidewalks and resembling hollow-eyed zombies became a common site overnight, thanks to a flood of the very popular, highly addictive, and usually fatal, heroin.

Eventually it was no secret that the drug had invaded our home. I remember our family often talking about Russell being a heroin user. It especially bothered us when he would fall asleep with a lit cigarette – the three-inch long ash threatening to fall on my mom’s couch at any moment. It was embarrassing, too, when my brother would itch at his face uncontrollably while hanging out on the corner of Patterson Way, the hot spot for most of the drug activity in Old Colony. Occasionally, he would try to kick dope by sweating it out on the couch for days. And it was no secret with everyone else in the family that we had to hide money—and anything of value—from him.

It was in those days that I started to use my friend Gia’s two-bedroom apartment as a further escape from it all. She shared it with her sister
Lisa—“Bushwiggle” we called her—and her mom, who was usually away at her boyfriend’s house. It was the Nineties and the puffs on our heads were teased high with AquaNet. We wore white canvas sneakers called Kapers, Champion sweatshirts, and (if we were really lucky) Girbaud jeans. I adored the layout of Gia’s apartment, and was especially impressed with her stucco-covered parlor walls. They seemed so modern to me—the coolest decor of the period. I remember thinking to myself, I wish my mom could do our apartment like that. But our family would soon have bigger problems than décor.

I was sixteen when Mom was constantly in and out of Beth Israel Hospital with kidney failure. I only had a permit so I wasn’t supposed to be driving her junk box of a car over to the hospital without being accompanied by a licensed driver. I had no choice, though. I had to visit Mom. It was during her illness that my brother Russell began to sell crack cocaine out of Mom’s bedroom. In retrospect, I guess it was the perfect opportunity for him. We were in the heart of the Old Colony Projects, the center of drug activity in Southie, and the customers just couldn’t get enough. I knew Russell didn’t want to hurt us or anyone else. As far back as I can remember he was addicted to heroin—I guess that was his escape; as with so many of our neighbors, it was another way of “getting out.” And selling crack was simply the way he found to support his heroin habit.

I cried to Mom in the hospital, telling her about Russell’s new business. From where she lay, though, there was nothing she could do. She couldn’t kick him out at that time. She needed someone to “take care” of my twin brother and me while she was ill. When I’d get home from visiting her on those cold and snowy days, I’d answer the door to loads of people asking, “Can I see your bro?” I would try to block it out, even though I knew I couldn’t for much longer. And before long I, too, found myself hoping my brother would buy us food, or throw me a “fin”—as we called a five dollar bill in Southie—for gas money to get to the hospital to see Mom again.

I didn’t expect my mom to pass away that year. She had been back home, but she woke me up the morning of June 18, 1995, and told me to call an ambulance; she was having chest pain. I sat with her in the bathroom thinking, Damn it, that ambulance better hurry up. I remember walking out of the apartment building and noticing how lifeless her body
looked as she shook around in the wheelchair. At the time, I wanted to think it was the paramedic’s fault, the way they were handling her. I went into the ambulance with Mom for the short ride to Boston Medical Center. They put me in a small room beside the entrance to the Emergency Room. It was isolated, quiet, and lonely. I was the only one there when the doctor came in and told me she was gone. He then asked, “Do you want to view her body to identify her?” I nodded, then hesitated, and asked, “Can I wait for my brothers to get here?” My twin, Ray, showed up, and we went in to see Mom lying there with all the machines still hooked up to her.

“Yup, that’s her,” I said. Ray was trying to keep it together, to stay strong. But his eyes were filling up as we practically ran out of that room. Russell was running around—God only knew where. My brother Jack was working at his job as a mechanic for Gillette.

Four years later, on March 21, 1999, my brother, Russell, died—the day after his 29th birthday. The one thing I was grateful for was that my mom never had to suffer the loss of her son. I have three brothers in all. My twin brother, Ray, is now in recovery, and I’m praying that lasts. He got addicted to pain killers when he was making money working at Old Colony Wine & Liquors. Soon the pain killers were too expensive and he began sniffing heroin. When he’s sober, he’s ambitious and smart; but when he’s using he’s scary and unapproachable.

My brother, Jack, on the other hand, was the one who escaped or “got out” in a good way. He was smart enough to land a job for Gillette and make it his career. He moved about forty minutes away, has a beautiful family, a home of his own, and even a swimming pool! Needless to say, in the summers I escape to his house as often as possible with my son, Junior, so that he can see a bigger life beyond the projects. While we lounge by the pool in a world that seems a million miles from Old Colony project, I think of Mom’s only possible escapes from the chaos of our neighborhood. If you ask my neighbors about Mom, they’ll describe her sitting on her lounge chair—her long brown hair in a braid down to her waist—out on Mercer Street as if she were on the Riviera, soaking up the sun with her homemade tanning lotion: baby oil with iodine. “The iodine attracts the sun,” I remember her telling me. And I can’t help but wish she were with us.

* * * * *
After having my son, Junior, and getting an apartment of our own in Old Colony, I ended up living on Patterson Way, where Russell used to be seen scratching his face on the corner. I’d sit at my kitchen window, able to see down the whole street, watching the goings-on, and felt as helpless as my mom must have felt so many years earlier on Mercer Street. Remembering too often my brother, Russell, I only wanted to get out.

When our housing development manager showed me an available apartment on the opposite end of Old Colony—just downstairs from Gia’s old apartment, my childhood refuge, I jumped at the opportunity. I would have taken anything to escape Patterson Way with its severe overcrowding, rat infestation, and drug trafficking. I worried a little about hanging paintings because of the stucco that rose up from the walls like mountain ranges. But they also gave me happy flashbacks to Gia’s apartment, which had the exact same mountainous stucco walls back in the day. The Boston Housing Authority hadn’t offered me many choices when they granted me a transfer, but I immediately signed the lease that day, my memories of Gia’s giving me the extra nudge.

Today (maybe not so coincidentally!) the layout of the apartment my son and I share is identical to Gia’s old place upstairs. When you open the front door, you’re immediately in the biggest room of the house: the parlor. Sitting on the parlor couch, you look toward a small bedroom with a window facing the street; and since we are on the edge of the project, the view is of the many condos going up beyond our housing project. To the right of that bedroom there’s another bedroom door, and even further to the right is the shoebox-sized bathroom. When I was younger, sitting on Gia’s couch in her parlor upstairs, I always felt like I was in the most perfect spot in the world. That’s the exact spot where Junior and I sit today. And that’s what it is for us now. One difference? The music was always blasting when we were teenagers, so the rumbling noise from the Number 11 bus—which I’ve since discovered passes by 148 times a day—was no big deal back then. The other difference? Gia’s glass kitchen table was placed against the semi-divider that separated the living room from the kitchen. But that just happens to be the perfect spot for Mom’s hutch, the one possession I still have from her, a reminder of the past and an urge to strive for more.

* * * * *
As I write this, the sun shines brightly into the two-year-old building where I work. The Tierney Learning Center’s windows are so large, and the sunshine so plentiful, that my red hair becomes a fluorescent orange. The whole setting brings a sprint to my step because it brings me back to my childhood, being on the exact street where I grew up three decades ago. But the memories don’t hurt these days, as my outlook is just not the same.

From my bright blue metallic desk, the view is breathtaking. Across the street are the green fields and baseball diamonds of Moakley Park, for now desolate at the beginning of winter, but soon bustling with activity in spring, summer, and fall. Just beyond the park my eyes are drawn to the sparkling sapphire blue water lapping on Carson Beach, on the Boston Harbor. Mom would bring us there and soak up the sun for hours on end. She’d make me sit in the shade of a tree, right by the abandoned concession stand, so that my own fair skin wouldn’t get burnt, though. By evening, my brothers, my mom and I would make the long journey to Castle Island. From as far back as I can remember it was always the most peaceful place imaginable. Sometimes we’d stop at the piers to see the local fishermen’s latest catch.

