

On the End of a Breeze

Or When Feminism Goes Slightly Awry©

By Rosalind Denise Reed

*"Love does not begin and end the way we seem to think it does. Love is a
battle: love is war; love is a growing up."*

James Baldwin

I recently went swimming in the Meramec River. Actually, I did little more than sit in its warm waters, but I loved the feel of the sun on my wet skin. It was a sweltering summer day in Missouri. The air was typically hot, almost stifling, and as muggy as the weather always was during the month of August. There was no breeze, no air moving around me. Just heat, and the water that flowed over my body felt more like a lukewarm bath. I was naked. I felt young and vigorous as I sat in the shallow waters on a rocky bed of gray and brown stones. I loved the rocks buried in the riverbed. Each time I came to the river, I took a few of them home, and they soon became a tactile reminder of how much I loved the Meramec, how I felt every time I sought its warm embrace. The river never failed to comfort me.

"Exactly what is it you do out here?" My best friend, Adrianna, once asked me. We had been swimming in the river all day during another, now distant summer.

"What do you mean?" I responded somewhat impatiently. I was leaning on one of those plastic blow up rings, the kind kids play with in swimming pools. I took a deep breath and shrugged. "I can breathe when I'm here."

“Is this where you pray?” She asked, looking around trying to make sense of my reverent fascination with the river, and why she allowed me to bully her into spending the day with me in the water.

“No,” I answered emphatically. “I never pray out here...ever! Besides, I hardly pray anymore. You know that. This place is sacred to me. Why spoil it with religious cynicism?”

“Your own cynicism?” She retorted, tossing her head because she already knew the answer. “Or everyone else’s?”

I turned over to float on my back, getting lost in the blue sky and white clouds above me. I looked at her, and said, “I’m not sure God exists. In fact, I’m quite sure He doesn’t exist. I suppose the answer to your question, Drie, is my cynicism. The blind faith of religious zealots offends me. The only person I have absolute belief in is myself, and I’m not ashamed of that.”

“What about me? I believe in God,” Adrianna reminded me, suddenly profoundly serious. Then, she asked the question I had been dreading all the years of our friendship. “Do you think I’m one of those ‘idiots’ you despise so much?”

“No,” I said. I smiled a little and gave her my most honest answer. “I don’t detest you. You’re my friend, and Adrianna, it’s your belief in God that will ultimately save me.”

I remembered that conversation as I sat in the water, looking back over the years, the good times, and the contemplative moments when we let our guard down and told each other everything. I was at the river now because I was consciously ending a chapter in my life, a long and arduous chapter that had lasted decades, and I was doing it without my best friend. I had come to the river to acknowledge the death of my

baby daughter, and for the first time in over twenty-nine years, there were no tears. Instead, I felt immense relief as acceptance quietly settled over me. Her memory was no longer tainted by overwhelming grief. Instead, I found myself cherishing the memory of a beautiful little girl who lived long enough for me to fall in love and give up nearly everything for her.

The affair between my daughter's father and me was not an epic love story, larger than life or filled with endless drama. Our story was quite ordinary. Both of us were aware, from the beginning, that our last chapter would not have a *happily ever after* ending. Our story should have gone to the grave with us. It would have, if not for the one and only time I cried for him. I knew him forty years by then. I was angry with him because I had just confessed a secret I kept from him since I was twenty-five years old, and he didn't react the way I wanted. In a genuine effort to purge him from every breath I drew, I sat down at my computer and began to write. In the wake of the *#MeToo Movement*, I explored my love for a man who, in nearly every way possible, was the wrong guy for me. He was married, lived in a faraway city, and though he consistently told me he loved me, I felt a tiny twinge in my stomach every time he said the words. Yet, he was the right guy for me. We were intellectual equals, shared almost identical political views, and came from similar black middle-class families. But as the words poured out of me in introspection, I stumbled upon a disquieting self-truth. The aspect of our affair that concerned me most was not that our relationship was morally wrong because he was a married man. I was infinitely more troubled by how cavalier we both were in the beginning, assuming no sexual responsibility for our relationship even though, like most affairs, it began with an undeniable sexual attraction.

