

1. **Enter the Apology.** *Apologia* is more precise--in Greek: ἀπολογία. A speech in defense. Apologia doesn't evolve into an apology--expression of remorse or sorrow--until the sixteenth-century. The latest evolution of the word implies inferiority complex as well--she was a sad apology for a mother. Regret, defense, Plato's Socratic masterpiece. Love means never having to say you're sorry. Love is nothing but one apology after another. Especially maternal love.

2. **Enter Gaia.** Earth mother. Produced the Titans with Uranus, who was technically her son and consort. Uranus never stops being funny. And yet we pick on poor Jocasta for her "oops" moment with son, Oedipus. I'm no Earth Mother. I bore no Titans. I didn't accidentally have sex with my son after he killed my husband. None of that happened. And all of that happened. Our archetypal mothers haunt us as much as our womb mothers. As an unmothered mother, I seek guidance from etymology, tradition and myth, VH1's *Behind the Music*, Mother Goose, Olivia Walton, Andy's mom in *Toy Story*, and divine intervention.

3. **Enter the daemon.** The classical definition of a Daemon (in Plato's Greek: daimon) is a quasi-divine helpmate. They're not the malicious devils that Christian¹ etymology handed down. Western tradition turned *daemons* into *demons* because there was no room for them at the inn, inhabited, as it was, by shrill angels heard on high and three disoriented astrologists from the East. Christians are as addicted to their dualisms as suburbanites are to their opioids: pain/numbness, good/bad, black/white, God/Satan, angel/demon. Daemons disrupt the dichotomy between good and bad, like Batman, only more dynamic.

4. **Enter Eve.** Eve hooked up with wisdom in the guise of a serpent one fateful day in the garden and they called it evil. Note Genesis 3: the serpent was the most *cunning* of all the animals God had made. The serpent is not Satan—it's just some wiley creation of God. *Maybe the serpent was transitioning?* Note also:

¹ Western Christianity, not to be confused with actual followers of the enlightened first century rabbi from Nazareth, botched quite a few great ideas. The list is exhaustive, but includes: evergreens, the solstice, allegory, Judaism, Jesus, October through December, non-virginal mothers, and daemons.

the serpent wasn't wrong. Their eyes were opened and they *were* like God. That's just good information is what that is.

5. **Enter Socrates.** Socrates' daemon cooperated with him throughout his career; see the *Apology*. A mysterious force from his childhood that helped him discern. A divine gift from the Oracle. It was a still small voice. Like a muse. Divine presence. Socrates was about to leave one day, Plato notes in *Euthydemus*, but his daemon told him to sit back down and wait. So Socrates sat. Waited. And Western civilization was all the better for it.

6. **Enter Dominique.** My daemon's name is Dominique. They're transgendered and, like a less nefarious Legion, they like third person plural pronouns. They're a cross between RuPaul and John Legiuzamo if they both transitioned. What's a nice trans daemon of color with a Latino accent doing with an Anglo chick like me? I keep them fat and happy in pinot noir and pretzels. Dominique and I do happy hour downtown at the snooty bar with over-priced pinot plus hot homemade pretzels with two sauces; they like the mustard sauce. I prefer spiced cheddar. If the regulars at the bar knew I was hooking up with Dominique, they might speed dial Father Joe, the priest down the street at the crabby Catholic Church. Not all Catholic churches in town are crabby—just the one downtown, full as it is of dualism's apologists. Sometimes, Dominique is comforting, downright chatty. We have chai tea on quiet snow days. Talk about the past. They know I grew up petrified of possession--*Exorcist* style. Split pea soup and all. Socrates described his daemon as a gift--a favor of the gods. Not like fear of split pea soup.

7. **Enter the Offspring.** Pregnancy is possession. Bloodied flesh pulled from my sliced belly. My self was peeled back--its withered skin sloughed off, snake-like, writhing beneath desert sands. The next inhaled breath filled my maternal lungs with unevaporated fear: anxiety, angst, despair, dread, unease, *bête noir*... Birth pierced more than my womb—it broke me into shattered glass—beautiful shards. But sometimes, I

wanted to run away. Sometimes, Fear (or maybe it was Wisdom, slithering like a Serpent) convinced me to hop the train to Chicago. I'm sorry. Not sorry.

