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**Haunted Daughters:
Encountering the ghosts of our mothers and grandmothers
in (and out of) the counselling room**

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Abstract

This research explores the experience of intergenerational trauma, also known as ghosts or intergenerational hauntings^{1,2}. Specifically, the work focuses on the way these hauntings may be passed from mothers to daughters, following a family through the maternal line. Using the therapeutic relationship as the mode of exploration, this writing considers how intergenerational trauma may be processed within a therapeutic setting. This research is rooted in psychodynamic theory, and the therapeutic process and relationship are thus viewed through this lens.

Using fiction writing as inquiry as a method, it follows the course of a therapeutic relationship from beginning to end through the eyes and first-person narrative of the therapist. The use of creative writing (both fiction and fictionalisation of true events) allows the reader to glimpse into the counselling room and into the mind of a therapist. This also allows for the exploration of how intergenerational trauma may be processed or explored in therapy and how a therapist may ultimately be impacted by their client work. Seeking to understand how these ghosts haunt us and how we repeat patterns that may not be consciously known to us, this research explores how unconscious experiences with our own mothers may follow us into the counselling room as the therapist.

In this writing, questions raised include how trauma may be transmitted from mother to daughter and how we may begin to break the cycle of transmission. This research contributes to the greater literature on counselling theory through the exploration of how intergenerational trauma is processed in therapy and to the understanding of dynamics between mothers and daughters. This research also contributes to the existing literature on counselling practice through the focus on clinical work, delving into the process of therapy and the dynamics of a therapeutic relationship. Finally, this writing contributes to counselling research literature through the use of a creative methodology, combining the methods of writing as inquiry and fiction as inquiry, resulting in the process of fiction writing as inquiry.

Keywords: Intergenerational trauma, therapeutic relationship, fiction writing as inquiry, mother-daughter relationship, generational hauntings

Word count: 58,359 (excluding abstract, lay summary, declaration, acknowledgements, footnotes, and references)

¹ Frosh 2013

² Fraiberg 1980

Lay Summary

Using creative writing, this thesis explores the relationship between mothers and daughters and the experience of trauma passed from one generation to the next. The relationship between client and therapist serves as a vehicle for this exploration, as the story is told through the first-person perspective of a therapist as they move in and out of the counselling room. The use of creative writing (both fiction and fictionalisation of true events) allows the reader to glimpse into the counselling room and into the mind of a therapist. This also allows for the exploration of how intergenerational trauma may be processed or explored in therapy and how a therapist may ultimately be impacted by their client work. The purpose of this thesis is to gain a greater understanding of these processes and offer space for reflection and future growth. Seeking to understand how these ghosts haunt us and how we repeat patterns that may not be consciously known to us, this research also explores how unconscious experiences with our own mothers may enter the counselling room as the therapist.

Thesis Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself, and has not been submitted, in whole or in part, to any other degree or professional qualification. Except where stated otherwise by reference or acknowledgement, the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

Quinn R. Stoeber

August 25th, 2025

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**Haunted Daughters:
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***Prologue:
Introduction and ologies³***

An initial question

Before I was anything or anyone else, I existed in the world as a daughter.

A daughter who watched her mother interacting with the world, absorbing her actions and learning from how she moved through life. Defining myself and developing my identity through her lessons. As I grew, moving into my identity as a sister, a friend, and later a wife and a therapist, I took these lessons with me. Moving through my world with the echoes of my mother guiding me, shaping my path, informing how I interact with others and how I perceive myself. Long after I moved away from home, with an ocean between us, I was still moulded by her lessons. Guided by her hand, her voice still a whisper in my ear. Our relationship haunting me.

I have always been fascinated by the dynamics that exist within families. Wondering often about the why and how we become who we are. Wondering how who I had become was shaped by the experiences and context of my family. I would make jokes about being the forgotten middle child, about the guilt that only a Jewish mother could wield when I would get a text message simply saying ‘call me’, about how my sister was becoming our mother even as she actively denied it, without thinking too deeply about what truth lay in those words. It was as if these questions were always at the edge of my awareness, begging to be seen. But much like a ghost, they would dissipate into the shadows when I turned to look. Slipping through my fingers like mist when I would attempt to pin

³ Ward 2017

them down, lacking the vocabulary to form the words. Something was pushing me, guiding the direction I took and the relationships I would enter. Something I knew was part of me, but not completely mine.

Then, I was swept into the world of intergenerational trauma. The pieces were falling into place, and I could finally name the questions I had been desperately trying to find the language for. In counselling theory, intergenerational trauma refers to the process of a traumatic experience being passed down from one generation to the next⁴. The experience of trauma causes a ripple as the effects are experienced by future generations who may not even be aware that the trauma occurred. While these effects may be unknown to us, they appear as patterns that are replicated throughout a family⁵. One generation repeating patterns set by the previous, with the traumatic experience beyond their awareness⁶. Stephen Frosh writes of the rippling impact of this trauma as “...what gets transmitted from one time period to another, from one generation to another, so that those who have no direct experience of an event may nevertheless be affected by it,”⁷. We are haunted by these traumas, lingering in the shadows of our everyday lives. This was further illuminated through reading the article “Ghost in the Nursery: A psychoanalytic approach to the problems of impaired infant-mother relationships” by Selma Fraiberg⁸. This reading was a seismic shift in my thinking about trauma. It changed my perception of trauma from something stagnant and stuck in a specific time to a moving, fluid occurrence that permeates across generations of families. Fraiberg writes of intergenerational trauma as if it is a ghost that follows the mother into their child’s nursery, literally and figuratively⁹. The more I read, the more I felt pulled to ask. What traumas lingered in my historical lineage?

While I often thought of these questions regarding family systems, during my work as a therapist and through lived experiences, I found myself particularly drawn to the dynamics between mothers and daughters. I have lived a close and intense relationship with my own mother. I have watched her in relation with her mother, my grandmother, and with my two sisters. I have spent hours having endless circling conversations with friends about how to exist alongside our mothers, how to heal our relationships, or even when to leave these relationships. In each of these encounters, I have felt the strain of both desperately wanting to have a close relationship with one’s mother and

⁴ Chou and Buchanan 2021

⁵ Chou and Buchanan 2021

⁶ Frosh 2013

⁷ Frosh 2012, page 242

⁸ Fraiberg 1980

⁹ Fraiberg 1980

trying to reconcile their humanness and flaws. Experiencing firsthand the sharp wound that only a mother can deal to later find myself begging for her affection. I have come to recognise it to be an intensely connected relationship, one that shapes our experiences with the rest of the world. Thinking of the quote, “mothers convey the expectation of society onto their daughters, they serve as the example, and the relationship is a model”, before we can distinguish ourselves from “the people and objects around” us, we “[exist] in a merged state with [our] mother”¹⁰. Our relationship with our mother is our “emotional legacy”¹¹, guiding and shaping our place in the world. If our mothers experience trauma, how does it influence their guidance? How then is our life shaped by their experiences? What occurs when there is an emotional wounding in the maternal lineage, which is then passed from mother to daughter?

Looking beyond myself and my immediate situation, I began asking questions about how my mother may have been shaped by my grandmother, my grandmother by my great-grandmother. Wondering how trauma experienced by the women who lived generations before me may still be acted out in my life. Moving out only to come back in, looking up and down my maternal line. What ghosts persisted all these generations later? How did they come to haunt me?

Purpose and objective

Through my observations in practice, in reading, and lived experience, I began to form an understanding of how our worldview may be shaped by these known and unknown traumas, the things that have haunted our mothers and grandmothers¹². I wondered how mothers, as the traditional primary caregiver, may be re-enacting historical traumas in their parenting throughout our childhoods¹³. Wondering if their parenting of us was influenced by these traumas that existed beyond their awareness. As I began to read more on intergenerational trauma to form my questions, I came to find that, in the existing research, I felt there was often a focus on the big, historical traumas. Yet I found myself drawn to the more ordinary traumas, the day-to-day experiences that can shape and affect us. I was curious about how those historic intergenerational traumas might manifest in ordinary ways generations later. Shaping our relationships, impacting our perceptions of the world around us,

¹⁰ Orbach and Eichenbaum 2014

¹¹ Orbach and Eichenbaum 2014

¹² Fraiberg 1980

¹³ Fraiberg 1980

guiding our career paths and shaping our dreams for our futures. If those significant historic traumas ultimately become what I was thinking of as everyday traumas.

Thus, as my research began to take shape, I chose to focus on how intergenerational trauma manifests in these more ordinary ways. First, I want to explore the notion of emotional containment of a parent, specifically how the absence of a containing environment can negatively impact a child. I also consider the cycle of working to emotionally contain and hold your mother, what occurs when the roles are reversed, and the child contains instead of the parent. For my exploration of the concept of containment, I look through the lens of Bion's theory of containing, which is explained as the occurrence of the mother serving as an emotional container for their infant, the mother is traditionally the container so that the child feels contained¹⁴. Another theme I explore is the experience of rejection by the mother, which influences the development of the daughter's sense of self and identity¹⁵. Next is the theme of the unspoken nature and shame of trauma within families and how speaking about the trauma can help break the cycle of it^{16,17}. How trauma can thrive in silence or be banished through exposing it to the light. Finally, in this research, I explore the ways relational dynamics are experienced and learned, how our experience of being mothered shapes who we are as people and how we learn to interact and relate to others.