He was six years older than me. At the point in his career when we met, he was a local celebrity in St. Louis. He was famous, but not that famous. He was several years into his marriage and lived his infidelity almost openly. I was in the beginning stages of a relationship of my own when I met him. I could have easily blamed him for the bubble where we existed. He was older than me and more sexually experienced. We worked at the same place, but we were not professional equals. The bubble where we existed had no real substance. It would eventually sink under the weight of diatribes and platitudes, and those awful silences men and women hear in each other's voices when neither was being truthful. I could have easily blamed him, but then, I would be lying. I fully took part in our sexual adventure because it was fun...until it wasn't fun anymore.

Long after the bubble deflated, I still called him occasionally. It was usually after I had been to the river, and all those feelings of loss and remorse for my daughter's memory came crashing down on me. I called because I needed to feel his presence, his connection in my life, but during those conversations, I remained silent. I couldn't bring myself to tell him the truth about what I was feeling, that I loved him, and he was oblivious. I think he thought I was stalking him. In reality, I was linked to him in a more profound, fundamental way which only complicated my growing need to eradicate him from my life. We had a child together who died and, yet our talks were painfully superficial. He had no genuine connection to our child because of my actions. How could I blame him for not responding appropriately when I never gave him the opportunity to respond appropriately?

But something else happened in those moments when I blurted out the truth, and perhaps that's why I finally told him. I was examining our relationship with a freshness I

had not felt in years. He was married when we met and was still married. I was relegated to a place in his life without definition. Even though I had entered the bubble willingly, in that moment of clarity I realized I never liked the way the bubble made me feel. Our relationship was too vast a departure from my maturing feminist ideals. I was suddenly drowning in my truth. I still loved him, but after the death of our baby, my love for him dictated much of what happened to me in the ensuing years. The truth was I young and stupid, and simply didn't know what to do with what I was feeling. So, I ran from him. I didn't stop running until the day I told him everything about our relationship and our baby from my perspective. I could not stay silent any longer because in that moment of deep anger I realized my struggle with our relationship was rooted solely in my being female. What I felt for him was, in fact, wrong because the relationship's dynamic made me feel archaically feminine and submissive.

I met him at work. He was walking past the general manager's office at one of our local television stations when he saw me through the partially opened door. He quickly retraced his steps and burst into the room. I leaned forward in my chair to get a better look at him. He said I intrigued him. His personality was big and colorful and charismatic. The attraction was primal, sexual, and hit me hard in the core of my womanhood. The frame of his body was tall, not muscular, but toned. I would later find out he was a cyclist, which explained the smooth definition of his long, lean legs and the sun-kissed tint of his light, black skin. He was very aware of his body and moved like a man confident in his own sexuality.

I was a 25-year-old single mother from Wisconsin. While I had met no one like him, I was not sexually naïve. Later that day, he found me outside the break room in the

building's basement. We talked for only a minute before we each concluded, on our own, that sex was inevitable.

“I am totally uninhibited,” I told him.

“We'll just have to find out how uninhabited you really are,” he teased, and for the first time, I heard his southern drawl whispered in my ear. “Look, you're blushing,” he laughed with approval as I felt my skin grow warm under his gaze feeling a dichotomy of embarrassment for wanting him and the longing that invaded my own thoughts.

I knew he was married when I went to bed with him. His wedding ring was blindingly beautiful. He did not talk about his wife, and I didn't ask. It was harmless fun. Who would know? It was close to midnight when he came to me that first time. I willingly gave myself to him without restraint. I expected the hardness of his body and, of course, he was a skilled and vigorous lover. He was also gentle. He treated my body with reverence, quietly acquiescing to me and my pleasure. Afterwards, I felt incredibly sated, but what we did not realize, either of us, was I gave him my heart on that scorching St. Louis night in my moonlit third-floor bedroom.