I think back to those childhood family walks in better days—long before talk of Southie’s drug epidemics—from Carson Beach, past the more sophisticated shorelines of South Boston and beyond to Castle Island. I smile, knowing that I can share those better parts of my own upbringing with my son. Junior knows “The Island” today like it’s his own backyard: the massive flocks of seagulls, the “Haunted Castle” at Halloween and, to him, the best cheeseburgers all around! at Sully’s. Sully’s is a rare relic from the old days, a local gem where you can still get a forty-cent hot dog on the opening and closing days of beach season. For Junior and me, the long hike to Castle Island by foot is our refuge away from neighborhood drama. For my mom, my brothers and me, it had been the same. Of course, the time came when Russell wouldn’t join our walks up to Castle Island; it must not have been too cool for him anymore. He probably didn’t want to miss what was going on in “The Echos,” an open court area near our apartment where everyone hung out to cop drugs or nod out, a place I’m determined to keep Junior out of.
As I sit in our neighborhood’s brand new, inspiring, and hopeful learning center, mesmerized by the rippling waters beyond Carson Beach, I can’t help but think that although so much has changed in my life and in the neighborhood, some of the better things have remained. And those are the things I can share not only with my son, but with other single moms that might be newer to the neighborhood. My job at the community center allows me to have a rippling effect on my neighbors as I distribute resources on the latest union recruitment and training opportunity called Building Pathways, share that I am now smoke free with the help of our Smoking Cessation Group, or help another single mom print her resume for a job interview.

By late afternoon, blinding sunlight floods my reception area. While some complain about the angle of the sun, I have learned that life is often how you see it. I’m trying my best today to live well and to teach my son to be the best little person he can be. I am a productive, helpful and hopefully inspiring member of my community. And I’ve never been more proud than I am each day when I leave work and go home to Junior.

I love my home. Even with the same old industrial radiators that bang like hell if you don’t turn the valves to release steam and “bleed them,” my parlor feels like the most perfect spot in the world. It stirs memories of when I was a teenager hanging out upstairs with Gia, and when Mom was still alive. Those memories are precious to me. It may not be a condominium like the ones going up all around our housing project, but the beauty of my apartment is in the fact that it’s our very own safe place. And, being in Southie, I’m suddenly in a “prime location.” Who knew? My neighborhood is still subjected to drug abuse and violence, but I focus on keeping busy, and keeping my home safe—a place my son, Junior, doesn’t have to escape from, but can escape to.

Having just graduated from Bunker Hill Community College, holding a full-time job and typing this essay on my big cozy couch with my son leaning on my shoulder, looking on—just as I sat on Gia’s couch in this same spot upstairs over twenty years ago—I can only look to the future with hope and excitement for what journeys lay before us.

And at the end of another workday, I can close my eyes, take in the light of the moon that shines across Boston Harbor and into my home, and imagine even more distant and greater escapes for me and for Junior.
* * * * *

Since writing this piece, on Halloween of 2014, my son’s father died. Also, on January 6th, 2015, my twin brother overdosed and died in Old Colony Project. I dedicate this essay, with all of my love, to all those who suffer from the disease of addiction, and to all those who, like me, will continue to persevere, to walk in the sun, seek healthier escapes, and give to our children—with or without fathers—resilience and hope.
“THE THINKER”

Pamala Delaney
After a long day, I arrive home, hang up my keys and immediately report to my private domain: my bedroom. I throw my jacket over the closet door. I don’t waste time or energy hanging it—it won’t be long before I’m putting it back on anyway, off to work again. I kick off my sneakers without untangling the laces, since I’ll be sliding right back into them all too soon for another busy day. But for now I get to recede into my sanctuary. Once the coat is hung, the shoes are off, and the TV is on, I sink into the bliss of my Tempur-Pedic memory-foam bed. And, finally, I RELAX.

In the corner of my mind I anticipate that call from my daughter asking for something. I pray that she doesn’t, even though I know she will. Can I hope? But this night she doesn’t call and soon my brain turns to the previous day’s events: what went wrong and what I can do to improve tomorrow. Tomorrow... here goes. My mind races to tomorrow, and the next day, and the next. Before long I am mapping out my entire future. I’ve got to find a better way to keep my life organized and put my thoughts on paper. Between thoughts, I channel surf through the TV, never staying on one show for very long. Staring but not really “watching” the television, I go back inside my mind, deciding tomorrow’s priorities: phone calls, appointments, and grocery shopping. Invariably I zone out again, obsessing over my future. In the future, I have a very successful career as a counselor who works with at-risk youth. I have that dream car, a beautiful big house, and a much nicer master bedroom (and maybe a husband with whom to share that room!). See, it doesn’t take long for my bedroom to go from being a refuge, to a board-room for strategic planning and executive decision-making, to a stage for envisioning my future dream life.

I look at the clock. It’s 2AM! Better get to sleep! Tomorrow I will have to restart the process yet again. But tonight I can’t sleep...

I try to not dwell too much on the past. Visions of my future are a lot nicer; and how to get there usually has a lot more pull on my thoughts. But as I almost drift off to sleep, grateful for the sanctuary that is my bedroom, I start to flash back to an incident in my childhood that probably made my bedroom the safe domain that I insist it be.
My siblings and I were not allowed to go into my mother’s living room. Her house was like a museum; everything in place and every wall filled with specially chosen pictures, shelves and knickknacks. The room’s walls were a pristine white, with a baby blue sectional couch made of Terrycloth. Everything in the room matched just so. Crystal trinkets were carefully arranged inside a curio chest and atop each table. The end tables and center table had glass toppings that added to the delicateness of it all. And there, on top of the center table, sat the anything—but-delicate, three-feet-tall oxygenated copper statue that captured my childhood imagination. I could not get the solid statue, The Thinker, out of my head. And I was always aware of its presence in that forbidden room.

I was mesmerized by it. I wanted to hold it, feel it. But when I imagined touching it, my mom’s words echoed in my head, “I don’t want you mother-fuckers in my goddamn living room! If I even think y’all were in my living room, or if I see anything out of place, your asses are mine!” Her fist would be balled up and her tongue would be stuck out, animated as she always was when she gave an order. And she gave a lot of orders! To me, the image of my mom screaming with her tongue stuck out was nightmarish—disgusting and scary. But my curiosity, as always, got the best of me. I had to touch that statue.

One day when she was at work, I couldn’t resist temptation any longer; it was my chance to sneak into the forbidden living room. Walking softly, even though I was the only one home, I first touched the little trinkets around the room. There was one crystal figurine that had caught my attention—an angel, about 8 inches tall with a candle holder in its back. I picked it up, inspected it, and slowly, gently returned it to its exact, original position. Then I sat on the soft baby blue sectional, at first nervously on the edge of one piece, but in no time stretching out over every piece. I felt like I was sprawled out on a cloud. Then I snuck a glance at the thing that brought me into the living room in the first place. The Thinker was the very image of sturdiness, strength and contemplation itself. I loved it! And staring at it up close, all else seemed to disappear. I couldn’t help but be pulled closer to it.

I’d never felt that type of material before; it was cool to the touch. I picked up The Thinker and he was even heavier than I’d ever imagined. Putting him down again, I heard the door opening. I was startled and the
man slipped out of my hands and cracked from the back of his head to the base. My heart dropped to the pit of my stomach. I felt anxiety and dread. I knew this would result in a butt-whooping, followed by never-ending verbal assaults. I sprinted to my bedroom, which I shared with my sister. I prayed my mom wouldn’t notice the crack, but then I realized I had put it down facing the opposite direction. As my mother walked through the house, I lay on my bed, paralyzed with fear. She entered my room and I knew she read my face and body language like an open book. Knowing something was up, she went straight to the living room.

As I followed her into the living room, I stood far away, observing her like I was a researcher observing an animal in its fiercely guarded domain. She immediately noticed the statue facing the wrong way. And then she saw the crack.

“Which one of you hard-headed, cock-sucking motherfuckers was in my goddamn living room and broke my motherfucking shit? If I don’t get an answer in two seconds, all of you bitches gonna get y’all ass beat!” I stood there listening to her rage and tried to gain the courage to come clean... or else to think of a good enough excuse.

“Mom,” I hesitated, “I... I was trying to help you out by dusting the living room, but when I picked up the statue... the Pledge had it so slippery, I dropped it and...” I felt all 8 eyes of my siblings watching me. I could hear one sister laughing at me.

“Get me the goddamn belt!” my mom ordered. “I didn’t tell you to do a motherfucking thing.”

I slowly walked around the house looking for a belt with my head down in fear (not shame). I tried to stall and buy time but, of course, my sister found the belt and handed it to my mom. I wanted to run so bad, but I knew the consequences would be even worse. With the belt in her grip, she screamed, “You better not run, Bitch!” My mother never called us by our names. We each had a curse word that was specific to each kid.