Further, the writings of Frosh and Fraiberg lead me to wonder about the role we play in either perpetuating or eradicating these hauntings^{18,19}. Is it our responsibility to exorcise the ghosts that have haunted generations of women before us? Throughout my research, I often came back to Winnicott's concept of "good enough mothering", how do we define "good enough"²⁰? Where and how does that line get drawn?

While asking these questions, running parallel to my existence as a daughter within the context of my family, I am working as a therapist. Each week, I have clients coming into the room, bringing their outside world in with them. Their mothers often enter through their stories and meet me as I, too, bring my outside world in. My perspective, the way I approach therapy and theory, is also being shaped by the context in which I exist. Through this research, I want to find a way to capture the unique, weird feeling of the therapeutic relationship. A relationship that can be intense and intimate,

¹⁴ Cartwright 2013

¹⁵ Winnicott 1960

¹⁶ Barnwell 2019

¹⁷ Wolyynn 2017

¹⁸ Frosh 2012

¹⁹ Fraiberg 1980

²⁰ Winnicott 1960

only to end sometimes without warning or fanfare. A time-limited relationship that shapes both client and therapist, but one that only exists in a contained time and space. I aim to explore what occurs beyond the closed doors and how the process of therapy is experienced both internally and externally. In conducting this research, I feel that these endeavours are actually one and the same, as the therapist I have become has ultimately been shaped by the daughter I am.

As I struggle to contain these questions, feeling the unravelling nature as they grow within me, I determine that the primary purpose of my research is to explore the following:

- How historical traumas may become ordinary everyday traumas as they are transmitted across generations. If the transmission of trauma is embedded in our family history, how does it influence us as individuals in our daily lives?
- The experience of daughterhood, specifically how the position of daughter can become the holding place for intergenerational trauma. Through this lens, I consider the phenomenon of how intergenerational trauma is experienced by daughters and how, through therapy, one could explore the way unresolved trauma is inherited. Exploring questions such as when (if) we become mothers, how do those hauntings move through us, and what is our role as daughters in exorcising our families' historical ghosts?
- The relational dynamics between therapist and client, considering how the experience of intergenerational trauma shows up in the therapeutic relationships. This includes how historical trauma complicates personal relationships and can influence the therapeutic process.
- Finally, how the outside gets in. How does the outside world come into the counselling room? What do we do with it? How does the counselling room spill out into our lives as therapists beyond the 50 minutes once per week?

This research contributes to the existing dialogue on the transmission of intergenerational trauma and the mother-daughter relationship by exploring the combined nature of those phenomena. The intersection between the two, how hauntings in the maternal line are experienced. This research also contributes to existing dialogue through the addition of the therapist's perspective. It uses the

experience of a therapist and the dynamics that occur within a counselling room and therapeutic relationship to explore how therapists are moved by their client work.

Ontological and epistemological position

When I first began this endeavour, I initially found myself grappling with how I defined knowledge. Grasping onto a shaky understanding of what was considered valid in research and seeking a foundation for what I referred to as my “ologies”, inspired by a podcast of the same name²¹.

I used the following definitions: “epistemology concerns what it is possible to know, whereas ontology concerns what there is to know in the world ‘out there’,” ontology is the nature of being, while epistemology is the experience of knowledge^{22,23}. My research is thus supported by the notion that knowledge is constructed by the lived experiences of individuals, with my goal being to understand those lived experiences from the “point of view of those who live it day to day”²⁴.

Operating within a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, I approach this inquiry through the belief that “reality is constructed in the mind of the individual, rather than it being an externally singular entity”²⁵. My epistemology is subjectivism, which is rooted in the notion that our knowledge and reality are constructed through our “lived experiences and through our interactions with other members of society” and are reflective of the unique experiences of the individual²⁶. Through living, through experiencing the world, we create our own unique knowledge.

These definitions inform my understanding of the concept of intergenerational trauma, as I believe each individual in the familial line will have their own interpretation and experience of that trauma. While intergenerational trauma or hauntings are patterns that are repeated throughout generations of one family, I believe that even if I were to choose and explore one identifiable pattern, everyone within the lineage would have their own unique experience with it. I also believe that family members experiencing the same trauma will have different, unique perspectives on the same situation. For example, when my mother tells a story about something we did together, I often find myself remembering it differently or having a different perspective on what happened. When she reflects on something that happened in her childhood, my grandmother will have a different memory

²¹ Ward 2017

²² Harper 2012

²³ Ponterotto 2005

²⁴ Ponterotto 2005

²⁵ Ponterotto 2005, page 129

²⁶ Denzin, Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba 2017, page 192

of that same event. In my research, I work to capture these experiences, using the various perspectives to offer a window into the differences experienced within a singular family system and how these hauntings take on life within individuals.

I also exist within my research. It is told through a perspective that I have lived, shaped by my subjective experience of reality, my experience of being a daughter and a therapist. I write this inquiry utilising the lens through which I view and experience the world around me. My research is heavily based on my lived experiences and what is known to me, and therefore, I recognise that my perspective may be different from someone who has seen these same encounters from their own viewpoint. In that, I hold power²⁷. The stories are told through my interpretation of events, the world viewed through my eyes. While I have tried to include the stories of others in an attempt to minimise the influence of that power, even those stories are told through my narrative, and it is impossible to fully separate myself from that. I take responsibility for my views and hope that through being reflexive, making use of myself in my research, I can make sense of that power²⁸.

Arriving at a method: Using fiction in writing as inquiry

When I first envisioned this project, I thought I had a very clear idea of what I wanted to achieve. I initially had planned to write purely from my own experience, using autoethnography to delve into the inner workings of my own family²⁹. I thought the best way to answer the questions I was asking was to write what I had witnessed firsthand and tell the stories I had known my whole life³⁰. However, as I went further into my inquiry, I realised that the method of autoethnography would not serve the project as it came to life. The more I wrote, the more I realised that there were more stories I wanted to tell. I had begun to collect endless stories from friends, family members, and colleagues about their own intense and complex mother-daughter relationships. Each person I discussed my research with seemed to have their own story they wanted to share. I was also often captivated by the stories that followed my clients into the counselling work, and I could see how these dynamics were playing out in our relationship. I increasingly felt myself wanting to find a way that would capture the

²⁷ Etherington 2017

²⁸ Etherington 2017

²⁹ Ellis, Tony Adams, and Bochner 2011

³⁰ Ellis, Tony Adams, and Bochner 2011

experiences I had as a therapist. Both through how I felt bringing my own ghosts and fears into the therapeutic relationship and how my client would enter and, eventually, leave.

Admittedly, I also found myself moving further away from autoethnography after the sudden death of my father, who passed away during the course of this project. The wounds of my family felt too raw and too fresh to be exposed in the way I felt autoethnography demanded. I wanted to tell my story, but it felt too heartbreaking to approach the current reality of my situation. It no longer felt like the time or place to explore the processes within my family.

At that point, I found myself at a crossroads. I knew I wanted to tell a story and explore the honest inner workings of the therapeutic relationship without risking exposing myself, my family, and my clients, but I was unsure where to begin. This led to an exploration of more creative methodologies, specifically, the use of fiction in research and writing as a mode of inquiry³¹. The more I read about and saw examples of this methodology, the more I felt called to it. The method of fiction as inquiry utilises writing fiction as the entry point to exploring a question³². Significantly influenced by the work of Patricia Leavy, who wrote that “fiction is grounded in reality, at a minimum, in the author’s experiences and perceptions,” well-done fiction “resonates because it is based on ‘the real’”³⁴. I realised that, while I, as the researcher, am in the role of the storyteller, I could use fiction as a “vehicle”, bringing the reader into a relationship with my “imagined other”³⁵. The work of Susie Orbach also inspired my methodological approach. In books such as *In Therapy: The Unfolding Story* and *The Impossibility of Sex*^{37,38}, Orbach uses fictionalised vignettes of client work to explore the therapeutic processes and the relationship between therapist and client. Orbach blends vignettes with her reflections to explore what occurs in the counselling room, allowing the reader a glimpse into the otherwise private world of therapy. A creative approach called to me, I found myself drawn into other readings like Fiona Murray’s “‘There Are Two Clocks in Here and They Are Not in Sync’: Counsellors’ and Clients’ Struggles with Online Pornography” and Jonathan Wyatt’s *Therapy, Stand-up, and the Gesture of Writing: Towards Creative-Relational Inquiry*^{39,40}. Research that held a story I could get lost in with characters I could picture.