The consequences of that night were not immediate. I became pregnant over a decade later. By then, we were floating in and out of each other's lives, would occasionally have sex and then, move on. My life was extremely ordinary. I was with another man who would be in my life for nearly thirty years, raising our family with him. There was nothing glamorous about us, and for a while, I was happy. My daughter's father built a successful broadcasting career that included a very public persona. His credibility depended on his life being above reproach in a city that might as well have

been a million miles away. For a while after he left St. Louis, he only occasionally looked back, but I never blamed him for leaving or for having the career he wanted.

On October 15, 2017, Hollywood actress Alyssa Milano tweeted a request, “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted, write “Me Too” as a reply to this tweet.” After just one day, there were hundreds, even thousands of replies, comments, and retweets. Both women and men used social media to tell their personal stories. The *#MeToo Movement* took on the form in which we now know it, and sexual reckoning began.

My response to the *#MeToo Movement* was not to jump completely on the band wagon. I had one foot on the running board, but the other foot was planted firmly on the ground. I couldn’t explain my unease with *#MeToo*. Instead, I asked questions and read everything I could about the Movement. What did *#MeToo* mean to me? Did the Movement’s initiatives challenge or align with my own feminist views? Why was I so uncomfortable with women finally demanding sexual justice?

While my story appeared to be a square peg in the *#MeToo* narrative, there was a racial component that further complicated the issue for me. When I was in my late teens, I saw the rise of the women’s movement. However, the women I saw (Gloria Steinem, for example) making the rounds on the talk show circuit were all white. I was deeply embedded in my “I’m black and I’m proud” era, and the feminist message from black women such as Angela Davis and Florynce Kennedy was quite different. I saw the mainstream feminist movement as white women seeking to legitimize their privilege,

while black feminism sought to bring attention to the intersection between race and sexism in America.

Still, *#MeToo* allowed me to take an unflinching look at myself in retrospect. I allowed myself to recognize the tired lines of tethered limbo in my face. What was inside me that kept me attached to a love affair that should have ended long ago? He and I were only lingering in each other's lives. I was just beginning to comprehend how many of my beliefs about myself and my sexuality had gone disturbingly askew. I suddenly understood my uneasiness with *#MeToo*. Women were boldly coming forward, telling their stories, and exposing the misogynistic, xenophobic behavior of powerful, and not so powerful, men. While I applaud these women for their courage and conviction, the single-minded agenda of many of the young women speaking out under the *#MeToo* umbrella didn't appear to include women who were flawed, who struggled to make acceptable feminist choices. I was one of those women.

I didn't consciously accept responsibility for the sexual choices I made until after my daughter's death. Her father and I were young and in love. We romped and played together with lots of uninhibited laughter, and we talked about everything except the consequences of what we were doing. Social disapproval, irreparable hurt, or pregnancy were all possible results of our relationship, consequences we both ignored. I couldn't blame my behavior on drugs or alcohol because I didn't drink or use drugs. I couldn't claim sexual coercion because I was a willing participant in our affair. I became involved with this man, and over the years, I grew to love him unconditionally. Still, there was a side to our relationship that should have been troubling. He was cheating on his wife, which meant he was a liar. Cheaters were always lying to someone, but I couldn't

label him a liar without indicting myself because I was lying as much in my relationship. As a result, our honesty with each other became resolute, perhaps, because we were lying to everyone else.