8. **Enter Chagall.** Imagine some curious middle school kid hopping the train up from Joliet to the museum campus stop in Chicago and taking his little league bat to Chagall's *America* windows--a mother's story is blue, like Mary, ever virgin-blue. A cinematic story, cracked fragments of light and sand, meticulously designed by Chagall, a Russian Jewish storyteller. *Because all good mothering stories have a smart Jew in them somewhere.* After birth, women are blue. I was indigo. My mother-in-law said, it's just baby blues—"they go away." No. They just grow into ultraviolet adolescence.

9. **Enter the Sherpa.** I wanted to move to Tibet. Hang with the Sherpas until the blue shards stopped piercing. But Dominique held me back. Told me to sit. So—like Socrates—I sat, and waited and pondered these things in my heart, like Mary, only less virginal. Before birth, you're a mother-in-waiting. After birth, mothers become the heartbeat of the antidepressant movement.

Jesus, whatever happens, don't let this essay be filed under "chick lit." Chicklets lose their sweetness after thirty seconds of chewing.

10. **Enter Freud.** Chick clits confounded Freud, another creative Jew. He dismantled the daemon; renamed it *superego*. Because when a man writes it, it has to be super-sized. Took the metaphorical muse right out of it. Made it all about penis envy and clitoral inferiority and men being better at masturbation and fear of castration from mothers and Oedipal complexes.

11. **Enter Jocasta.** Poor Jocasta. Freud stole her tragedy and made it dirty. Bad Freud. Oedipus's mother-wife. The mother of all ill-fated mothers. She fought the future, "neither prophets nor oracles have any sure knowledge," she argued. Turns out, she was wrong. Her fate, twisted, rock hard. On accident. She took

matters into her own hands. No son marries his mom *on purpose* in Thebes, for godssakes. She'd have raised Oedipus to be strong, to defeat tyranny. Armed with his father Laius' wisdom (minus Laius' careless attraction to oracles), she'd have raised a son to come home on Sundays for roasted rump suppers. She'd have taught him to honor his father and mother, not kill and fuck them. She'd have raised Oedipus to be a sensitive lover, the kind any daughter-in-law would be proud to ~~bed~~ wed. Jocasta wanted to kick back with her men, after their long day of fending off Spartans. Oedipus would have been ardent, hard, persistent. But, fate mocks every mother's best intention and evolution's de-generative tale landed Jocasta in the shit pile of tragic dead moms. And yet, Freud picked this myth, this tragic narrative as the seed of psychological vocabulary. We don't call the relationship between a son's phallus and his mother the Jesus complex, or the Agamemnon complex, or the Krishna complex, or the name-your-mythological figure complex. No. Oedipus inadvertently marries his mom and centuries later, Freud made a killing off it. It was just a fucking accident on the road.

12. Enter Pascal. Pascal's Wager is a solid bet for parents living in fear of fate screwing you over like it did to Jocasta and Laius. Since we don't know what we don't know and we don't know what we do know, best to hedge your bets wisely. Believe all of it. Meditate. Make a date with your daemon. Practice breathing in the present moment through the left nostril. Then the right. Sit up straight so the chakras are ignited and aligned. Om. Read Tarot for help.² Chant to Green Tara: Om Tara Tuttare Ture Soha. Hail Mary, Full of Grace. Five prostrations. Awaken the Kundalini. Lie flat on the ground to contact spirit animal (mine is, without question, a white-headed capuchin monkey). Sit atop Thomas Merton's grave at Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky and read him Robert Lax's later poetry. Study the notes on the Heart Sutra from the Dalai Lama's visit to Bloomington, Indiana from 2010. Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, Have Mercy on Me, A Sinner. Subscribe to Tricycle's film festival. Listen to Tami Simon's *Sounds True*

² The Queen of Cups is my bitch.

podcast. Buy a bag of healing crystals and sacred stones.³ I mean, it may just be a bag of rocks. But remember: you're hedging your bets. Only, I don't remember which rock cleanses guilt; it's probably one of the green ones. Or maybe it's baby blue.