³¹ Richardson and Adams St. Pierre 2018

³² Leavy 2018

³⁴ Leavy 2018, page 191

³⁵ Leavy 2018, page 194

³⁷ Orbach 2017

³⁸ Orbach 2002

³⁹ Murray 2017

⁴⁰ Wyatt 2019

Through these readings, I felt myself being pulled in a more creative direction. Searching for a way I might capture my personal experience, but through a fictional lens. All these wandering thoughts and worries came into focus when I read Melissa Dunlop's thesis "Auto/fictioning (the) Contemporary (in) Human Relations and Psychotherapeutic Processes"⁴¹. From the first sentences, I was hooked, both engrossed in the unfolding story and captivated by the way she was able to seamlessly blend research and storytelling, weaving references and theory in a way that did not disrupt the story that was unfolding. It felt real and rich, each character and scene was painted in vivid detail with a humanness that is difficult to capture. The characters were flawed, layered, and complex. I could feel the way it was rooted in reality while leaving room for questions and exploration⁴². I felt then that this was how I, too, wanted to approach my research, through the people at the heart of my questions. Reading this thesis made it feel possible to accomplish and capture what I had hoped to do in my research. I resolved to create something as real and immersive as she had, to capture the experience of being human, where the people were front and centre. Their stories and experiences were the data, the knowledge⁴³.

Thus, I arrived at my method, fiction writing as inquiry. This method combines aspects of writing as inquiry and fiction as inquiry, as I have created a world that is a piece of fiction inspired by reality and let the process of writing be the means of exploration^{44,45}. The fiction aspect allowed me to tell a story that is based on the real, while protecting the people who served as inspiration and allowing me to take creative liberties to shape the story. Before I began, I created a rough outline, but otherwise I let my characters, and my story, guide me, allowing it to flow without any pressure or constraints. However, I felt it was important to capture the experience of therapy in a linear process. Following from the beginning, to the middle, to the end. Telling the full story of a therapeutic encounter.

This combining of methods contributes to the existing research as it is a different approach, by combining them into creative writing as inquiry, I have opened up a creative method of exploration. This methodology has allowed me to open the doors of the counselling room and let the outside in, as using fiction allowed me to explore the more nuanced emotional and psychological layers present in therapeutic interactions without risking breaking confidentiality. Through this

⁴¹ Dunlop 2022

⁴² Richardson and Adams St. Pierre 2018

⁴³ Freeman 2018 page 124

⁴⁴ Leavy 2018

⁴⁵ Richardson and Adams St. Pierre 2018

methodology, I was able to include my thoughts, imagine the thoughts of others, and capture emotion without the risk of harming someone in my real life. By incorporating real-world details into my fictional accounts, I aimed to create a richer and more textured representation of clinical experiences⁴⁶.

What I have written is a combination of pure fiction and fictionalised events that I have experienced in my real life. The fictional client is an amalgamation of myself, my friends, previous clients, and my imagination. She is not based on any real person, yet serves as a vessel for both fictionalised versions of real stories that I have either lived or been told, and for imagined stories. The therapist I have written is a fictional version of myself. While she is shaped by my real experiences, influenced by my real journey, and her experience of reality is viewed through my perspective, the vignettes are all imagined. I have intentionally created this client to serve as a mirror to the therapist, as I felt it enabled a more profound journey within the therapist, and I felt it was more honest for me to write from a perspective that I know, using my understanding of reality to shape both of their perspectives. In the writing, there are also fictional friends, colleagues, and family members. These characters, like the primary client, are amalgamations of real people I have known and encountered, but are also fictional. Using this method of blending fiction with fictionalised versions of real events, I hope to create a world for my characters to exist in that feels rich and grounded in my reality. As Kim Etherington wrote, “personal experience is at the heart of what we do in counselling and psychotherapy,” and I wanted to capture that in my writing⁴⁷.

In defence of fiction

As I come to my writing, I find myself asking what is research? At its most basic, it is the creative processes through which a person ventures into the unknown. Embarking on a journey to ask questions, explore data, and produce something to be shared in the hopes of generating knowledge and understanding. In my early work, one of the first hurdles I would face would be the defence of the validity of fiction as a method of inquiry. Throughout my education, I often struggled against the rigidity of what I thought research or knowledge was. Thinking that, in order for something to be valid, it needs to be rooted in statistics or hard data. Yet I struggled to understand how a method like

⁴⁶ Marsh, Dyer, Bubp, and Myers 2017

⁴⁷ Etherington 2017, page 87

this could capture the complexity of human interactions and relationships. How can you assign a number to the way goosebumps run up your arms when a client has a breakthrough moment during therapy? What data point can you set for the moment when your phone rings out of the blue with news that upends your entire reality, like the sudden and unexpected death of a loved one or a lecture from your mother for some unknown wrong? Anything else felt impersonal and stripped of the emotion that lives within these powerful moments. A creative-arts method, like fiction as inquiry, allows me to capture these interpersonal dynamics in a way other methods could not. Something that felt important to hold when exploring questions like the ones I endeavour to answer. Where quantitative research focuses on numbers and generalisability, arts-based methods work in stories, images, and sounds, seeking resonance and authenticity⁴⁸.

As Patricia Leavy writes, the difference between literary fiction and fiction as inquiry is the balance between art and usefulness. The goal of literary fiction is to entertain, while the goal of fiction as inquiry is to use that to educate, share, or discuss⁴⁹. These are done using fiction, a story is written and shaped intentionally to educate readers, share thoughts, and open a discussion. Creating a space for learning within the fictional world. In fiction as inquiry, there is a clear purpose and aim. While it may be presented in an entertaining manner, using storytelling to captivate a reader the same way a novel would, there is an intent behind it. There are goals and aims that the writer sets out to achieve from the beginning, not just telling a story but using that story for a purpose. In this method, data is generated, not collected, through a creative process. The writer is active in creating that data, shaping the knowledge that is produced through the act of developing the piece of fiction. As writers, we are not finding the data, we are instead creating it. In fiction as inquiry, researchers use many of the same tools as literary writers, such as using vivid descriptors to paint a scene and writing engaging, realistic dialogue. However, they shape these processes in a way that reimagines the “real world” in a way that allows for curious exploration⁵⁰. Peter Clough argues that these works of fiction are “legitimate pieces of research because they could have happened”⁵¹. He writes that, within these accounts, which are “versions of the truth”, we can learn from example⁵². Stories describe reality, and through creating a world that mirrors reality, fiction allows us to connect with the experiences of others, giving us access to inner thoughts, personal moments and processes, and perspectives that are different from

⁴⁸ Leavy 2020

⁴⁹ 2016

⁵⁰ Leavy 2020

⁵¹ Leavy 2016, page 40

⁵² Clough 2002

our own. By combining the tenets of qualitative research and fiction, this method “uniquely allows us to create believable virtual worlds into which we may insert a theoretical, philosophical, or socially minded substructure”⁵³. In this body of work, I aim to tell a story that could have happened through a version of the truth that I know. I hope to use this version of the truth to create a reality that could have happened, one that meets the reader where they are, giving them space to bring in their own experiences and interpretations while promoting empathy and reflection by connecting them to fictional characters.

One of the greatest strengths of this method is the benefits to learning and its accessibility. Through fiction as inquiry, learning becomes an interactive process. It becomes something that is joyful and engaging. How a person is taught impacts how effectively they learn and how meaningful and long-lasting that learning is⁵⁴. Due to its nature as something that is engaging, evocative, and accessible to broad audiences, fiction is highly effective for creating and disseminating research. It pulls readers into its world, communicating knowledge in a way that is accessible to both novices and experts. Connecting with and reaching a broad audience, fiction as inquiry can be used to portray the complexity of lived experiences, to promote empathy and self-reflection, and to disrupt dominant ideologies and stereotypes. Teaching things like compassion and empathy through reading of the lives of imagined others because it allows for “details, nuance, specificity, contexts, and texture”⁵⁵. I have always found that I learn best, remember the details of, and am moved and inspired the most by the stories of others. The experiences of lives lived, the perspective that is different from mine, the details from a world I would never personally inhabit. Those are the pieces of research that have most fundamentally shaped who I am, as a therapist, a researcher, and as a person existing off the page in my own life. Within stories, there is the capacity to explore the “interconnectedness of the past, the present, and the future, the personal and then the professional” in a way that has a lasting, powerful impact on the learning of the reader⁵⁶.

The shape this research takes is what gives it meaning. This process can be highly personal as fiction can serve as a means to process one’s own experiences. However, storytelling also has scholarly value. By telling my story, stories I have been told, and stories that I have created, others may learn from and feel empowered to make sense of their own experiences. Through fiction, I am

⁵³ Leavy 2016, page 40

⁵⁴ Leavy 2016, page 259

⁵⁵ Leavy 2020, page 60

⁵⁶ Clough 2002, page 99

endeavouring to challenge a person's way of thinking. By bringing them into a rich world with characters they grow to care about, I am to use fiction to create empathetic engagement, self-awareness, and social awareness. I can use fiction to bring my readers into a different world, “as readers begin to care for the characters and develop empathy, previously held assumptions, values, stereotypes, and even worldviews can be challenged”⁵⁷. Therefore, this piece of writing differs from pure literary fiction in my aims and intent. I intend to create a piece of research with these goals in mind. Someone who has never been a daughter, never struggled with their relationship, never considered intergenerational trauma, or never considered the personal life of a therapist may pick this up and be pulled into a world where they can experience reality differently. Using my writing to generate data through which the reader may gain understanding, empathy, and grow in their own world.