It is these kinds of interactions between men and women, sexual agreements we enter as consenting adults that often prove challenging for *#MeToo*. Since the arrival of the Movement into the realm of public discourse, both women and men seem to understand they are treading in potentially explosive waters as we confront contemporary relations between the sexes. The emotional complexity of these discussions has often played out in public. The Kavanaugh Supreme Court hearings. The elevator confrontation on Capitol Hill between then-Senator (R-AZ) Jeff Flake and Ana Maria Archila Gualy, a sexual assault survivor. Wealthy, powerful men such as Harvey Weinstein and Bill Cosby have fallen, and may spend the rest of their lives in jail because of their sexual exploitation of women. Like any revolution, these clashes between women and men are palpable, predictable, and often necessary to force a shift in the way we think about sex, to move *#MeToo* forward.

But I still felt a disconnection from most of the movement's global dialog because my personal situation was not an example of feminist logic. The goals of *#MeToo* felt too singular. There simply didn't seem to be room for examination of the more sensitive behaviors that have always existed between the sexes, especially when the topic turned to female sexual responsibility.

When I sat down in front of my computer to begin this exercise in romantic exorcism, I didn't realize my own sexual accountability would come into question. The reasonable lens through which we should discuss sexual relations between men and

women is sexual accountability. If we, as women, are going to remain autonomous sexual beings, then it is more important than ever that we hold ourselves to the same sexual standard as the current fervor surrounding the behavior of men. We should accept responsibility, without hesitation, for our own sexual choices, and with the exclusion of rape, sexual assault, and coercion, acknowledge that sexual autonomy also includes a willingness to accept the consequences of those choices. The death of my baby will always be an excruciating reminder of how an unwillingness to accept sexual responsibility profoundly affected my life.

I am ashamed to admit the last thing on my mind when I met my daughter's father was accountability, which left space in my life for an affair that, if I'm honest, I have never once morally questioned. Condoms and birth control were not part of our time together, and the life we were creating remained, somehow, theoretical. By the time I became pregnant, we were a decade into the relationship. Our affair was nearing its natural conclusion. I only spoke about my little girl's existence and her subsequent death in vague terms. And he let me. I never held him responsible until decades later when I told him, in anger, everything about the baby that had been cradled deep inside me. By not holding him accountable for our child, I took away his opportunity to be responsible for his own sexual choices.

I didn't need God, or anybody else, to tell me about life. I saw it all around me along the river. Birds lifting their small bodies from their perches on the rocky cliffs to glide gracefully over the water. Beavers swimming efficiently upstream, and turtles, big

and small, taking their sweet time crawling along the shore. Frogs hopped in and out of the water, while coal-black tadpoles swam in shallow pools awaiting their own metamorphosis. Lush green trees lined the path of the river, silently standing guard as the clear water flowed past. The Meramec River was full of life, and on a clear day under the blue tint of the Missouri sky, it was beautiful.

The river was also a dangerous place. If one watched and really paid attention, death was just as abundant as life. The Algonquian Indian word for the Meramec was pronounced “mah-ah-mac,” which meant *waters of death*. Consider the hysterical squawking of a mama duck when a turtle pulled one of her ducklings down into the water to drown before eating it. Hawks swooped down from their high perches in the cliffs to pluck fish out of the water, or raccoons feasting on crayfish were all part of life on the river. One of the most terrifying events I ever witnessed on the river was when a man I did not know pulled a large catfish onto the deck of his boat, stabbed it in the head with a spear, and kicked it back into the water to rot. It was a lesson in life and death I never forgot. The animals and human beings had the fragile nature of our existence in common. There was always a natural predator lurking, waiting to pull its prey down into the depth of the water to drown. For most animals, their nemesis was likely another bigger, stronger animal. While so much of our human vulnerability was rooted in the idea of death, God and heaven. I saw God as just another word for a bigger, stronger animal. Life on the river was a system of interdependencies, where a mistake often cost a life, and sometimes, the resulting death was just too brutal to watch.