With every lash of the belt, I begged and pleaded, “I’m sorry mom! I’m sorry! It was an accident!” Her response to that was, “I don’t give a damn. I told your hard-headed ass not to go in my fucking living room!”
I’d had many experiences like this, usually involving that treacherously sacred living room. So, naturally, my bedroom became my safe space. To this day, I don’t even like to go into my living room. With my own children, I have always kept my furniture simple and kid-friendly. I often wonder what triggered my mother to behave like that; how could she just casually beat her children like that? What was she thinking?

Throughout my life, I have mostly felt hurt, pain and anger toward my mother. I don’t have many fond memories of her, but the very few I do have, I cherish. And lately, on sleepless nights like this one, consumed by that hurt, pain, and anger, those cherished memories, too, sneak into this sanctuary of a bedroom. And I’ve discovered that the safety of this room allows me to turn it all around, to make space for more understanding for the woman who raised me. Even if I don’t know that I can forgive her meanness and violence, I do know that I want to understand her better.

As a single parent just like my mother, I’ve had to peel back the layers of scary imagery of my mom in order to appreciate all that she accomplished and did for her family. I have to remind myself of the core good in her, the strength in her, the vulnerability, and the determination to provide for the five of us... all alone and with no help from anyone.

My mom was born and raised in the Jim Crow South, also by a single mom. She was the third of 10 kids, and the darkest. My mom always felt inferior for her skin complexion, and it didn’t help that one of her uncles meanly called her “black gal.” I could only imagine how she felt being called that by her own family, in addition to already being a second-class citizen in the White segregationist society she lived in. By the time my mom reached the age of sixteen, she had her first child who died before the age of one. At the age of seventeen, she had my brother. And by the time she was eighteen, she was pregnant with me.

Soon after my birth, my mom followed my father to Boston. She had no family in Boston, and she had not finished high school. When they split, she worked to get her General Equivalency Diploma (GED). She moved into her own apartment and, after about 2 years in Boston, went to Boston State College for training in business. After completing the program, she
landed her first full-time job, and was able to get off welfare.

I really admired my mom for striving and for instilling in us the importance of education. She was very careful about picking the right schools for each of us. I grew up during Boston’s most tumultuous period: the busing period. Followed by years of segregated neighborhoods and schools, racial desegregation was attempted in Boston through a busing plan, and race riots set an already-tense city on fire. My mom successfully shielded us from all the commotion; she got us all into Catholic schools, somewhat protected from the racist violence we saw on the nightly news and heard about from other kids in the neighborhood who were bused across town.

Because she had to work long hours to pay our tuition, we were all enrolled in afterschool programs, such as those organized by the Black Panthers, or the Bridge Program. Both of these provided transportation and structure for us all. The programs kept us from being cooped up in the house. They provided a social life and gave us a bigger-world outlook, encouraged goals and values that also insulated us from a lot of the dangers that existed for a struggling Black family in inner-city Boston. My mom had a lot of fears about the outside world. When we weren’t off on field trips or seeing movies with the afterschool programs, she would lock us in the house. I guess she thought it would protect us from the dangers out there. She would treat us to the movies once a month, though. And whenever she dropped us off, she would sternly and carefully instruct us to stick together until she would return to pick us up. Seeing her genuine fear for us on those trips to the outside world, I got the idea that she really cared. Those times going to the movies allowed me to see the softer side of my mom. And afterward, she would spend money on us without complaining. Anything we wanted, she’d give it to us. And I took full advantage of those more generous days.

My fondest memories of all are of the days when she would take only me to her weekend job, cleaning her boss’s home in Sharon, MA. The drive through the fancy White suburbs, so unlike our densely populated city neighborhood, would allow us to converse one-on-one. Pointing to the big beautiful houses we passed, I would ask, “Mom, do you think we’ll ever get a house like that?” She’d respond, “Pam, I’m trying every single day to get us a house better than that. I want you and your siblings also to work hard
every single day and go to college so y’all won’t have to struggle like I have.” She would talk about her life, my future, and would even thank me for helping her out with the rest of the siblings. The way she thanked me—the sincerity in her voice—almost hurts to remember.

On our way back after a day of cleaning, we would stop at a Friendly’s restaurant, and she would let me order whatever I wanted. For once, I wouldn’t have to split a meal among five siblings. I loved the red leather booths, the jukebox at each table, and the coat rack at every other booth. The waiter would come by to take our order and I would look at my mother, unsure if I could really order anything I wanted. Mom would say, “What do you want, Pamala?” Shocked every time, my response would always be, “I could have anything I want?” She nodded her head, and I confidently ordered my heart’s desire.

Once, while we were waiting for our food, I asked my mom about her childhood and if her mom ever spent fun times with her like this. “Nah,” she said. “My mom had 10 kids and never had the money. I’ve always tried to do better than my mother—for y’all. I left home to come here to Boston so that any children of mine would have a chance.” We continued our conversations about her childhood. I had plenty of questions, and she didn’t mind answering them, following every reminiscence with a lesson, or a warning about life and my future. I think those days working with my mom—listening to her memories, being given earned life-lessons, and ordering whatever I wanted—were the only times I felt truly comfortable around my mother … And somewhat loved.

Finally, after a night of facing some of that dreaded past, and doing so with a little more understanding for my mom, my racing mind settles on the present. I know I’ll be tired tomorrow as I get back on the treadmill of work, education and training, and still tending to the struggles of my now grown kids. But it’s OK. I’ve used my sanctuary for its truest purpose—not only as a board room for strategizing and executive decision-making, but as a place of healing.

With what few hours I have remaining to sleep, I can drift off knowing that tomorrow is going to be a good day.
“The Journey”

Anne Desjardins
It was early May of 1995. The blazing sun shone on the city making all come alive again after a harsh winter. We seemed to have no spring that year, going straight from winter to summer. Finally the warm weather was making its appearance and I was exhilarated! 23 years young, I had just had a healthy baby boy and was ready to get back to work and school. We had had a tough winter that year, full of snow and below-zero temperatures. It had been an especially difficult season for me because my pregnancy had been labeled high risk during my fifth month. I had been strictly ordered to bed rest and had to withdraw from school again. More than that, it had been a particularly dark season in my life, for unspeakable reasons that I was only beginning to make sense of, and learning to name...

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I was five months pregnant when I went into pre-term labor—my cervix had opened to four centimeters. I sat in the waiting room on the fifth floor of Beth Israel Hospital. I didn’t let it bother me that I was the only one waiting alone without a doting mate. I prefer to be alone, I told myself, so that I can collect my thoughts. Lord knows, I had a lot to think about.

The doctor ran several tests looking for the cause of the problem and why this would be happening at my young age. I acted as clueless as he looked about my situation. He ordered strict bed rest for four months in order to ensure a full-term delivery. Otherwise, he said, I would have a premature baby. As bad as that news was, even worse, the doctor said he’d like to speak to my husband to make sure those supporting me knew how serious the situation was. I played cool and told him that my husband was waiting in the car because there was no parking outside.

As I patiently sat in the office waiting for test results, I thought, They’re going to figure this out... figure out that the young black girl that’s always dressed so sharp, so put-together—but always here alone—may be a domestic violence case. After all, here I was, a 23-year-old woman with no signs of infection, no previous health issues. My first pregnancy two years earlier had brought a premature birth. And I was pregnant again, showing signs of preterm labor at 5 months? Clearly there was a problem. But I was good at
keeping up appearances so they wouldn’t catch it. Inside, I was dying to let the cat out of the bag, but my mouth just couldn’t say the words. If they had looked into my eyes and probed a little more, maybe they would have seen it. I knew exactly why I was dilating. My husband, my “supporter,” the sole provider of my children, was physically abusing me... and not a soul knew. Just me.

As the doctor expressed his concern about the state of my pregnancy, I drifted off and thought about my next steps. I knew right away that this bed rest thing was out of the question. Bed rest at this time in my life just was not an option. I was literally fighting for my life on a daily basis, and work and school provided an escape from my secret life of domestic abuse. I was in another place while he talked, but every now and then I would catch a few phrases from him such as, “You need a care-taker to check your temperature every few hours to make sure your temperature doesn’t climb, and you should only get out of bed to go to the bathroom and bathe—nothing else.” And then, “Have your family tend to your every need to ensure you make it to the ninth month.”