Theoretical position

As I have written from my experience, my research exists within the theoretical position in which I practice therapy. As a psychodynamic practitioner, writing into how intergenerational trauma is processed through therapy, I felt it was important to write through the perspective I use in my actual practice⁵⁸. Therefore, in this writing, I have framed the therapeutic work done within the world of psychodynamic theory. While pulled from psychodynamic theory in general, specifically the processes of unresolved early childhood experiences, the therapeutic process was more specifically based on work done using theory such as Winnicott’s Good Enough Mothering and True/False Self⁵⁹, Klein's Concept of Phantasy and Object Love⁶⁰, Bion’s Container Model⁶¹, and Fairburn’s Repression and Return of Bad Objects⁶² to name a few key theories. In my research, I used these theories to process the fictional client work, focusing on her relationship with her mother, how that early relationship has influenced other aspects of her life, and how to begin resolving the conflicts left in its wake. These theories informed my thinking on how my client developed her identity through the environment in which she was raised. The theory on mother-daughter relationships, why that

⁵⁷ Leavy 2016, page 50

⁵⁸ Chou and Buchanan 2021

⁵⁹ Winnicott 1960; the actual mother versus the imagined, not perfect but “good enough”, environment where the baby feels secure enough to explore their true self

⁶⁰ Likierman 2001

⁶¹ Cartwright 2013; considering the maternal function, which offers a containing environment through which infants are able to safely explore and process emotions

⁶² Fairbairn 1994; an object (the mother) splitting into good and bad, bad objects returning from being repressed

relationship is crucial and why it is important to explore, was greatly influenced by the work of Orbach⁶³, Hasseldine⁶⁴, Streep⁶⁵, Chodorow⁶⁶, Goldberg⁶⁷, and Arnold-Baker⁶⁸. From these readings, I specifically considered what occurs when a daughter feels unloved or unaccepted by their mother and how they recreate that in their parenting. These readings also informed my thinking of the pressure or expectations of mothers and how we measure what being a good mother looks like. Finally, the theory serving as the foundation for my exploration of intergenerational trauma was influenced by the work of Frosh⁶⁹, Wolynn⁷⁰, and Fraiberg⁷¹. These authors all explored the notion of intergenerational trauma being a ghost that follows from generation to generation, not beginning with us, but still leaving us shaped by its presence.

While at times used conversationally in daily colloquialism, in this writing, the words trauma and intergenerational trauma are positioned within the psychoanalytic framework. The concept of trauma, which is historically defined by Freud as “any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield,”⁷² can also be considered as “the idea that real events can bring about a breach in the protective shield of the psyche, disrupting psychic structure and the sense of self”⁷³. Van der Kolk positions trauma as something that continues to organise your life, so that “every new encounter or event is contaminated by the past”⁷⁴. After trauma, a person experiences the world through a different nervous system. He states that, biologically speaking, “trauma affects every part of the human organism”⁷⁵. In his work on trauma, Stephen Frosh writes of the way events mark us forever, at times beyond our awareness because it is “held as a kind of unconscious knowledge”⁷⁶. Something we catch glimpses of in our patterns and relationships, but exists beyond our conscious awareness. In this writing, I explore this dynamic between trauma and the unconscious. Considering how, unconsciously, traumatic experiences continue to influence us in our day-to-day lives.

⁶³ Orbach and Luise Eichenbaum 2014

⁶⁴ Hasseldine 2017

⁶⁵ Streep 2009

⁶⁶ Bueskens 2021

⁶⁷ Goldberg 2016

⁶⁸ Arnold-Baker 2020

⁶⁹ Frosh 2013

⁷⁰ Wolynn 2017

⁷¹ Fraiberg 1980

⁷² Keiser 1967, page 781

⁷³ Connolly 2011, page 607

⁷⁴ Van der Kolk 2014, page 62

⁷⁵ Van der Kolk 2014, page 63

⁷⁶ 2017

Throughout this work, I consider intergenerational trauma using the following definition: intergenerational trauma is “the notion that psychologically traumatic events experienced during an individual’s lifetime can significantly influence the well-being of their offspring”⁷⁷. As Stephen Frosh writes, intergenerational trauma is “...what gets transmitted from one time period to another, from one generation to another, so that those who have no direct experience of an event may nevertheless be affected by it”⁷⁸. Positioning my use of intergenerational trauma within this lens enables a discussion into the processes through which trauma experienced by one person can then be passed down to their children and their children’s children. Ultimately, becoming a ghost that haunts a family. Considering this, I chose to focus on how that historic trauma manifests in later generations as something more ordinary or everyday. Wondering how the trauma is repeated and expressed generations removed from the known historic traumatic event.

Into the writing

A beginning feels daunting. A blank page, endless potential and unimaginable pressure. How does one even begin to write a story rooted so deeply in the human experience? Do we start at the beginning, the earliest notion of a person's existence? Or do we jump in the middle, hoping context clues are enough? Do we look at a person through the context of who they are to others? Or how they see themselves? Through what they bring to a relationship or by wondering who they truly are when they are alone? What thoughts race through their minds while they drift off to sleep? Or the way they tell their story?

As I began to write, my initial instinct was to start writing in the middle. It felt less intimidating to imagine dialogue in the middle of a relationship, where the work had begun, for the sake of skipping over the awkward fumbling of an initial meeting. Instead, I forced myself to start with that uncertainty. Leaning into the discomfort, letting the unknown guide me like I do in my real client work. When I began, I sat down with no expectations, only the rough outline of a plan, and let the story flow. Letting the writing truly be the data and the process be the inquiry, I was curious to see where the writing would lead and what I would uncover, not only about myself but within my work as a therapist. I thought I had a clear objective, thought I knew where this journey might lead. However,

⁷⁷ Chou and Buchanan 2021, page 363

⁷⁸ 2012, page 242

I found more in the journey than I had expected. The more I wrote, the more I found myself moving away from my assumptions and asking new questions. The story took on a life of its own, my characters growing alongside me.

Through this research, I embark on an exploration of the clinical process. I work to shed light on the inner narrative of a therapist, the experience of entering a therapeutic relationship, and the process of giving a voice to the unspoken. This inquiry explores both the relationship that exists between mother and daughter as well as between client and therapist. It poses the question of how intergenerational trauma is transmitted and how we may begin to resolve it through therapy. Through the writing, more questions arose, and I was left answering my initial queries with an “it depends”. Ultimately, it feels as if it is undeniable that we are shaped by the lives our mothers led and they by the lives of our grandmothers. Yet I still find myself coming back to the greater question of, “and then what?”. Must we resolve their trauma? Can we ever find ourselves fully exorcised of these ghosts?

And with that, we find ourselves at the beginning once again.

Author’s note: This inquiry is a work of fiction. All characters depicted in this work are fictional, and any resemblance to real people is entirely coincidental. While some vignettes are based on real experiences and stories, all characters, dialogue, and situations are works of fiction.

Part One:
In the beginning

1.1 Initial assumptions

My relationship with Marjorie began before she even entered the counselling room.

From the moment she contacted the counselling centre, we existed together in purgatory. A space where each was unknown to the other but had begun to exist at the edge of each other's awareness, filled with expectation and possibility.

At the time, the centre where I worked conducted assessments before assigning clients to therapists. Marjorie would meet with one of the senior therapists for a brief session and would then be allocated accordingly. Then, the week before we were first scheduled to meet, this assessment would be passed along to me. General details of who and why, quick lines describing an initial appointment and the determination that she was fit for counselling in our centre.

When her appointment was scheduled and the assessment arrived in my inbox, I felt the buzz of anticipation. The curious excitement of meeting someone new and the uncertainty of what was to come. Like the expectation and apprehension felt before a blind date. Even now, a few years into my counselling practice, I was amazed by how that anticipation threatened to bubble over. Nerves and old anxieties returning with the prospect of something new and unpredictable. What would this relationship be like? What would come to pass between us? Would it feel awkward, or would a relationship build easily? Would it be fleeting, a brief encounter with both of us recognising that it was not a 'fit' and cutting our losses before we had ventured too deep? Or would it be rich, with endless weeks of exploration and growth? Were my expectations too high? Were hers? The awkward newness of uncertainty bubbling within me, I opened the file.

As I cupped the tentative nature of a new relationship gingerly in my hands, I began to read through her assessment. Fantasies of who Marjorie might be beginning to materialise before me. She was close to my age, just a few years younger than me. According to the date of birth provided, she would be turning thirty this year. And, like me, she was also from America, having moved to Scotland to study, again like I had done years before. I found myself pulling these pieces together in an attempt

to create an image in my mind of who she might be. I wondered what she looked like, what her tone of voice might be like. Did she have an accent? Did she use her hands when she spoke? Was she loud and animated or soft spoken and careful? For some reason, I imagined her to be tall. Initially, she read like someone who carried herself confidently and gave the impression that she would be carefully put together. Shoulders back, head up, I imagined she would walk into the counselling room with an air of authority. I wondered if that was my insecurity about my position, still a relatively new therapist. It was as if I were already intimidated by her. Assuming she would somehow be more of an adult than me. Even though on paper, we seemed to be in similar phases of life.

Marjorie had completed a master's degree in Edinburgh and was now working full-time as a high school teacher. She had an address listed in a nice part of town, an enviable neighbourhood, and I caught myself wondering how she afforded the rent on a teacher's salary, my assumptions again slipping into my imagining of her. Did her family help with her bills? Did she have a wealthy partner?