I stopped praying in my early teens. As my belief in God waned, I found I could meditate, find my balance at the river. I felt a deep, spiritual connection in the way the river ebbed and flowed: shallow in some places along its path and dangerously deep in others. Yet, the river streamed endlessly through time, easily adapting to the natural changes that came its way. Here, I reconciled my deepest angsts with unmitigated honesty. The river was a place that accepted me without judgment. When I was in the water, I felt complete freedom; something I had felt nowhere else. The river forgave my mistakes, even the ones I could not take back and some, I didn't want to take back.

In the aftermath of my daughter's death, I escaped to the river. My baby was born at 22 weeks' gestation. I was holding her defective and strangely perfect little body in my arms when she stopped breathing. She lived 41 hours, 16 minutes, and 28 seconds. Those numbers never made sense to me. There was no rhythm to them, nor were they the square root of some larger, more magnificent number. Math was the language of logic, but all I had were six random numbers indelibly etched on my brain, the aggregate of my daughter's entire life. Intellectually, I understood what happened. Her lungs had not developed enough to sustain her life outside my womb.

The silence in the delivery room was so heavy the air nearly crushed me. There was no ambient sound except for my heavy, labored breathing. Even the machines monitoring the baby and me were inaudible. My labor was nearly two days old. People moved around me in a faded gray blur. I was emotionally exhausted, but my senses were hyper-focused on what I did not hear. There was no laughter. No anticipation. No hope. The sounds that usually surrounded the birth of a healthy baby. And yet, the quiet was so loud my head pounded with almost blinding pain.

“Don’t push,” Dr. Tanner instructed.

I tried to stop my body from doing the work it was designed to do through sheer will. Every one of us in the room knew 22 weeks was too early for my baby to be born and survive. Dr. Tanner was my obstetrician. I knew him. I could tell from his worried expression he expected my worst fear, that my baby would be born dead or worse, near death. I cried out as another contraction spread quickly through my body. My feet strained against the stirrups of the birthing chair, and I tried to ignore everything nature was telling my body to do.

“Okay,” Dr. Tanner looked up at me. “Push.”

By then, I had three vaginal deliveries, and until forty-eight hours ago, I had no reason to think this baby would enter the world any differently. Each pregnancy, each birth, each child was unlike the others. The result was a baby I already loved because I was happiest in my motherhood. I imagined my baby would push her way into the universe, screaming indignation at being forced to leave the warm, protected space inside her mother’s body.

I pushed because nature dictated it, and my labor was abruptly over. That awful quietness seemed to grow on its own until it was large enough to fill every corner of the room. I knew the second my daughter came noiselessly out of my body. I sensed when she took her first breath, and her last breath on her own. I fell against the back of the birthing chair, shattered by fatigue. In that moment, my mind drifted back to the river. I recognized the pain of the mama duck when a turtle pulled one of her ducklings down into the depth of the water to drown. I allowed myself a moment to panic. Then calmness settled on me, and I became incredibly present in my daughter’s life. A

Christening gown. A priest. While I did not believe in God myself, some part of me could only imagine my daughter's soul in heaven. The silence stopped being so loud once I accepted the reality of my daughter's inevitable death, that I was alone in this. The time for grieving would come later. Calling her father just never occurred to me.

In the end, I sat in a rocking chair in the NICU holding my baby, with Adrianna at my side. I sang the lullaby Mary Magdalene sang to Jesus in the play *Jesus Christ Superstar*. My voice was soft and clear and off-key, but I loved the song. I was no singer, but that night, the words seemed appropriate. *"Try not get worried, try not to turn on to problems that upset you. Oh, don't you know everything's alright. Yes, everything's fine. And we want you to sleep well tonight. Let the world turn without you tonight. If we try, we'll get by, so forget all about us tonight."* This baby was my fourth child, the youngest. I had sung the lullaby to every one of my children and singing it now gave the situation a sense of normalcy. 41 hours, 16 minutes, and 28 seconds. In the short time my daughter lived, both she and her father changed the entire trajectory of my life.