My heart told my mind to scream and tell the truth: NO, DOCTOR...I'M A BATTERED WOMAN! SAVE ME PLEASE! KEEP ME HERE AND DON'T LET ME GO! Don't you see these marks on my body? Can’t you see the puffiness around my eyes from crying? These questions converged in my mind but never came out of my mouth. I carried on with the conversation I wanted to have, ignoring the fact that the words were never spoken. Doctor, my husband stabbed me in my thigh, and several times a week I wake up to a gun in my face. He is both physically and verbally abusive and if I am forced to stay home, one of us will die for certain.

As my internal conversation carried on, I was handed off to a nurse who then gave me a list of do’s and don’ts about high risk pregnancies. Damn, did I just miss my opportunity to save this baby’s life? The doctor was now out of sight and I was left with my secret and no clue about what to do next. Prior to that day, I believed I was invincible. I didn’t see myself as battered because when he hit me, I hit him back. Yes, I may have walked away bruised, but at least I showed him I wasn’t accepting it without a fight. Despite the fighting all night long, I would still go to work, to school, and maintain a pretty face and smile. My mom minded my one-
year-old daughter while I continued with work and school. No one had a clue what my home life was like, and I didn’t dare tell anyone.

Leaving the doctor’s office that day, things were different, though. I had just told the truth, at least to myself: I was a battered woman.

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As I walked out of the office, my mind raced with things I had to do. Deep down, I just wanted to go to my momma’s house and lay in her bed. I realized then that I didn’t have much of a verbal relationship with Momma. The comforting atmosphere she created in that bedroom of hers was all I ever needed to put my troubles to rest. As a child this room kept me safe from the chaos all around me. We lived in the projects so coming home you had to walk past knuckleheads drinking and doing drugs or just listening to music from their boom boxes and having a good ole time. As a teenager, I would seek comfort in Momma’s room when faced with unrelenting peer pressure, or every time my brother went on a tirade for money to get high. It was my place of solace. In every corner and in every closet there were bibles in all shapes, colors, languages and sizes. I felt in need for one of those bibles now, and was on my way to Momma’s room in the hope that time spent there would help me to sort it all out.

I sat in my car for what seemed hours, though. Before getting up the nerve to go into the house to see my mom and my baby girl, Annie, and to share my news, memories of all my childhood lessons ate away at me. I sat there trying to figure out how I ended up in this situation.

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I had been swept off my feet at the very first sight of Sam. He reminded me of the best part of my childhood—the part taken away at 10 years old, when I lost the greatest model I ever knew for what it meant to be a good man.

My Godfather, my Parenn, had been everything to me. He was my all-time protector, the true definition of a Godfather. In the Haitian communi-
ty, Godfathers play a big part in raising the children. The first 10 years of my life, my Godfather was the only father with whom I had a relationship. Growing up, I recall being confused about who my real father was. I didn’t look like my biological father. I didn’t look like Parenn either, but he cared about every move I made. I barely even saw my real father. Literally every step I took was carefully inspected by Parenn. I remember the day he discovered I was pigeon toed. I must have been 5 years old or so. He made me walk back and forth about a hundred times to correct it. When it wouldn’t correct itself he bought me corrective shoes to help fix the problem. That didn’t work either, but I remember how much it bothered him, how much I meant to him. In his eyes I was perfect and he treated me like a gem. He made promises and always kept them. He taught me the importance of doing the right thing always, and doing what you say you will do! My promises to him and to my mom were to practice violin and tennis, get good grades, go into prayer mode when things get tough and, most important of all, to always tell the truth even when it hurts.

Parenn was a truck driver for a cola company; but whenever he met with me, he’d be clean cut, freshly showered, smelling of cologne and walking with the confidence of a king. His shoes were always shined and he always wore buttoned up dress shirts, dress pants and blazers. Parenn made sure I dressed the part as well. When he passed away, it left a huge hole in my life.

When I first met Sam, it was as if Parenn had been reincarnated. Sam wore blazers, dress shirts and fashionable jeans; and his trademark look was that he had a new pair of Ferragamo loafers for every outfit he wore. He also made sure my look complimented his swag. In spite of his abusiveness, which soon reared its ugly head, he was always so proud to show me off to his friends and family, and he took me everywhere. Just like Parenn with the tennis and violin lessons, Sam exposed me to things I wasn’t use to. He was big on taking me to clubs, basketball and football games. We always sat in the VIP section or the Club box everywhere we went. Yes, it was fun and exciting but—unlike with my Godfather, Parenn—the man, and our relationship, was all surface. What we projected in public was the complete opposite of what was happening behind closed doors.

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After what seemed like forever sitting alone in that car with my news, I eventually got up the nerve to share it with Momma. But only the news of the doctor’s prescribed bed rest, not the bigger truth.

During my bed rest season I stayed in momma’s room. She had cousins from Haiti staying in my old bedroom while helping them to get settled here in the States. She loved Sam to visit me, and she showered him with love. But she knew there had to be a reason I didn’t want to stay with him during this most difficult time. She never asked questions, though.

When Sam stopped by, my parents would entertain him with good old Haitian political talk and, even better, homemade Haitian food, something that was missing in his fast paced high roller lifestyle. He ate it up like candy and would forget about the problems that lay between us. He brought me and Annie gifts: matching two karat diamond earrings, and matching mommy and daughter outfits that we could wear together once the baby arrived. It was in times like that that Sam reminded me once again of Parenn, and I prayed for his devilish ways to go away. The more I prayed, though, the more I found out who the real Sam was.

A month didn’t go by without a fight. It happened mostly when he thought I was being disobedient. Once a month I allowed myself a day out to run errands: health insurance stuff, doctor visits, the welfare office (which I did behind Sam’s back), housing, life! I would stop by the house I shared with Sam and the vibe would often be wrong. Of course, I would say something and he would erupt into loud arguing and fighting. I knew our future time together would be short.

During the 9th month of my pregnancy I was surprised I had actually made it, and decided to take it easy. Every time I got the urge to leave Momma’s room, the framed picture of Psalm 46:10 on Momma’s bedroom door, saying Be still and know that I am God would stop me. Being able to follow that instruction was a blessing. I felt guided by that quote all the way through my ninth month. When I found out about the “other” girl in Sam’s life, I was still. I was still, too, when I found out he was a notorious drug dealer; and even more still when I found out he had two other children with another woman. I was still enough to map out the rest of my life, and it didn’t include his crazy ass!
My plan was set: I would go into action as soon as I healed from the C-Section. The high risk pregnancy that my doctor feared would be premature was now 21 days overdue. During my extra days of pregnancy, I read a story by Maya Angelou about her son who had been in a car accident in Africa. His friend, Amari, and Amari’s family, had helped Maya’s son recover in their home. I thought of how such a beautiful act of kindness had turned friends into family. It was a story of true family, and healing—something I insisted the coming period in my life would have to be about. After searching for the meaning of the name, I knew it was a perfect fit. Amari is of African origin and had several meanings, but the one that would fit my son was “strong & eternally lovely.” He had to be strong to have withstood all the fighting and arguing his dad and I did during his time in my womb. I changed the spelling to reflect the way my parents would say it, Omari. And on a refreshingly cool April day, after a long hard winter, Omari Sam came into this world.

Of course, there was to be a speed bump in my departure plan. No more than a few days after I was out of the hospital, Sam came by requesting that I give our relationship a life line. His aunt Sen, in Haiti, who raised him, caring for him while his mother was in the States, was on her death bed—it didn’t look like she would make it. His aunt’s one wish was to see Sam again before things got really bad. She had no children of her own and she was so close to Sam that our daughter was named after her. He said there was no way his aunt could die without seeing his wife, her own namesake, and their new baby boy. He knew my commitment to family and that I would agree to go. In less than two weeks I was flying to Haiti with my daughter Annie, and our three week old baby, Omari.
My first trip to Port au Prince was the best, and most eye-opening, trip I’d ever taken. I wished I had visited it while growing up. It would have kept me more aware of my roots, and constantly aware of how blessed I was to be an American.