According to her assessment, in her own words, she had procrastinated therapy for a long time. Never feeling like she was ready, never feeling like she “needed” to be in therapy. As if her problems were small compared to those who might “need” it more.

The further I read, the more I found myself forming assumptions about her and why she had chosen to begin therapy at this time. Her words came across as shaky and insecure, which already contradicted my initial beliefs. I also found myself assuming that her true feelings were buried deep beneath layers of what I was reading as shame and embarrassment, intense feelings which may have prevented her from beginning therapy before now. The words shame and embarrassment struck me, they were harsh and critical words. I wondered if it was potentially shame about what would come up, or the embarrassment that her issues were small and insignificant, as if they were never really “that bad”. My image of her shifted as the air of insecurity floated through the page as I continued to read. As if she already felt embarrassed for wasting my time. I wondered what processes had played out within her before she reached out for this appointment, what internal dialogue had taken place before she made the call. Just like our relationship had begun for me before meeting her, I recognised that it had also already begun for her. Something had led her to this place, to this time, to me. Some internal process had played out for her, separate from me, that would influence our relationship just as much as my internal process would. I was forming assumptions about her, but what assumptions was she forming of me?

As I read, I kept feeling myself snagging on the threads of her that reminded me of my background and experience. I wondered what part of America she was from, if it was somewhere I had ever been. We were nearly the same age and had both moved abroad to pursue graduate degrees. Her words on the page were ones that had come out of my own mouth on more than one occasion. I felt connected to her just reading through her assessment, and I wondered what it would be like to meet her. Would it be as if a mirror of myself were being reflected at me? Or would the reality of her be my complete opposite? I wondered what she would think of me when we met. Would she be surprised that I was also American? Would she be surprised that I was young or relieved that we were the same age? Was she anxiously forming her own fantasy about who I was? As I sat with these thoughts, I considered how Marjorie had already become this fully formed image in my mind. One that might be at odds with the real Marjorie that I would encounter. I tried to pull these threads back apart, letting the idea of Marjorie fall back into a shapeless form so that she may have the opportunity to rebuild my experience of her, one that was rooted in reality instead of my own musings, my own projections. However, I found that I was already struggling with pulling those threads back apart as some of my own had begun to tangle with them. Would we be as similar as I felt? I read over her assessment again, starting from the beginning, letting my thoughts of her continue to spiral.

1.2 When we meet: The first appointment

The following week, Marjorie was late.

I found myself increasingly nervous as the seconds passed. I watched the clock, sitting at the edge of my seat as I listened for the door to buzz. Closing my eyes, I put both feet flat on the floor and breathed in deeply. I tried to ground myself as I quickly went through my counselling contract in my mind, reminding myself of what I needed to say when she arrived⁸⁰. Mentally reciting it like a checklist. Five minutes stretched on, and I began to wonder if she would be attending. Wondering if I had spent all that nervous energy for nothing.

⁸⁰ Cartwright 2013; using a therapeutic contract (clearly defining the time, constraints, frequency, and bounds of confidentiality), we create our own container in the counselling room. This framework, much like the maternal container, gives a client a safe environment for exploring and processing emotions

I stood, pacing my small room, occasionally adjusting the plush armchairs, angling them slightly off centre as if to soften the directness of a therapeutic relationship. As if angling slightly away from each other could offer some small piece of space and safety. I peered out the large window that overlooked the main entrance to the counselling centre, attempting to be discreet in case she turned the corner and saw me looming down at her, sure that this would give away how anxious I was while waiting.

Finally, after seven minutes had passed, I jumped when the door buzzed. I heard the receptionist answer and the shuffle of someone entering the building before a soft knock sounded at my door.

“Your client is here,” the receptionist said, opening the door just slightly and peering into the room. Letting the door shut behind them, I heard them make their way back to the main office.

I took one last deep breath and a quick cooling sip of water before I left my room. The unknown was about to unfold as I formally entered the relationship with Marjorie.

From the first look, I could tell she was flustered.

Excuses spilt out as she rushed in. I picked up bits of the story as it tumbled out, something about traffic and people on the road. The bus was delayed, and then she missed her stop and had to backtrack, running the last few blocks. She looked windblown, her cheeks flushed. Somehow, it was not her fault but the fault of those around her. She apologised repeatedly as I gave her a soft smile and introduced myself, gesturing for her to follow me down the hall and back into the comfort of my room.

As we took our seats, I noticed that Marjorie kept her coat on, zipped all the way up to her chin. I settled into my seat, intentionally keeping my body language open, as if in a nonverbal reassurance that she, too, could relax here. Literally and figuratively. Her hands began to fidget, playing with a hair tie she had pulled from her wrist. She shifted uncomfortably in her seat, still apologising as she crossed one leg over the other. The contrast between us struck me, the way she unconsciously was communicating her anxiety through her actions as opposed to my very conscious and deliberate desire to convey a steady calmness. I leaned back into my seat, afraid of crowding her space, and let my hands rest in my lap. Every movement an intentional act.

Next to her, she set her backpack on the floor. A fleeting thought floated through my mind as I wondered about the intention behind carrying what looked like a heavy and full backpack as opposed

to a purse. Was she coming from somewhere, or going somewhere directly from here? I wondered what she might have brought with her. She reached into the front pocket and pulled out an oversized water bottle, drinking deep gulps as she tried and failed to calm her breathing. I wondered again about her preparedness. Considering what all these little pieces of her might mean, wondered where they came from. I sat silently watching her as she finally began to settle into the space physically.

Marjorie was both somehow exactly what I had thought she would be and entirely different. She reminded me of so many people I knew from home, from the way she was dressed to the way she spoke, quickly with animated, exaggerated hands gesturing wildly around her as she continued to complain about her journey here today and how much easier it had been when she had her initial assessment. How, because of that, she had underestimated how much time she would need to get to the office today. Still, she continued to apologise repeatedly. While I had assumed she might be a perfectly tailored and zipped-up professional, Marjorie was actually a bit chaotic. She had long dark hair pulled back in a messy ponytail and well-worn, scuffed Dr. Martens.

She left little space for me in the room, little space for me to speak or even think. At this point, I realised I had yet to speak more than to say “hello” in the reception area. I was feeling overwhelmed by her, not because she was unfriendly, in fact, I quickly assessed that she was very personable, but because she was unrelenting. Like a storm over the sea, she was the waves crashing down along the shore. Never coming up for air. As she spoke, the visual of an overflowing pot of boiling water came to mind, and I felt like I was desperately trying to turn down the heat or put on the lid to keep it contained⁸¹. I wondered instantly if this was how she was experienced by other people, like an uncontainable presence⁸².

Marjorie finally paused to take a breath. Recognising my opportunity, I finally forced my way in, saying something along the lines of “Yes, the traffic really can be unpredictable this time of year. I’m glad you were able to make it,” hoping I could squeeze my contracting in before we got too far, and I lost sense of direction within the session.

With those first words I spoke, her eyes lit up.

“Where are you from?” she asked excitedly. I smiled back at her, instantly realising why she was asking.

⁸¹ Grant 2002; experiencing strong feelings that do not fit in with the therapist’s sense of self

⁸² Bion 1970

“My accent gives me away immediately, doesn’t it?”

She nodded, “Mine too.”

I quickly debated how to answer her question, wondering if it was my need to connect or hers. Wondering if, after being so overwhelmed by her, I needed to bring some of myself into the room. Take up my own space. However, the genuine excitement in her tone had caught me off guard. It was something I had recognised in myself before, a need to grasp onto a tether from home.

“New Jersey,” I finally responded, keeping the answer brief and simple. Aware of the weight the decision to divulge or not to divulge holds. This felt like an important first moment between us, or maybe I was already hypersensitive to how I was being perceived and experienced.

“No way,” she smiled broadly back at me, “I’m from a small town in Connecticut. Two east coast girls randomly assigned to each other in Scotland - what are the odds! I honestly think that just might be fate!”.

While I smiled back at Marjorie, appreciating her enthusiasm, I thought to myself that it probably was not as random as she had thought, considering the large international community within Edinburgh and the significant number of Americans I regularly encountered. However, I could tell this connection was important to her. Just as it was to me, even given those stipulations. Once again, I found myself reflecting on our sameness. Growing up in neighbouring states at the same time, I again wondered how similar our experiences had been. What historic or cultural touchpoints did we share, what had we both lived through⁸³? Would it make it easier to connect since we had a shared experience? Or was I again forming assumptions? I felt desperate to ask what town in Connecticut, having spent a significant amount of time there, but pushed that to the side.

This revelation seemed to shift something in the energy between us, and I felt like we had officially broken the ice. Marjorie finally unzipped her jacket, revealing a bulky, oversized sweater, and settled back into her chair. Neatly folding her jacket and placing it on top of her bag. I felt myself let loose a breath I had not realised I was holding.

‘I can do this,’ I thought to myself before I finally segued us into our working contract. Reviewing the limits of confidentiality, the time and frequency of our meetings, and the limit of twenty sessions as per the policy of the organisation I worked for⁸⁴.