I stood at the river's bend, knee deep in the water where the Meramec curved south toward the Mississippi Confluence. It was a cool and cloudy day, almost cold. My legs were nearly numb, and my bare feet hugged the rocks that lined the river's bed to keep me from falling against the current. The water moved swiftly, but not too swiftly.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Adrianna said to me, her voice rising above the sound of the river water splashing against the old dock where she stood. “You don’t have to do this.”

“Yes, I do,” I replied so softly she barely heard me. I twisted the top off the urn in my hands and tossed it to her. She caught it with the agility of someone who spent years playing softball.

“You should tell him,” She said. “You shouldn’t have to do this alone.”

“I’m not alone,” I responded. “I’ve got you and your God.”

“Okay.” She plopped down on the dock and waited for me. I knew she would not inject herself into my private grief, but I also knew she was studying me, waiting for me to show some sign of crazy. I was not having a mental breakdown. I may not have immediately shared my plans, but I knew what I wanted for my daughter before I left the hospital. I knew I was bringing her to the river.

I waded out further until I was standing in the middle of the water. It was still shallow there, but the rush of the current was stronger. The tadpoles and crayfish were hitting my legs and nipping at my skin. I barely felt them.

When I was satisfied with where I was in the river, I bent over with the mouth of the urn barely in the water. The clear fluid trickled into, and out of the urn, taking my baby with it. My daughter’s ashes appeared to fly on the tail end of the soft breeze for a moment, settled on the current, and flowed downstream toward the confluence. From there, she would be as free as the water. I waded back to the dock, climbed upon it, and sat the urn down carefully.

“You need to get warm,” said Adrianna. She got to her feet and came toward me with a blanket she brought from the cabin. I rushed past her to the other side of the dock that stood over one of the river’s many pools, and dived in. My body sliced through the water with the same agility as when I was fifteen. When I surfaced, I began to swim. One lap. Two laps. Three laps. I began to run out of steam by the eighth lap. Still, I wasn’t ready to give in to the pain growing in my chest as my lungs fought to keep up. I was screaming inside. I just wanted to swim and think of nothing except my body in the water.

I used my last bit of energy to pull myself up and out of the water onto the old dock, falling back exhausted against the washed gray boards. I couldn’t think. I didn’t want to think of anything beyond the dock. Today, I needed the river to hold me. This was home. This was where I felt the most loved. Dusk was sneaking around the bend when I finally sat up. I lost a little time, but I think I slept for the first time in days. I tucked my legs under me and closed my eyes. My body hurt, but not enough. When I opened my eyes, Adrianna was peering at me. She said nothing.

Nine weeks had passed since the birth of my daughter. I conjured her up in my mind. I allowed myself to feel the loss, the remorse, the sorrow. I missed her with a pain so deep inside me that even I could hear myself crying, and the sound reverberated through the rocky cliffs that lined the path of the river. My lungs were still hurting, but not enough to numb me. I felt my uterus suddenly contract, and blood leaked through my swimsuit, a harsh reminder of a life interrupted. My body had failed me, failed my daughter miserably. I couldn’t save her. I jumped to my feet, ran to the river, and dived back in.

I didn't know Adrianna had followed me into the water until I surfaced. Her face was an angry mixture of uncertainty and pity. I wanted to shout at her, "I am not suicidal!" My life had a purpose it didn't have before. I had three other children, and I felt suddenly driven to be the best mother I could be to them. But, right now, the memory of a beautiful little girl whose tiny body was floating down river toward absolute freedom filled my mind.. It was the least I could give her.

Adrianna and I left the cabin the next day. She was happy to be going home to her family and talked incessantly during the entire 90-minute drive. I watched the twins jump into her arms as she hurried up the steps toward the house, and I felt a little envious of their happiness. Amid their laughter, she half-carried, half-dragged the boys to the front door where Jack waited for her. When he took the children from her, she turned to look at me. Slowly, she walked back toward the car.

"Are you going to be alright?" She asked as she knelt beside the car door.