Prior to visiting Haiti, I’d only heard of a horrible place of dirt, poverty, lies and deceit; of people walking the streets aimlessly looking for an escape, whether it was by pan-handling, robbing, stealing, or selling mangos by the side of a dirt road. My perception wasn’t only from the pictures I’d seen on television but from stories I heard growing up: stories of barrels from the U.S. filled with food, clothes and electronics stolen from the port, as if they’d never been sent. We would often send a barrel, it would reach the port and our relatives there would be called to come get it. Since many of our relatives lived so far from the city, it took them close to a week to get to the port. And when they got there, they would find no barrel or else they would find a fake signature from someone who had picked it up days before.

When I walked out of the airport, I wasn’t prepared for the many beautiful shades of black, brown and even white that I saw waiting for the arrivals of their loved ones. The darker their skin tone, the more captivated I was. As someone who suffered skin issues from acne to eczema most of my life, I couldn’t understand how they got their skin to be so smooth. My mother had a very fair complexion with hazel eyes and “nice” hair. She didn’t need a perm to make it straight like I did. Before visiting Haiti, I thought she must be one of a kind. I wondered why my parents didn’t introduce us to Haiti before, but I was glad Sam brought me to my ancestral home. I was in love!

I had been a nervous wreck on the flight, and curious about the people headed there. There were white people on the plane and when I would speak English to them, they would respond in French... first reality check! Landing in Haiti was another experience in itself. The heat – I could literally see the heat rising from the ground. I felt like I had just stepped onto the sun itself. The clattering of makeshift cars and bus type vehicles waiting to carry loved ones into the mountains. The crowds of people
walking with bundles around their waist and buckets of water stacked up high on top of their heads. It all amazed me! People were selling every-
thing from paintings to mangos on the side of the road. The beauty and intensity of it all put me on an emotional roller coaster.

Before boarding the plane in New York, my husband had asked me for some money to buy something. I gave him everything I had. He then asked if I had any more. I said, “No, you got it all.” He said, “Okay I’ll be back.” I thought it was odd that he left and returned with nothing. It didn’t bother me until we were at the Port au Prince airport walking past a lady with no shirt and one arm, breast-feeding a naked infant. No one seemed bothered by any of it but I was stunned. The lady asked me if I had any money and when I went to reach for my pocket book, I realized I had nothing. I looked at my husband. He said, “Exactly why I emptied you out before we got here. Keep walking and make no eye contact with anyone.” Now I was scared.

We were rushed off by a sharply dressed older gentleman with nice shoes. I was curious as to how he kept his shoes so darn clean because we were literally walking through a cloud of dust. We were scurried away into a Mercedes SUV with our luggage, which was plentiful traveling with two children. I look back now and shake my head at the young Diva I was at the time—one suitcase contained shoes alone! We left all that chaos in the dust, and drove off to Pétionville. I can vividly remember that drive: passing the faces of extreme poverty as we drove past the shanty towns and makeshift villages. Driving around sharp curves and up steep hills was the scariest thing for me. I closed my eyes and went into prayer, as I was taught to do when situations were out of my hands. I would slowly open my eyes to see the beautiful scenery. Before long, the speed and reckless driving brought me right back to tightly shut eyes and prayer! When the driver slowed down I felt comfortable looking around. But I felt like someone had knocked the breath out of me. As the journey progressed, the homes looked more like colorful paintings and the people looked happy and well off. We were clearly in the “bourgeois” part of town, and I loved every minute of it! We pulled up to the beautiful dream home of my mother-in-law, and a crowd of people confronted us. My mother-in-law greeted me with a few kisses and then took the children. Her maids took the luggage.
“You have reservations at the restaurant in town,” she said. “You’ll be late if you come in to get comfortable. Go now and return later to relax. Leave the children; they’ll be fine”. My husband and I got back into the car and drove off to dine in tip top fashion. The stark contrast between shanty towns and mansions and eating at one of the nicest restaurants I’d ever been to, was completely mind boggling. I knew I was in for the experience of my life!

After eating, we got up to leave the restaurant when two men who’d been watching us through our entire meal, ran to our plates to finish off our scraps. This was the first of many situations that made me increasingly lose my appetite for the rest of the trip.

On the way back, we went to a town called Thomasinn (a suburb of Pétionville) to visit Aunt Sen. My mother-in-law and the kids were already there. The hospital was clean, but families had to pay for their own nurse to stay with the patient. The patient’s family was responsible for the daily food, clothes and linen during the hospital stay. They called this the best hospital at the time. I was losing my mind. This was very sad knowing the type of medical care we have in the States and knowing this woman was probably dying because of the lack of care they have in Haiti. Aunt Sen was beautifully pleasant. She went on and on about how beautiful I was and how Annie Sen was going to be a handful and for us to prepare ourselves (and, 18 years later, I can tell you she was not lying!). Ms. Sen thanked me for coming even though she was very weak and could barely talk. She shared a few childhood stories about Sam and how much she loved him. Over and over again, she thanked us for making the trip. I wish I had had more time with her. If she was here now she would be the one I would call to complain about Omari and ask for prayers. Prior to my time in Haiti, I heard that Ms. Sen and Sam’s gramma were Mambos (Voodoo priestesses). People would pay top dollar to them to make a person go away or to help them get well from an illness. Sam’s gramma was no longer with us and now it looked like Sen was on her way to be with her.

After a few hours of talking and praying, we were on our way back to Pétionville, to this beautiful house built for a queen! This was the house I’d been hearing about since I met Sam. He said his mother initially made each of her three sons give her about $10,000, and she continued to get money from each of them. She said that if they were going to sell drugs
and not remain in school, in order to stay in her house they’d have to pay for a house to be built in Haiti. She said that that lifestyle would get them put in jail, killed, or deported. And if they were going to be deported, they might as well have a nice house in Haiti to live in. That Sandy, Sam’s mom, was something else!

A few days later, we were in downtown Pétionville, where the city was buzzing with the have and have-nots all mixed up together. There was excitement in the air because Sweet Micky (the current president of Haiti) was going to be performing and everyone was preparing for the big show. Sweet Micky was Sam’s all-time favorite singer, so of course we were going. Sweet Micky was known for his use of profanities and for mixing his music with political values. He also wore crazy costumes when he performed, and drove the ladies wild! The men thought he was “The Man” because he would curse using both English and Creole showing he was it. Sweet Micky was Wyclef Jean’s buddy from the hip hop group, The Fugees. So it was rumored that Wyclef would be joining him at the last minute. We had to be there, so Sam got his mom on the case.

I had met Sandy only twice in the States and didn’t know her all that well. But my family knew her family from living in the same town back when they lived in Haiti. A dark skinned woman who stands about six feet tall and looks like she weighs about 300 pounds, she was where Sam got his swag. She dressed in beautiful dresses and pant/shirt sets, always neatly pressed. She was draped in gold jewelry, and her nails, feet and hair were always done. I was mesmerized at how she had Sam (and everyone around her for that matter!) in check. To top it all off, she had four maids—later I learned they were restavaks- child slaves. Also, there were all these other little kids running around, whom she was “taking care of.” Sam’s mom was obviously a powerful woman, and had connections. Needless to say, we were in for the Sweet Micky concert.

The concert hall looked more like a gymnasium then a concert venue. Those who were less fortunate and couldn’t afford tickets stood outside. They were not looking to get in, but watching the people who were going, asking for spare change or listening in on compliments about someone’s hairstyle or clothing. Even though we were having a lovely time, I was getting less and less comfortable. I’m used to security in venues with so many people. The guards at the concert were only kids between 14-18
years old. They carried guns and talked recklessly. I didn’t feel safe and wanted to go home. After the first few songs, we had the driver take us home.

Back home, Ms. Sandy was having her own little party, hosting friends and showing off her “American” grandchildren. My father had owned quite a few properties in Haiti along with a boutique that sold second-hand clothing. So Ms. Sandy invited my father’s tenants and employees over to meet us. Sandy was a troublemaker, or what I call a “shit starter.” She had lady friends that were involved with my dad and uncles in some kind of way... but it was all good. I represented my mom to the fullest. The house was buzzing with people asking all kinds of questions about my mom since she had never returned to Haiti after leaving in 1970. I spent my time talking to one of the boy maids, named Restley. He was 15 years old. There were many maids in the house, assigned to do chores from washing the floor to wiping the walls down. They were very young but with such hard labor and a hard life, they looked older. Ms. Sandy brought an extra boy in for our visit, so we wouldn’t feel stressed at all.