⁸³ Williams 2021

⁸⁴ Murdin 2000; thinking of the time-limited nature and how that impacts work done, ending from the beginning

Once I had covered the bounds of our work, I handed the floor back over to Marjorie, curious to see where she might lead us now. She took a deep breath, and I found myself mirroring her as I took a deep breath of my own. I steadied myself for what was sure to be an onslaught of information.

“Where do I even begin?” She laughed. When she first walked in, she was like a broken tap, words flooding out of her faster than I could shut the valve. However, now, with the attention fully handed over to her, it was as if she had suddenly lost all ability to speak.

1.3 How do we begin?

Marjorie had never been to therapy before, and I could feel her uncertainty now that the initial adrenaline of being late had worn off. We sat in an uncomfortable silence. The air around us felt stagnant and loaded with anticipation. Unease radiated off Marjorie, rippling from her across the room to me as she stared at me expectantly. Waiting for me to lead her, guide her toward the official beginning.

I listened to my own heartbeat pounding in my ears as I waited, watching as she continued to fidget with her hair tie. I realised that I was once again sitting perfectly still as if in an attempt to balance out her relentless fidgeting. Thinking again of that visual of water at a rolling boil, in my mind, I suddenly realised she needed me to help pour her into a larger pot as I continued sensing her need to be contained.

“Well,” I said, breaking the silence in the hopes of saving her from drowning in it. “I did read the notes from your initial assessment, but I would love to hear your story from you. What do you think is important for me to know? And, maybe, why did you choose to start counselling now? What are you hoping to do with the space?”

I tossed her a lifeline and hoped she would be able to grab on.

“Sure! Let’s see... Like I said, I was raised in Connecticut... I grew up in a standard two-parent house,” she finally started. Seeming relieved to have a prompt to guide her. “My parents got divorced after I moved away for university. I’m the youngest with two older brothers, so we used to joke that they were just waiting for the kids to grow up. Their divorce wasn’t too bad. I have some friends who survived nasty, toxic divorces when they were young. My parents are still good friends, they talk often and see each other a few times a month, but it was not an overly affectionate household. I don’t think I ever saw them kiss or even hug. I sometimes couldn’t tell if they even liked each other. It wasn’t a

shock for anyone when they got divorced... they never really seemed happy when they were married. My mom has a great boyfriend now who we all love, and they seem happy together... What else...," she let out another awkward laugh before continuing to list off any fact that came to mind. "My mom was a stay-at-home parent my whole childhood, and my dad works in finance and commutes to New York City. So, it was mostly just my mom doing the parenting, my dad was gone a lot. I guess I would consider our lifestyle to be privileged. We went on a lot of family vacations, and my brothers and I all went to private school. My oldest brother Cory is a physical therapist, and my middle brother Stephen is a software engineer, so I guess we all turned out alright..."

I found myself again cataloguing similarities. We both had two siblings and divorced parents who waited until all the children were out of the house.

"I'm close with my brothers. Cory is so smart and wise... I go to him for advice, and we talk on the phone at least once a week. Stephen is hilarious, he's always been the jokester of the family. An absolute class clown. My dad is just the biggest teddy bear, honestly. He played sports all through high school and university, he claims he could have gone pro," she said, shaking her head. A strand of hair slipped loose, which she pushed behind her ear. "He's a big softy now. He still works, so he's always busy. My mom's boyfriend has fit into the family well, too. He never had kids, but he's really jumped into being like a second father, he's a sweet guy."

As Marjorie spoke, I began to imagine a picturesque American upbringing. A big house in the suburbs with a white picket fence. A stereotypical family, a husband and wife with a few kids running around the yard. I made note of my own assumptions that were forming based on my knowledge of the area and were now tainting my mental image of Marjorie's life. Questions bubbled to the surface of my mind as she spoke, but I did not want to interrupt her now that she had begun. I wondered about the cause of her parents' divorce and considered how she was already dismissing her own experience, discrediting it because it was somehow less traumatic than other hypothetical divorces. I wondered about her relationship with her brothers, were they close in age? What did it mean for her that they went to private school and grew up privileged? I wondered what it meant that these were the facts of her life she thought I should know before anything else. I also noticed the way she described them all. She had warm words of praise for everyone except her mother, who was described in an almost sterile, factual way. I wondered what that meant, filing it away to mention later.

"I played a lot of sports in high school and always was... I guess you could say academically overachieving. I was involved in a lot of extracurriculars, my brothers were too," She continued. "Let's

see...” she said again, and I made a mental note of the way she described herself. Listing her achievements and statistics, devoid of any emotional context. “I went to Penn State for college... or I should say university... and I studied business when I first got there. I thought I wanted to follow in my dad’s footsteps, but I found it painfully boring, so I switched to English literature. I got my teaching certificate and started working at a high school in Philadelphia right after graduation. After a few years, though, I decided I needed a change of pace. So, I applied to graduate programmes here in Edinburgh.”

More images shifted through my mind as she spoke. I had friends who went to Penn State, the big state university in Pennsylvania, and knew what the campus looked like. I sorted through the information she had just shared, my mind snagging on thoughts about the implications of being high achieving, her change in academic pursuits, and the blasé way she brushed off a significant change like uprooting her life to start over in a new country. All these bits of information seemed to be glimpses into something deeper that was occurring, although it was still out of reach. I felt like, in time, all these little pieces would come together into something meaningful.

There was a natural pause in her speaking, and I wondered if I should jump in. I thought of how, in traditional conversational turns, this would be my opportunity to share my background and history. Something in me itched to speak, to offer what I knew of Penn State or Connecticut. To share that I also had two siblings. That I also had worked in a high school back home. That in any other world, we might have become close friends. Instead, I smiled and nodded as Marjorie continued to elaborate about what she had studied here, how she had found her current teaching job, and her ongoing debate of whether she wanted to stay in Scotland. At this time, she was leaning towards staying but was trying to be realistic about how difficult that might be.

Again, I wanted to scream “Me too!”.

I stole a moment to look at the clock quickly and realised how close we were to our time. The beginning of our session had felt clumsy, but I was pleased that we had settled into a more comfortable rhythm. Marjorie had stopped speaking and was looking off somewhat thoughtfully out of the window behind me. My head was spinning with all the information she had given me in that factual rundown of her life. She gave me the impression that she was ultimately eager to be in therapy but unsure where to begin, uncertain of the relationship, and unsure of how to trust the space.

“And what are you hoping to do with your time here? Is there a certain reason you’ve decided to start counselling?” I asked.

“Well...” she looked thoughtfully. “I feel like there are a lot of things in my life that I have never really talked about. Like I said, I was high-achieving in school and put a lot of pressure on myself to be perfect and successful. I think that’s led to a lot of stress and anxiety now. I have a really hard time taking breaks or resting, and I feel like I’m just on the edge of burning out. I also think there’s some relationship stuff that I need to work through. I keep getting into these toxic relationships, and it’s just become a cycle... I’d love to understand why I keep letting people into my life who continue to treat me like crap. I also have always struggled a lot with my body image and confidence. When I was an athlete in school, I had strict exercise and diets that I stuck with, and I think that damaged my relationship with my body. I’ve gained a lot of weight since I stopped playing sports, and that also hasn’t helped. I feel bad about myself most of the time if I’m honest...” She trailed off and began to toy with the hair tie around her wrist again. She shifted in her chair before continuing. “I don’t really know why now, but I guess if not now, when?” Marjorie laughed awkwardly. I got the sense that the honest disclosure had made her uncomfortable, and she was desperately attempting to retreat to safer territory.

“I think those all sound like things we can explore here. I also think we may find that some, or all, of those things are connected somehow. I’m getting the sense that there is some underlying theme here, and maybe that theme will emerge throughout our work together. It’s a great place to start, though, and like you said, as good a time as any!” I gave her a reassuring smile, hoping to breathe some light and warmth into her trepidation.

“Yes,” she smiled back, “I suppose so.”

Something about her response, though, felt like it was only half an answer, like there was more to her motivation than she was consciously aware of. The sentiment felt shallow and seemed to hold only part of her truth. As we sat together, I felt like I was still left wondering why she had chosen to start counselling now and what she was hoping to do with our time together, but I was looking forward to finding out where that time would lead us. It felt as if there were no pressing or urgent concerns, no sudden life circumstance that had brought her to me, but there was a feeling that things were bubbling just under the surface, things that soon would overflow and spill further than she could reach to mop up. A general uncertainty, discomfort, or sadness that lingered. Waiting to be explored. Marjorie seemed to want to gain a greater understanding of herself, of her life, of the relationships of

her past and the memories that she couldn't quite seem to silence. I offered that I had hoped we could do those things together. I hoped that I had managed to provide a seamless transition out of our first, awkward introduction and into the rest of our work together.

I glanced toward the clock and was surprised to see that we had somehow managed to go over our time.

"Well, that is us for today... Same day and time next week?" I asked, hoping I had somehow done enough to encourage Marjorie to come back and continue working with me. My insecurity and self-doubt hung in the air as I waited for her answer, hoping I had passed the test of the first session.

"Yes, that sounds good to me. You're so easy to talk to," she laughed. "I was so nervous for today, I was so scared about what you might be like... but this has been so easy... I guess that's the point!"