13. **Enter the *Pietà* at Exit 212.** Mary's face has been described as "aloof" by Renaissance art critics studying the Vatican's treasured Michelangelo marble. She's not aloof; she's transparent. Art critics haven't lost a son to indifferent Romans or to demons. They haven't taken a son down from a cross--or been with Exit 212's grieving mother, lying in fetal position atop her son's unfinished grave across from the 50-yard line, with topsoil marked by her son's artifacts: a football, his senior prom photo, an American flag, and a crumpled football cleat. When a neighbor loses a son to heroin at Exit 212, fear goes viral, floats with the pollen, amidst the acrid smell of corn syrup waste from the nearby Staley processing plant. It sticks to you. Like Venom Symbiote. She screamed out on Facebook:

"Nooooooooo, Nooooooooo, Nooooooooo!"

Our town heard the agony piercing her February tears as they turned to snow crystals.

This won't happen to my sons, right? I thought. I feared. If it could happen to her....

My house sits a block behind the funeral home. I gazed for hours from behind my frosted windows the night of the visitation, watching stunned family trickle in on a soggy Thursday in February. I was scared to go because her fresh grief might cling to me, Venom-like, use me as a host, feed on my fear. Her teen son was alive the Sunday before, grief unconsummated, unborn. Addiction is a nimble malicious demon, possesses prairie children with swift precision. I arrived late to the visitation. She was downstairs, barely touching the ham salad sliders provided by the Altar and Rosary Society. She must be starving, I thought. I waited for her to come upstairs. I had no comfort.

³ I lost the guide explaining the function of the sacred stones.

“This sucks. It just sucks⁴,” she said, holding me. Staring right through me. She wasn’t aloof. She was Transparent. I hugged her tight. Felt Venom’s grip.

“It does suck.” I sat next to her son’s red-headed Grandmother, watching his old high school football highlights. He looked like a resin statue lying in his casket; any unfinished son can get possessed by the junk.....*not mine?*

14. **Enter the Hangman.** I called our 16-year old son down to dinner. He wouldn’t come. I trudged upstairs to get him. His eyes dilated with panic, staring at his baby blue bed sheets. My heart sank in fear.

“Don’t you see him?” he asked me, transparent.

“Who? Daddy? Yes. He’s right behind me,” I said, looking back at my husband in the doorway.

“What’s the matter?” asked my husband.

“I can’t get out of bed. There might be a man hanging himself outside my room,” my son said.

(panic panic panic pan-ick panic panic panic panic pan-ich)

“No, honey, there’s no one in the hall,” I replied, calmly. Then, trying to recall what movie moms ask in these situations, I asked my son if he took anything.

“What did you take?” I looked for track marks.⁵ Because no one tells you what to expect when your son’s having a delusion. Or a psychotic break.⁶

“I can’t leave. I smell blood. My blood,” my son continued.

“Son, did you take anything?” my husband asked, unleashing a preternaturally calm paternal voice.

“No. I promise. Nothing. I swear. But I’m scared I’m going to drown in my own blood,” he said.

⁴ “Suck” has well over twenty meanings before even getting to the myriad slang connotations. When the mother of an unfinished son uses it at his visitation, the definition is “the elimination of rational thought and words through the immeasurable suction created in the time-space continuum by grief.”

⁵ I haven’t the vaguest idea what heroin track marks look like. Do they resemble my son’s freckles? The ones he shares with his dad?

⁶ I also have no idea what a psychotic break looks like; is it like Robin Williams in *The Fisher King*? Will he see flying fat people?

Do we take him to the hospital where he was born? What do we tell the emergency room people? My son thinks a man is hanging himself out in the hall and he smells his own blood. They'll think he's on drugs. They'll take him from us. They'll lock him up. They'll strap him to a bed and give him a One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest lobotomy.

they'll think i'm a bad mom

15. **Enter *Vanity Fair*.** Mother is the name for God on the lips and hearts of all children. That line is from *The Crow*. It's originally from Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. More people should read eighteenth-century novels, I reflected. Trying to remember quotes is what you do when you're searching the first available psych appointment for your son. Dominique nudged me back to the present moment, instructed me to hold my son in my lap and quiet my face, like Mary's. Transparent. They told me to wait. So I sat, holding William on my apologetic lap. I'msorryi'msorryimsorryimsorryimsorrysorrysorrysorrysorrysoitgoes.

16. **Enter *Psyche*.** *Two days later. Inside a sterile child psychiatrist's office, bright windows letting in rare winter sunlight. Woman Doctor has spent twenty minutes asking my son about his delusional vision and his general mental health. Including the nightmares that wake him at 2 a.m. fueled by prairie anxiety.*

WOMAN DOCTOR (to me). So, tell me about your pregnancy. Was he your first?