Restley shared with me how he came to be with Ms. Sandy. He was a “restavek.” Rester avec means “to stay with,” in French, which is why the term seems harmless. But these restaveks are treated worse than animals. Restley said when he was about eight years old, his father was looking for someone in the city to care for him in exchange for helping around the house. His parents couldn’t afford to keep their kids, so they looked for other families to take over. He didn’t dare say anything bad about Ms. Sandy but I could see the fear in his eyes when it looked like he might be resting rather than working. Restley said he made all the trips to the city and took care of Ms. Sandy’s other grandkids (another boy and girl from Sam’s older brother).

Restley said, “Ms. Sam, I don’t want to get in trouble. I must go clean the clothes.” I insisted he stay with me to keep me company. The people who would visit and all the maids loved getting me alone so they could ask me for things. One lady asked me if I had any underwear I didn’t need and that she could have. They made sure Ms. Sandy was nowhere around when they asked for such things. Ms. Sandy had everyone shook. Restley knew a little English and I had exhausted my Creole for the day. He was refreshing. Restley said Ms. Sandy pays for him to go to school but that he
would have to keep up the house work if she were going to continue paying for his education. I didn’t think that was too bad, until I started asking about the others in the house. They weren’t that fortunate. There was a young girl around 10 years old. She was the one who had to prepare the food. In the mornings she would ask us what we wanted to eat that day. She and Restley had to go to town every day to get the food and make sure it was prepared for our breakfast, lunch and dinner. On the third day, when we were finally eating our first meal in the house, she asked would I would like for dinner. I said I would like chicken. The little girl said okay and led me to a room at the side of the house. The room housed a bunch of chickens. She told me to pick one. When I did, she grabbed it and went to the back. I had no idea she was going to kill it herself, and skin it clean to prepare for cooking. I lost my appetite. From then on, I ate the avocados and mangos from the trees in her back yard.

Restley noticed my uneasiness and made special trips into town for me to get American food like cereal and chips. The more I sent him into town, the closer we got, and the more he shared with me about his life. He told me Sandy threatened to send him back to his parents if he wasn’t able to keep up with cleaning the entire house for her. He wanted to play soccer but he had to prioritize house-cleaning if she were going to continue paying for his school. He told me he knew he was the lucky one, that the others were not able to go to school, and had to tend to the kids and everyone in the household from sun up to sundown. He told me that Ms. Sandy had told him that I would be leaving Annie Sen and Omari behind, so that I could go home to the States and complete school. “So she will be looking for more help around the house with the extra two children.” After hearing about my supposed plans to leave my kids behind, my mind was set on getting out of Haiti and, once again, set on leaving Sam. I began to see that my in-laws and Sam had been tactfully working to keeping my children in Haiti all along. They had made me extra comfortable this entire trip, having me waited on hand-and-foot, and seeing to it that my children got the best of care.

As my departure from Haiti approached, Sandy started to tell me I could leave my kids and go home and finish school. She said they would be fine. But after seeing this restavek situation, I declined. It wasn’t a bad thing in their eyes because everyone in Haiti did it, but that’s where I
draw the line, acknowledging that I am American and could never leave my kids to such a life.

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All throughout my trip to Haiti I had gotten to meet cousins and other relatives that had meant so much to my parents. And I met people who knew them and looked up to them as honorable, good people. I had gone to see the movie theatre my parents sold in order to afford to bring a family of eight to the United States. And then there was the trip to the bank where my father was a loan officer. This man that I had known to be a janitor all my life—my father—was actually a big wig in Haiti. And I was told that everyone came to him when in need. If he couldn’t get them approved for a loan, he would personally lend them the money from his own pocket, and arrange a “pay-as-you-can” system with them. It felt good being told these stories by total strangers who would walk up to me and say, “You must be Anne Marie and Jean’s daughter; you look just like your mother!” They all had touching stories about my parents and how good they had been, and still were, to them. I was so proud to be their daughter. And, like never before, I had a sense of who I really was.

I thought about my upbringing. And despite having been raised in the projects we were pretty sheltered. I recalled Parenn again, too, and what it really meant for a man to be a good man. I never wanted my children to grow up with such a father figure as Sam. It was gut wrenching and disgusting to think of my kids possibly growing up with such a person as their father. Throughout the rest of my trip to this sad and beautiful country, I kept comparing Sam to the other men who had come from this landscape, and who were honorable and proud Haitian men: my dad and Parenn.

At that point I remember feeling ... knowing, I’m done!

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After that trip to Haiti, and my breakup with Sam, my relationship with Sandy soured. But I wasn’t afraid of her. I hadn’t known anything about Voodoo growing up. But I knew I was—and will always be—protected.
After the split, my mother would always say to me, “And don’t you worry about Voodoo because you are protected by the most high God. Nothing they do can harm you.” My parents and Parenn sustain me. And whenever I feel any kind of setback, I go right back to my memories of the safe haven that Momma’s bedroom was, and always will be.

Back in Boston, on a beautiful cloudless spring day, after that dark winter when I saw the light: the truth of being an abused woman in a bad marriage, I felt truly free. I was determined to raise my two beautiful children with the values I was raised on. And off to another job interview, I was determined to raise them, if I had to, on my own.
“Red Zone Redemption”
Lauren Doyle
It’s pitch black in the belly of the C130, as if you’re staring at the back of your eyelids wondering if it’s a dream. You’re fully aware but it doesn’t seem real. Soon it starts to feel more like a nightmare—one that has only just begun. Not one of those nightmares where you’re being chased or else free-falling; worse, you’re waiting endlessly in dark, silent space. Though no one can see me, I’m sure I maintain the appearance of calm. Inside, millions of thoughts race through my head, often colliding. What is Iraq going to be like? Am I trained enough for this? Is my daughter going to be okay? Is she going to miss me? Is she going to remember me? My daughter is only two years old, and I had already left her once before, when she was seven months old. I was gone for six months that time. Now I will be gone for 12 months, and that’s if I’m lucky. I am a 22 year old mother; what am I thinking? What if I don’t make it back home? My heart beats faster when the plane dips and some turbulence makes my body shake. We are not told where we currently fly over, or when we might arrive. You get there when you get there and you will not leave. After all, this isn’t a vacation. This is war.

Welcome to Iraq. Boots on ground; let the mission and the countdown begin. My Unit and I arrive at the building where we will be living, or at least sleeping... at least for now. It looks like a low budget hotel in Mexico. The building is U shaped, and all one-level. The windows are blown out and boarded up with plywood and sandbags. We already have our rooms assigned. The entire set up consists of one larger room split into four smaller rooms, including a common “living room” with a fridge. I take the few steps to my room and lay down my gear. The bullet holes in the walls are a bit unnerving, but what did I expect? Laura Ashley wallpaper? The first few days continue to be a culture shock. Everything is so different than what I’ve always been used to back home. Sitting in the living room I share with three other female soldiers, I can’t help but remember my childhood living room, a room filled with joy as well as pain, but, nonetheless—unlike this place—a room filled with life. After all, the living room is supposed to be where you live.

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I loved being crowded into that make-shift living room with Ma and my siblings: David, the oldest and 13 years my senior; Leanne, the oldest girl; Kay, the middle child; myself and Michael, “the baby” of the family. My two sisters and I are each a year apart from each other—“Irish Twins” as they say—and, although at times we’d pull each other’s hair out and call each other every hurtful name in the book, at the end of the day I loved them more than anything on earth and would do anything for them. Growing up in a seven-person working class family in Brookline, I rarely had a moment to myself. And I wouldn’t have had it any other way!

Sometimes I was jealous of friends’ homes, with their matching furniture and curtains, and wood that was all uniform. Some of my friends’ families had the latest television, while we had two different older models. Papa would use one heavy, wooden-framed broken television as a stand for the “newer” TV. Regardless of our furniture, though, I knew our living room was really alive. It was nothing to show off, but it was the centerpiece of our home and family—if you were in it, you knew you were family and had to learn to accept it all, the good with the bad.

I remember sitting on those couches—all different fabrics and patterns, some handed down from neighbors, some pulled from the surrounding residential dumpsters—and having the time of our lives. Each weekday after school we met in that living room to share our day. My siblings and Ma talked through our daily obstacles and offered each other advice. We watched music videos and recorded them on VHS—some I still have today. On weekends it was where we sang Karaoke, had dance battles and snuck a few drinks (OK, more than a few). And I remember always hoping in the back of my mind that the night wouldn’t turn into World War III, which only happened all too often, when our father came home late at night.