"Well, it is nice to hear that, I'm glad it feels better than you'd imagined. It is a strange relationship to enter into." I let out a quiet breath of relief as we both stood, Marjorie pulling her coat back on and her bag over her shoulder as she followed me out of the room and back down the hall.

After I walked Marjorie to the door, I returned to my room to write my notes from our session. Even though I sat alone in silence, I could still feel her energy lingering in the air. What had been a buzz of nervous energy before I met her was now an anticipation of what might come next. That fear was replaced with curiosity as I mulled over the questions that had come up for me during our session. I found myself wanting to know more, wanting to understand better. As I reflected, I was surprised by how eager I was to begin. There was something so familiar about Marjorie. Again, I felt that if I had met her in another phase of life, another setting, another relationship, that we might have been friends. Her story and her mannerisms so strongly reminded me of home, and I was caught off guard by the wave of homesickness that had come into the room with her. There was also something about her that pulled at me, a lot of what she said resonated with me and made me think about my own life. My own story felt like it ran parallel to hers, and I was struck by what that raised in me. As I thought back to our session and how I was able to picture places she spoke of based on my own memories, I wondered what that would mean for us and our future work. I wondered what of my own might come into the room with Marjorie each week.

My fingers hovered over my keyboard as I debated how to begin my notes. We had covered so much ground in that initial session. She had given me so much information that it felt impossible to

summarise. I felt almost dizzy. I wondered whether the overwhelm I was feeling was actually mine. Wondering if, instead, I had been left holding Marjorie's⁸⁵. The strongest feeling I was left with was the labour that would need to be done on my end to hold us within our space and time together^{86,87}. Throughout our session, I had felt this incredible sensation of her spilling over. Even now, I felt like she had leaked out into the room and left part of her behind. Somewhere along the way, in her early development, I wondered if Marjorie had lacked the containment to learn and experience emotions safely. I thought again of the way she had skipped over describing her mother, the primary caregiver, who I assumed was the key to this. I thought of the work Bion and Winnicott had done on holding and containing environments in counselling and knew this would be my first task^{89,90}. I was to be that container so Marjorie could use the space to learn how to process and regulate her emotions without being overwhelmed, so she could develop the capacity to tolerate and process intense emotions⁹¹. I just had to work on not letting myself become overwhelmed by her. I found myself wondering if this was how others experienced her, or if this was her experience of life around her⁹². Was she overwhelming to encounter?

As I finally began to type, I felt I was circling around these questions about Marjorie's mother and early childhood. Feeling drawn most to those themes, I hoped I would have a chance to ask.

I hoped she would come back.

One week later, I found myself nervously sitting in my room again when suddenly the buzzer rang out a few minutes before our scheduled time.

Relief washed over me. I would have another chance.

I had done enough that first week.

⁸⁵ Grant 2002

⁸⁶ Winnicott 1960

⁸⁷ Bion 1970

⁸⁹ Winnicott 1960

⁹⁰ Bion 1970

⁹¹ Minsky 1996

⁹² Grant 2002

As the next couple of weeks passed, Marjorie and I fell into a comfortable routine.

Each week, she arrived exactly five minutes before her scheduled time. She would come in, drop her heavy backpack beside her, and drape her coat over the back of her chair. She would tell me about her week, her frustrations at work, recent drama amongst her friends, and what she was planning to do that upcoming weekend. While the time in our sessions passed quickly, she was always quick to talk and could fill every passing second with an endless stream of chatter, I felt like we were just bobbing along the surface. We were hovering just on the edge of something. I could sense that there was something there that was being left unsaid.

While I could feel it, I did not know how to reach it. I wanted to be more forceful, more direct, but for some reason, I felt timid. Conflicted. I wanted to give Marjorie the space she needed to build rapport and trust, but I was also itching to get started. I felt the ticking of the clock as we marched slowly toward our twenty-session limit. Aware that we were working towards our ending, even though we had just begun⁹³. I felt this strain in our work, as my wish for slow, open-ended work conflicted with the nature of the counselling centre where I worked. The push against my psychodynamic instincts to be more focused, goal-oriented and task-oriented.

The week leading up to our fourth session, I brought this dilemma to my clinical supervisor.

“I know there is so much there, just under the surface, but I cannot figure out how to get to it,” I said pleadingly.

“Where do you think this is coming from?”

I had to sit and think about this for a minute. Wondering what of mine was coming into the room, as this pressure to be productive in some way.

“Well,” I finally said, “I am aware of the limited nature of our work. I think some clients come in, and it feels like they get right to business. The work begins right away. I think with clients who need more space and more time, I feel the pressure. I think I also am struggling with a need to feel helpful.”

“Can you expand on that?”

“Um...” I paused to consider what that might mean. “Sometimes I worry that I’m not really doing much of anything with my client. I want to be helpful and productive, I guess... I am aware

⁹³ Murdin 2000

sometimes that my sessions, especially these first few with Marjorie, can feel like more of a chat than doing any work.”

“Does it always have to be productive? It sounds like that is more a need of yours than a need of the client.” Her words hit their mark, feeling like an important distinction in what I was trying to bring to supervision⁹⁴. My needs as the therapist versus my client's needs. “I’m hoping it’s not actually ‘just a chat’, I’m assuming it’s not,” my supervisor continued. “But even in time-limited work, you cannot push the client forward before they’re ready. All you can do is meet them where they are. However, you do work within a time frame. So maybe this week you could work on being more directive, more focused on what the goal is.”

I left supervision with a clearer question: what did Marjorie need? How was it different from what I needed? I sat with these questions long after our meeting, scribbling winding thoughts and feelings in my notebook. The more I sat with it, the more I considered that all the pressure I was feeling to get it right and do a good job was purely coming from me. I thought of Winnicott. Isn’t that the entire premise of being “good enough”⁹⁵? That perfection is unachievable, and it is enough to offer my client the space they needed, the actual versus the fantasy⁹⁶. Why did this not feel good enough for me? What was I expecting to happen? Did I expect or need to feel like a massive breakthrough was happening each week to feel like we were moving forward? Did we need to be moving forward or anywhere at all?

The questions circled and spiraled, weaving their way in and out of my thoughts as I tried to move forward with my day. I kept coming back to what I might be bringing into the room with me. I considered what my supervisor had said. Was my need to be productive and useful impinging on Marjorie’s process? Maybe she needed more time before she would feel like she could open up, and maybe giving her space to do so was precisely what she needed, but the guilt of my own need consumed me. We only had so much time, and no matter how easy it was to say rationally that being there each week and providing her first experience of therapy might be enough for now. Irrationally, I was consumed by the worry that our sessions could easily become more of a friendship than a useful therapeutic hour. I decided to move toward something in the middle, and I went into that next session with a plan. I thought if I could be a bit more directive, a bit more questioning, I could pull us out of

⁹⁴ Murdin 2000

⁹⁵ Minsky 1996

⁹⁶ Minsky 1996

this lull and into something deeper.

However, this proved to be a great lesson on the true nature of therapy. No matter how prepared, no matter what our goal is as the therapist, ultimately, the client is leading the session. Everything I had planned to say was thrown out the window when Marjorie came in.

That week, I could tell there was a shift in her energy. She was tightly wound in a way that reminded me of our first session, but unlike that time, which felt like a hyper, boundless energy, this felt like a building anxiety. I thought I was picking up fear, maybe worry? I struggled to put words to it, but something was different.

“How are you this week?” I asked when we settled into our chairs.

“Well...,” she started. We sat in a long silence, pregnant with anticipation. Marjorie looked at her hands, folded in her lap, as her chest rose and fell with deep, calming breaths. I could almost hear her heart beating across the room and could feel the waves of anxiety rippling off her. My own breathing became more laboured as those waves crashed into me. I could feel the anticipation in the air and wondered what she was hesitating to bring.

“I wanted to talk about my mom...,” Marjorie began, leaving the sentence unfinished.

I nodded.

Then I added after a long stretch of silence, “But something is holding you back?”

“Whenever I speak about her, it’s almost as if she’s suddenly in the room with me. Her presence is inescapable. Like she’s listening to me talking about her, sucking all the air out of the room with her,” She braced herself and reached for her phone to check it was turned off before continuing with a small laugh. “Any time I start talking about her, I check to make sure I haven’t accidentally called her or something. It’s like she’s always there, always listening. It’s so ridiculous and paranoid, but I can’t help it. I feel like I’m being swallowed alive by the shame when I talk about her.”

I sat still, fighting a strange urge that rose in me to check my own phone as if I had also somehow called my mother⁹⁷. I thought back to a conversation I had with a friend the year before, she joked about how she always turned her phone off before saying anything negative about her mother.

⁹⁷ Grant 2002

Anxiety and fear pulsed through the smile she had offered as if to make a light joke out of it. As if that statement said more than she ever could about their complicated relationship. I marvelled at the shared sentiment. The shared fear or shame surrounding our relationship with our mothers.

The room suddenly felt full, as if both of our mothers occupied the space behind us as we sat silently facing each other. Looking over our shoulders like a looming, ghostly shadow.

“What did you want to speak about?” I said, breaking the silence once again. Recognising this was now not just an attempt to save Marjorie from the weight of our silence, but also to save myself as I was beginning to feel overwhelmed by it⁹⁸. It was a suffocating pressure, one that was heavy with a fear that I could not place or understand but knew was not mine⁹⁹. What was she worried about saying? Was she worried about the content of what she wanted to bring or about the judgment she might receive after saying it out loud?