ME. No, I had a miscarriage before this one.⁷

WOMAN DOCTOR (barely looking up from her computer). Were you depressed?

ME. About the miscarriage? Of course. Isn't everyone?⁸

WOMAN DOCTOR. How about during pregnancy? Any depression? Any drugs?

⁷ The other term medical professionals use for a miscarriage is a "spontaneous abortion." That's what they put on your chart. Spontaneous abortion. Miscarriage sounds careless. Spontaneous abortion has a nice malicious ring to it. In her seminal work (pun enforced), *The Second Sex*, early 20th century feminist Simone de Beauvoir adds to the guilt of miscarriage: "Constipation, diarrhea, and expulsion tendencies always express the same mixture of desire and anguish; the result is sometimes a miscarriage: almost all spontaneous miscarriages have a psychic origin." I blame Freud.

⁸ I didn't tell Woman Doctor that my miscarried, or spontaneously-aborted-baby, deepened my relationship with Dominique. Doctor might lock me up. First rule of daemons: never tell doctors about your daemon.

ME. Not really. No. Maybe a little pinot noir.

WOMAN DOCTOR. How about after? Any problems with postpartum depression?

ME (recalling desire to go to Tibet). Yea. Jesus. I'd say so. I wanted to be a Sherpa.

WOMAN DOCTOR (typing into the computer). You take anything? For the postpartum depression?

ME. No. I was scared. I was nursing my son and I didn't want to damage him with drugs.

WOMAN DOCTOR (typing into her computer). Any trouble with colic?

ME. Mine or his? (laughs). Oh, my god, yes. He screamed every evening between five and ten.

WOMAN DOCTOR (typing words, words, words). When did it stop?

ME. Obviously, it hasn't. (realizing Woman Doctor is not in the mood for humor.) The very day he turned six months old, February 22, 2001.

WOMAN DOCTOR (continues typing). Hmm. Ok. Postpartum depression. And colic. (type type type)

[Pause. Like a Pinter pause. More accurately, a Beckett pause.]

When your mother-mind is racing to locate someone else to blame for your son's psychosis, time warps, wraps back in on itself. (Note to self: see if Amazon sells shamanic drum kits. May need to add drumming to increase odds of winning Pascal's Wager.)

ME (turning to Dominique) Was that relevant? My postpartum depression? The colic? Did my son have a psychotic break in my womb, sixteen years ago? As he was unfolding inside of me? Was his fear of a man hanging himself out in the hallway already in the smell of my uterine blood? Is delusion imprinted on maternal DNA? Is my son going to wind up in the nuthouse? Or, worse, in Everyman's casket at a cold soggy funeral home with stale ham salad sliders from the Altar and Rosary Society ladies?

DOMINIQUE: They always blame the mother. Especially since, what's his name? The Jew with mother issues?

ME: Freud?

DOMINIQUE: No. The other one.

ME: Jesus?

(End of psychological assessment.)

WOMAN DOCTOR: Your son was probably just dehydrated. And depressed.

(Writes obligatory prescription for obligatory antidepressants.)

17. **Enter the Dream Catcher.** My son still can't sleep. Freud would say his "disturbing dreams cause a state of anxious wakefulness at night." I ask about the dreams. He ignores me. I fill in his adolescent distance with fear from my insufficient womb. One of his ex-girlfriends gave him four dream catchers, one for each corner of his room. One is earth-tone-green. One is royal blue. One is a dull, rusted orange. One's a bit rainbow-ish. Gay. Very gay. Gay like happy gay. At 16 he still leaves a light on when he sleeps. When he sleeps, where are the dreams floating? Dream catchers keep fear inside—or is it outside?—of their intricate web. I forget which. Freud wrote, "it cannot be denied that great self-control is needed to interpret one's dreams and to report them. One has to reveal oneself as the sole villain among all the noble souls with whom one shares the breath of life. Thus, I find it quite comprehensible that revenants should exist only as long as one wants them, and that they can be obliterated by a wish."⁹ Oh, that I could write an ode to Morpheus--an ode to obliterate my son's *revenants* with a wish. To sleep perchance to dream; there's the rub. The all in all is woven in a web of fear. *The destruction of the Oedipus complex is brought about by the threat of castration.*¹⁰

18. **Enter the Dead Mother.** It's been twenty years since I cradled my dying mother in her hospital room where she drowned in toxic piss, her inebriated kidneys suspended like Andres Serrano's crucifix. My mother died of fear.¹¹ She feared everything. Especially bridges. *Gephyrophobia*. From the Greek for

⁹ Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*. Great self-control is needed—nice use of passive voice.