By day, our living room was always the chill spot, the hangout, a place where I could let loose and really bond with my family. By night, though, it became a “no fly” zone, the place where Papa always slept, since, for as far back as I can remember, my parents never slept in the same room. Whenever my father came home from his bar shift at the local VFW Post, we all avoided that living room at all cost. It seems so strange that a room could bring such polar opposite sets of memories and emotions—from
feelings of complete happiness and a sense of belonging, to feelings of fear, pain and utter sadness.

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During my tour in Iraq, I moved around quite a bit, never living in a F.O.B. (Forward Operating Base) too long before moving on to another camp and starting a new mission. I loved my job, though, as a Water Purification Specialist, helping people survive one drop at a time. I helped provide the base and the surrounding cities with potable water on demand. Also, we supplied water to the occasional hot tub and pool if the resources were plentiful, and if our sergeants allowed it. There were so many different camps, all in different areas. Some were calm and deserted, especially in the GREEN zone, a term used to describe an area that has very little hostile activity. A RED zone would be the opposite. And I was on my way to a Red Zone FOB: Al Ramadi a.k.a. “Junction City,” 30 miles from Fallujah.

When we got to the Red Zone, my squad and I fixed up a storage room to make it more accommodating for me. We had worked late and the next day I would enjoy sleeping in a bit on my cot. Daylight barely touched the sky when a loud thunderous boom shook the walls of my room filling the air with dust. I jumped from the cot, my heart in my throat. I threw my gear on—vest, helmet, ammo and weapon—and went to check on my sergeant in the next room. Another ear-shattering explosion; they were getting closer. My sergeant commanded me to go back to my room and wait. After a moment alone in my room, knowing there was no one there to judge me, I cried. I was afraid. I prayed for something I had never prayed for before: my life, my existence. That moment in the Red Zone, I was in the presence of nothing but the long shadows of a terrifying dawn. I was changed forever.

* * * * *

Hostility wasn’t new to me; it had been a constant presence in my life. “Hurry up! It’s already 9:55 pm!” I hollered at my sister from the back seat of her ’92 Pontiac Sunfire convertible. She was already speeding
down Centre Street, but my curfew was 10:00 pm. I knew that if I didn’t make it home in time there would be some real problems. “He ain’t even home; he’s probably at the bar.” Leanne said. “Lea, if I don’t get there by 10, Papa is gonna fuck me up. So shut up and get me there!” I shouted.

I still didn’t understand why I was the only one that had a curfew in my house. I was sixteen-years-old, not a baby. My sisters never had curfews. “You’re buggin’ for no reason. It’s Friday and he’s not worried about you. He’s at the bar,” Leanne insisted. We lived in the same house but I knew her relationship with my father was so different than mine.

It was 10:06pm when we pulled up to 7 Egmont Street. I hurried to apartment #5. I got to the door and put my key in. I opened the door slowly, like a secret agent, knowing good and well it most likely would make no difference. I tiptoed through a silent house toward the living room. I turned the corner and ...nothing. I exhaled as if I had been underwater for too long and had finally reached the surface for air.

Not even 30 seconds passed and the phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Where were you?” Papa said in a stern voice.

I needed to choose my words wisely. If I lied it could get worse. “I told Lea I needed to be home, I kept telling her to take me home. It was her fault....”

He cut me off ... “Your curfew is your responsibility. I’ll see you when I get home!”

When he hung up, I jumped right into action and started cleaning the house. Maybe it would help him forgive me for being late. First dishes and trash, and then I started cleaning my bedroom. The back door slammed and my chest got tight. I felt like I was underwater again, and might drown.

“Lauren!!” Papa yelled from the living room.

I always hated when we were alone in the house. If something bad happened, who would rescue me? I walked fast because I wanted to answer him as soon as possible. “Yes, Papa” I whispered.
The smell of alcohol poured out of him, filling the living room with the stench of a distillery. It consumed me and sent a chill up my spine. I stood at the corner of the couch next to the door to my mother’s bedroom. My head was down but I was still making eye contact with him. He was seated calmly on the couch but I knew he was unpredictable when he was drunk.

“How many times do I have to tell you?” he began.

As I went to respond he jumped to his feet and was inches from my face in a flash. I wanted to faint. I started mentally coaching myself to stay with it: Maintain eye contact or he’ll think you’re not listening or that you’re being disrespectful. Tears instantly streamed down my face. I wanted to apologize, I couldn’t even speak, I was so afraid. He was screaming now but I couldn’t even hear him. I just saw his enraged face in mine. Fear overcame me. Calm down, Lauren! Calm down, Lauren! I repeated in my head. He wants answers and you don’t want him to have to repeat himself.

“Answer me!” Papa shouted and specks of saliva hit my face.

He threw a punch, landing on the wall near my head. I was hysterically crying now, hyperventilating. Then he punched the wall on the other side of my head. I flinched, squeezing my eyes shut. That face of pure fury scared the living shit out of me. I felt as if the smell of vodka on his breath was poisoning me with disgust. My crying seemed to eventually exhaust him and he shouted a few warnings that I couldn’t even decipher, and then he dismissed me. I ran to my room and shut the door, dropping to my knees and breathing in relief once again. I couldn’t slow my crying but I knew I would have to get it under control or he would return... and who knows what would happen then.

About an hour passed and my father appeared at my bedroom door. He appeared to be calmer at this point. He wanted to talk to me now, as he always did after tearing into me. It was as if terrifying me to tears was not enough, now he was going to make me feel guilty for the whole thing. He brought up my birth, how scary it was, and how the whole the family cried for me and prayed for me to live. And after being spared death in my infancy, this was how I decided to act? I was ashamed, of course, as much as I knew it was not true. It hurt to think he believed it all, though, and felt this way about me. Then he lit up a cigarette and offered me one.
“No thank you, I don’t smoke.” I proclaimed, trying to sound as truthful as possible.

“Don’t bullshit me! Take the fucking cigarette.” He demanded. I took it and he lit it. I didn’t dare smoke it. I actually had been smoking for a year now, but I still refused to smoke in front of him. I guess I cared too much about what he thought of me. He continued to talk about how much he expected of me, and how difficult I made it for him and my mother. I began to cry again when he mentioned my mother. I loved her and I never wanted to make her life any harder. She did everything for us and for everyone else, running a homework center for neighborhood kids and a food pantry and distribution network in our area. All the while, Papa continued to ramble on, chain smoking and continually offering me cigarette after cigarette. I didn’t refuse them anymore, but it was all really starting to make me feel sick. He finally got tired of lecturing me and crying, and he left. Honestly, I can’t even remember what his last words were. I was just relieved he was going and that I could go back to hating him and cursing him in my mind.

If only it were that simple.

* * * * *

That morning many years later in the Red Zone, as I prayed for my life and to see my daughter again, I also thought back to my father. Papa had been a Lieutenant with the United States Navy and served in the Vietnam War. I knew that, in some way, I became a soldier to be a little closer to him. I suddenly wanted to understand him better. Why he was the way he was? What was his story? Did he feel the terror I was feeling now, as the explosions got closer? This man that raised me, disciplined me, and wanted me, more than anything, to be strong in a very tough and painful world. I freely let more tears flow. For me, for Papa, and for all soldiers of war who ever felt they had to keep them hidden.

* * * * *

My memories of that big, loud, fun and sometimes terrifying, living room on 7 Egmont Street, are slowly fading. My heart yearns to go back
and to see it all as an adult with some years and experience under my belt. And I wish I could bring my daughter, to share with her every bit of it, so she might understand why my love for her is so strong—the joy and pain that that love and nurturing comes from.

I didn’t really know Papa. Not entirely anyway. And now I never will. He passed away on April 8, 2001. His physical, mental and emotional suffering—which he never, ever talked about, but which I now know in every fiber of my being, as a soldier and as a daughter—was finally over. He suffered with alcoholism for most of his life. I don’t think I gave my father enough credit, or understood him. If only I could sit down and talk to him again.