I nodded. "Yeah, I am."

"Good," she said. "You have a unique gift. You never say 'I love you' unless you mean it. You love with such passion that, sometimes, I feel pale beside it," she beamed. "I like watching the way you put yourself out into the world."

Being female inherently had a power of its own that men may never understand. Being female was evolutionary, intrinsically part of the fertile soil of the Earth. Women were collectively fierce and protective and unpredictable and empathetic, and that gave us a quality that is sometimes recognizable only by other women. My friendship with Adrianna became stronger because we shared the death of my baby, but in that moment when she looked up at me, she became my greatest ally. As women, we

emphatically understood each other at our core, which was far more intimate than even our romantic relationships. We simply knew each other and acknowledged our individual and collective strengths. Our connection was not based on capricious emotion, but was, instead, a friendship made of shared experiences, mutual loyalty, and respect. We formed a circle around each other, filled a space in each other's life that was not easily understood by outsiders. On that day, when I was beginning to come back from the most horrendous time in my life, I did not know I would return the favor in little more than a decade when I helped her husband and the twins through their own grief. Adrianna died in 2007 of pneumonia, a complication of metastatic breast cancer. That was the only time she ever left me.

Sex is complicated. The self-reflection needed to make healthy sexual choices almost always comes after sex. I never took the time to reflect on what I was doing in my relationship with my baby's father. I never asked more of him than he love me. All he ever asked of me was that I love him. Our time together was pure romantic escapism because both of us knew there would no pushback. The relationship worked for so long because neither of us had any real expectations.

"You know," he once observed. "We have never had an argument."

"No," I simply agreed, thinking back on those phone calls when we were feeling so much but said nothing. "We have never had an argument."

When we were together, we had the best of each other. No ugliness. No raised voices. No negotiating a shared space, but in hindsight, not expecting more than sex were really missed opportunities to know one another in depth. He's never seen my

eyes turn black when I'm angry. He doesn't know that while I don't like conflict, I'm not afraid to wade into it with both feet. He still doesn't know my favorite color, my favorite author, my favorite song, or that I absolutely hate chicken. Those are the nuances lovers learn about each other from casual observance over time. I don't know many of those things about him either. In fact, I didn't realize how much I didn't know him until I needed him. What if he was angry about the pregnancy? What if he disappointed me? What if he saw me as an obligation rather than the woman he professed to love all these years? What if I looked at him and realized the lover I wanted so badly had feet of clay? In the end he didn't disillusion me because I never gave him the opportunity to disappoint me.

Sex is complicated, and even more so when there is only the expectation of vague reciprocity. While I have never once doubted his feelings for me within the context of the affair, I did question the assumption of accountability if the affair saw the light of the real world. As a result, I did him a great harm by accepting full responsibility for our child. Like so many women, I did not give him the opportunity to be sexually responsible, and I did so because I was afraid. While I have forgiven myself for making so many assumptions about a man I didn't know well enough to guess what he might do in the real world, I have never felt the need to apologize directly to him for those assumptions.

Since I told him everything surrounding our baby, he's been an empathetic ear. I know he can never feel the shame, the guilt, or the pain I felt when our baby died. He will never hear his daughter's voice over the Meramec River. More importantly, he may never imagine the stunning young woman our daughter may have become, as

tenacious as her mother and as ambitious as her father with the empathy we have both shown the world. But I hope he knows what I believe, that his daughter did manage to transcend the limitations of her small, fragile body and her spirit is out there in the universe, soaring.

I am not perfect, but I have no interest in recriminations. I am no longer lost in him, nor do I have any more secrets to tell him. Now, I can sit peacefully on the cliffs overlooking the Meramec River. I can hear Adrianna and my daughter laughing whenever I remember the friend who took care of me when I couldn't take care of myself. I know they are both waiting for me when death finally comes. Until then, both my life and my memories are forever my own.

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