¹⁰ Freud's *The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex*. I originally wrote something defensive about insisting that my son inform his psychiatrist that I'm not going to castrate him. Changed my mind. Maybe a little fear of castration is good for sons.

¹¹ Mother preferred Smirnoff's as her substance for drowning. Dominique and I have discovered that Grey Goose, or better still, North Shore vodka, distilled just up the road in Chicago, is a smoother way to drown.

bridge, *gephura*, fear of crossing and collapse, entrapped thin space on the shoulderless path hovering above water. *Gephyrophobes* may require accommodation to cross bridges. Google that shit. The Maryland Transportation Authority pays people to transport *gephyrophobes* across the Chesapeake Bay Bridge. In Michigan, *hundreds annually require accommodation from the Mackinac Bridge Authority*. Travelers are taxied between Michigan's humpbacked peninsulas. No one ferried my mother across the Mathews Bridge in her native Jacksonville. Turns out, Florida cares more about guns than *gephyrophobes*. *Some drivers may require a mild sedative or tranquilizer*; some may simply stay home, develop *anthropophobia*, drink screwdrivers, avoid crossings and people altogether. Maybe Mom was injected with fear-serum by a venomous jellyfish, squished between her toes while writing love letters from Ormond Beach to that boy her parents hated, despite him being a kid named Skip. Who hates a kid named Skip? She composed sweet pony-tail notes to Skip, years before desperate love letters to my dad's deception. Maybe *mellontikósophobia* killed her--Greek for fear of the future. (I made that one up. Thanks Google). By the end, she feared everything, even the mailbox. She hoarded red Dixie cups half-full of vodka, hidden behind the extra set of guest towels in her bathroom. Her mother hoarded Cool Whip containers. We hoard things to stave off fear. Charon himself ferried mom's Smirnoff-soaked soul across river Styx so she didn't have to drive herself. I'm grateful for his charity. If only she'd had her own Dominique. Mom was cremated in her Florida State sweatshirt, incinerated by Judas II--her second husband--who claims he spread her ashes on the warm grey sands of Ormond Beach, far from bridges. That's better than pushing up daisies I suppose--better to be ingested by toxic jellyfish in the Atlantic than peering off the side of a shoulderless bridge. She died before she could meet her grandsons. Before she could watch fear and regret slither between generations.

19. **Exit Beloved.** My son William is named after Shakespeare. His younger brother Andrew is named after Jesus' first disciple. My husband's name is Bryan, Celtic for "high" or "noble." Amy is French; it means

“beloved.” But in my experience, it means “daughter of fear.” I am afraid of possession. I am afraid of crossing bridges. I am afraid of my sons’ deaths. I am afraid for my sons’ futures. I am afraid of Venom clinging to mothers at exit 212. I am afraid of car travel for any trip over 36 miles. I am afraid of lead seeping into water like Flint. I am afraid of Virginia Woolf. I am afraid one son will knock up a girl and be a father too soon. I am afraid of heroin. And vodka. I am afraid of meth. And pot. And the Adderall the kid down the street sells. I am afraid of Hell. Not really.¹² I am afraid of Heaven. What if I have to sit at a heavenly banquet with Tammy Faye Bakker or a random Kardashian? I am afraid of jellyfish. I am afraid of deserts. I am afraid of swamps. But not mountains, like in Tibet, where the Sherpas live. I like prairies. I am afraid of ice caps melting. I am afraid pumpkin seeds will impregnate me and I’ll have to spontaneously abort. I am afraid of the Trump administration. I am afraid of getting crushed to death in a bounce house. I am afraid that what we think is prairie wind just might be a pissed off lady giant crushing houses in revenge for her giant husband’s death.¹³ I am afraid of endings. But not exits.

¹² But I am scared of Hell’s Half Acre in Wyoming. Woke up on the edge of it (literally) one summer on vacation with mother and Judas II. Scary.

¹³ See Stephen Sondheim. Remember, all good stories about mothers have a good Jewish storyteller in there somewhere.

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