I have learned to forgive my father. I don’t feel that the way I was treated was right. I just accept that we all deal differently—not better or worse—with the pressures of parenting, of marriage, of life... And of war. Despite my father’s flaws, I will continue to learn from him well beyond his years on this earth. I know that, as more years go by, I will begin to understand him even more, and that this, too, will nurture my life and, ultimately, the life of my daughter. As a veteran, I know the toll that war and hazardous environments can have on your mental and emotional stability; and unlike Papa, I know that seeking help is necessary and does not make us less strong. I just wish my father had known this.

Excellence is never an accident. It is always the result of high intention, sincere effort, and intelligent execution; it represents the wise choice of many alternatives - choice, not chance, and determines your destiny.

— Aristotle
The sun peeked through the curtains as I lay still in bed, eyes wide open, excited for the new day. Wrapped up in the warmth of my cozy bedroom it was hard to believe we had moved into the third floor apartment on Ceylon Street only six months ago. I hated the place when I first saw it—the paint was chipped and the smell of mildew filled the air. But after a fresh coat of paint, some scrubbing and decorating, I learned to love it. After all, it was within walking distance of my school, and there was a corner store nearby that sold penny candy. It was also close to Columbia Road, where I hung out with my twin sister and our cousin—sometimes playing Double Dutch, but, more often, flirting with boys or gossiping on the front stoop. At the beginning of my Eighth Grade year, it felt good to have a place to call home and it looked like we might be staying for a while.

I had no clue that would be the last time I would wake up to the morning sun in that room.

The day started like any other. It was an October morning and I could feel the autumn draft filling the house, so it took me a while before I finally got out of bed for school. I liked the fact that my sister, with whom I shared a room, always left the house before I got up. For a few brief moments each morning the bedroom was all mine, and I didn’t have to rush to get out of the bathroom. As usual I spent about an hour in the mirror, curling my hair into spirals that sat high on my head like a crown. And after each and every curl was set in its place, I was off.

The school day dragged on as usual. I gossiped with my friends about who was dating whom while pretending to pay attention in class. After school I decided to take the long way home. I was in no rush, and the fall breeze was refreshing. I walked to the gas station on the corner of Blue Hill Ave and Quincy Street to buy a bag of chips and then walked slowly down Quincy Street to Ceylon Street, kicking the fallen leaves—not a care in the world.

Entering the house I didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary. My mother was on the phone complaining about how broke she was and how much she hated my father who had just gotten married a month prior. She
cursed the day she'd met him and joked about leaving us on his doorstep. I paid no attention to her while making myself a fried bologna sandwich. My sister wouldn’t be home for another hour, and I looked forward to a nap while I might still have the bedroom all to myself.

I don’t know how long I slept but I woke up to a huge commotion—the house filled with strangers moving furniture. I looked up and saw my sister sitting on the edge of her bed with a blank stare on her face. I asked her what was going on and she said emotionless, “Ma’s packing everything up and dropping us off at Daddy’s house.” I thought I had to be dreaming; I lay there for a while before it really sank in. For many years I had heard her say that she was tired of struggling with me and my sister while he lived carefree. But I had never thought she’d actually act on her threats of leaving us on his doorstep.

My mother had a wild look in her eyes as she screamed at us for “just sitting there.” "Start packing this shit!” She said, "We don’t have all night!” I hurried and started throwing everything I owned into trash bags while strangers carried my bed past me. Looking out of the window, I thought the awaiting pick-up truck looked as if it couldn’t possibly hold all those dreams of being home—dreams that, if only for a moment, had become as certain to me as that morning’s sunrise. I was heartbroken.

"How could she just throw us away like trash? I wondered. Is it because she wants to live alone with her new boyfriend and we’re just in the way? My mind raced as I watched my mother sell to neighbors everything that couldn’t fit into the back of that truck.

We had moved plenty before. But this time was different. My heart sank with that day's waning sun, as we drove up to the neat little white house with its manicured lawn. Something inside me died that day and I was sure that life would never be the same. I knew this would never be home, and I wondered if I would ever be home again. If my mother had only known the agony her decision brought, I don’t think she would have driven off that evening, leaving us to watch that emptied truck ride off into the sunset.

Not long after that day I became rebellious. Those closest to me sometimes said they didn’t even recognize me anymore. My actions were
fueled by anger and resentment; I was mad at the world and I had a chip on my shoulder. And it wasn’t long before I didn’t even recognize myself...

I’ll never forget the day I found out I was pregnant. Instead of being a carefree teenage girl, I was preparing to bring a child into my mess of a life. Soon, though, my growing belly became my point of focus. It was all I had, I figured, and I became determined to transform my reality and make this baby the answer to all my problems. It was a huge responsibility to put on a child that wasn’t even born yet; but this baby was going to be my savior, I decided, and make all my tears disappear. For once I would be loved unconditionally.

Suddenly I was ecstatic about becoming a mother, though hiding my pregnancy at school became exhausting. My classmates’ brutal taunts—and the cruel digs from strangers who didn’t even know me—broke my heart daily. I started to wear oversized men’s clothes to conceal my baby bump. But nothing worked—the more I tried to hide it the more I stood out. Eventually, I left and had to be home-schooled. As weeks turned to months and my due date started to approach, my forced joy and anticipation was increasingly choked by fear and anxiety. When you couple that with puberty and hormonal changes caused by the pregnancy? Well, it’s safe to say that I was an absolute wreck.

I had to ‘fess up to myself... I have no idea what to do with a baby. I had never changed a diaper, warmed a bottle, and had never even babysat a child under the age of three. In my naive way of thinking I had assumed that these skills would just somehow come to me once the baby was born. Little did I know, that couldn’t be further from the truth.

But when my son arrived I was soothed by his tenderness. The most beautiful baby I had ever laid eyes on, my heart was full of love and wonder! He was a fighter from the beginning and his cries pierced me as I slowly began to learn his rhythms. I eventually became an expert at making bottles, changing diapers and comforting a cranky child simultaneously. I had no choice. But I soon found out there was no such thing as
being an “expert” at the rest of the work—only trials, mistakes, more trials, and doing my best to never just give up. Lord knows, I had felt the impact of a parent giving up.

* * * * *

It’s hard to believe that eighteen years have gone by. My baby has grown into a young man and he has since been joined by a younger brother. I would be lying if I said I was a perfect mother because I know that I wasn’t. But I tried with all my might to give my children everything they needed and a whole lot of what they wanted. More than anything, I have tried my best to make sure they would have a sense of home—something I have valued above all else since that evening when my mother drove into descending darkness, a night that felt as if it could swallow up my entire life.

If I would have let it.

Today I lie in my bedroom and can’t help but look back to that fateful day. I’m filled with joy and thanksgiving for having gotten back to this place—the place I have always wanted to be: home. In this room I’ve nursed my babies and rocked them gently to sleep surrounded by comfort and peace. I’ve consoled them in the warmth of my room when the pains of childhood are just too much. I’ve chased their demons and wiped away tears that always make my heart want to break. I do all I can to turn frowns into smiles without coming undone myself.

My room is my sanctuary. My decor’s bright shades of yellow, orange, pink and turquoise transport me to a tropical island where the water is crystal clear and worries are not allowed. Carefully selected artwork reveals my deep-rooted longing for the land of my ancestors whose blood courses through my veins. The smell of cinnamon and vanilla fills the air with pure delight and soothes my weary soul. When things are going my
way, I even get to fill my room with joy and laughter. I turn up the volume and shake my hips to my favorite reggae beat.

Nothing takes place in this room without my permission, and no one enters without an invitation. I make plans for my future within these four walls and dream of days to come. I sit in silence and ponder my life’s questions while reminiscing on days long gone. This temple is where my dreams unfold like visions upon every night’s descent, enveloping me in strength at every break of day. When I walk out of this room I know I'll be good to myself and will never again be a victim. From here I feel I can control what happens in my life. From here I create for myself the stability of home that I thought I would never ever have.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Crittenton Women’s Union would like to thank:

Michael Patrick MacDonald, and his mother, Helen (MacDonald) King, for their inspiration, mentorship, and thoughtful attention to these authors and their personal truths.

Chelsea Sedani, for expertly guiding the project from vision to execution.

Kathryn Doyle, Jacqueline McMahon, and Brenda Stone-Riley for their careful editing and tireless coordination.

Our authors, Lauretta, Pamala, Anne, Lauren, and Jennifer, for reaching deep within and sharing with us.

The staff members of CWU’s Career Family Opportunity and Woman to Woman programs, who have worked with our authors as they make strides in their journeys toward economic independence.