“I find her hard to talk about, but if I’m being honest, I think she is the reason for so many things in my life. The reason I originally reached out for counselling was because I thought it was time I finally talked to someone about it. It’s complicated. We’re very close, and she’s never done anything actually wrong... so I feel a lot of guilt talking about our relationship. I don’t want it to be perceived as me talking badly about her because she is a great mom, and I feel like I have been lucky... Have you heard of the book *I’m Glad My Mom Died*¹⁰⁰?” I shook my head no. “Oh well, it was written by Jennette McCurdy, I don’t know if you remember her, she was on Nickelodeon when we were younger. It’s a great memoir about her life, but a lot of it is focused on this toxic, abusive relationship with her mom. It’s mostly stories about their relationship that she couldn’t talk about, write about, or process until after her mom had died. I mean... It was an unhealthy dynamic that took her mom literally dying for her to feel safe enough to say it out loud. I feel like that sounds so extreme to reference that, but I’ve felt that way sometimes. That there are things in my relationship with my mom that I won’t be able to talk about or process until after she’s dead and I don’t have to be afraid of the consequences... That sounds so horrible. I, of course, do not want my mom to die, and our relationship is nowhere near as bad as Jennette’s. But it makes me think of that sometimes, like, what am I afraid to say out loud because I’m afraid of how she might respond? What if I am never able to be fully honest with how

⁹⁸ Grant 2002

⁹⁹ Grant 2002.

¹⁰⁰ McCurdy 2022

I feel about her? What if I am so worried about protecting her and making sure her feelings are not hurt, that I just continue to hurt and hide my own?"

My thoughts buzzed with images and questions. However, the first thought I was able to grab onto was the shame in what Marjorie had just shared¹⁰². The way she managed to contradict herself and say so much while saying very little. There was so much guilt and worry that I might be judging her mother, that I might think she had been a bad mother or had explicitly done something wrong intentionally.

"Okay," I responded slowly, "It sounds like there is a lot of fear and worry tangled up in that. I'm wondering if you can tell me a little bit more about it?"

"It's hard for me to put into words... It's more of a feeling. Like, I'm going to hurt her feelings if I say how I really feel. I don't know why I feel like I need to protect her, but I have always felt that way. I have always been responsible for taking care of her feelings. I also want to, though, I'm sure that doesn't make any sense, but it's both something I feel like I have to do and something I want to do. I don't know how to find the words for that, but I never want to hurt her. I never want her to feel bad or be upset, and I do everything I can to keep her happy..."

We sat in silence a while longer while Marjorie seemed to chew over what she had just said. I was hoping she would continue. It felt like something important we would need to pull apart and explore. Why did she feel like her mother's feelings were more important than her own? And why was she responsible for them?

There was an air of guilt to the way Marjorie spoke, as if even talking about her mother was a betrayal. I found it incredibly precarious, like she was speaking carefully as if fearful of not only how her words would be perceived, but how I would, in turn, perceive her mother differently. A woman I had never and would never meet. I found myself wondering, what did she care if I thought poorly of her? Why did it matter that I had a positive opinion of her? What is it about mothers that has everyone talking so carefully?

At the same time, I could relate to the sentiment. I also find myself hesitant, lowering my voice as if my mother is going to appear behind me if I begin talking about her. In any other relationship, we openly complain and gripe about misdeeds, but mothers seem to live above it all on a

¹⁰² Kavner, McNab, Byng-Hall, Mason, Flaskas, and Perlesz 2005

mythological pedestal. Untouchable, infallible. And when they do fail, somehow that shame is ours to hold.

There was something so tentative about the way she spoke about her mother that I was scared to come in, worried that I would cause her to back away from the subject completely. I gave her space, waiting to see if she would be able to continue. Eventually, the silence felt so heavy I thought I might drown. The ticking of the small clock on the table between us echoing throughout the room. A literal reminder of the time constraint ticking by between us.

She started again slowly, as if choosing her words carefully, “I mean, on the surface, she didn’t do anything wrong, you know? We had a beautiful home, and she cared a lot about what people thought of it. We always had a team of landscapers and a house cleaner who came every weekend. She always decorated for every holiday. She cared a lot about how we looked also, me and my brothers were always well groomed,” she said with a laugh. “We had new clothes every school year, lunches packed fresh each morning, and dinner on the table every night. I almost feel like I can’t complain. I know people who had it so much worse...” Marjorie trailed off again. She began to fidget nervously, playing with a string hanging from the hem of her sweater. She shifted in her chair, crossing one leg over the other before switching legs over again.

The silence stretched between us, Marjorie’s words hovering just at the edge of a cliff.

I wondered if she would start speaking again, as I felt her pulling further away from me. I recalled our first meeting when she seemed so stuck on where or how to begin, and I wondered if we were there once again. Like I had then, I threw Marjorie another lifeline to help pull her from her silence and asked, “What was your relationship with her like when you were growing up?” Instantly wondering if I was offering her a safe retreat for her sake or for mine.

“Oh,” She seemed genuinely caught off guard by my breaking into her thoughtful reflection, and I wondered what I had interrupted. “When I was very little, I think it was like I was her doll. My older brothers were, I’ve been told, a lot of work. They were super active kids who were always running around and yelling and generally making a mess, I think the usual boy stuff mostly... My mom always wanted a daughter, so it was exciting for her when I finally came along. My brothers are six and eight years older than me, so I was the new baby for a long time. My mom would always dress me up in these ridiculous outfits. We have so many pictures of me in these frilly, pink dresses and with big, ridiculous bows on my head, even when I had barely any hair. When I got a little bit older, she tried to

put me in stereotypical little girl activities like ballet and gymnastics, but I just wanted to be like my brothers. I wanted to run around outside and play in the mud. Eventually, we compromised, and she put me in soccer, sorry football,” she laughed and gave me a conspiratorial grin. “Both of my brothers played throughout high school, and Cory, my oldest brother, played at university. I think that was the first time there was... friction, I guess. The first time, I wanted to be different from what she wanted me to be. My mom has always been someone who loves shopping and getting her nails done. God, that sounds so painfully stereotypical. But I think she wanted a daughter who liked those kinds of things too, and I just didn’t. I wasn’t like her... Not that I have anything against shopping or getting my nails done, but I would just rather spend my time doing other things...”

I nodded, images of a young Marjorie chasing her older brothers floated through my mind. I considered what it might have been like for her, a little girl who wanted to be like her brothers. A little girl full of energy who wanted to have the freedom she watched her brothers have. Instead, she was squeezed into restrictive clothing and activities that bored her. Stifling her expression and her developing sense of self¹⁰³, preventing her from discovering her true passions and interests.

I shared this reflection with her, asking if that felt accurate.

“Yeah, I think so...,” she said thoughtfully. “She wanted me to be something I was not. She had all these expectations of what having a daughter would be like, and sometimes I think the reality of it just didn’t match those expectations. I think I disappointed her. I felt it more as I got older. When I got old enough to choose how I wanted to dress, what I wanted to do, and who I wanted to be friends with. When she began to lose control over me because I wasn’t just a little doll for her to play with, that’s when our relationship started to get really tense.”

I let this hang in the air while I thought through what she had said. Before us, I saw two threads branching out. One direction saw us exploring what it meant that she was afraid or nervous to talk about these feelings. I so badly wanted to ask what she was so afraid of. What could the consequences possibly be? She was an adult now who lived across the ocean from her mother. And why did she feel like it was her responsibility to protect her mother in this way? The other direction would lead us to explore the notion of disappointing our mothers. What happens when we are not what they expect? What happens when they ultimately reject us because of that? I did not want to

¹⁰³ Minsky 1996

push Marjorie in either direction, but I was already sensing how these two themes may connect to the things Marjorie had previously brought into the room.

Tentatively, I decided to share this thinking with Marjorie.

“There are a few themes in what you’re saying that keep coming up for me. Mostly centred on why there may be this sense of shame in sharing about your mother, I’m wondering what the consequences would be, and where the responsibility lies¹⁰⁴. Another theme is this idea of what happens when we disappoint or are rejected by our mothers... I’m mindful,” I said, “that even my saying that might push you in a direction. Or maybe that I’ve made some connection that doesn’t land or feel accurate for you. These are just the things that came to mind for me while you were talking.”

For some reason, I felt apprehensive saying it, but then, just as the words came out of my mouth, images of my own mother quickly flitted through my mind. Instantly, I began questioning the connections I had formed. I was unsure if I was offering something for Marjorie or for myself as I realised my own feelings had slipped in somewhere along the way. So much of what she had said had resonated deeply with my own experience, her feelings and fears resonating within me. Again, feeling the same but different. My story was different, but the results were so similar. I wondered if I was offering her something she needed to hear or something I had needed to say. Maybe it was something I wished to hear myself, soothing my fears by saying it out loud.

“Yeah, maybe,” she said, breaking through my spiralling train of thought. “I hadn’t really thought of it that way, but maybe it is leading toward either, or both, of those directions. I think I just need to talk about it, say things out loud that I’ve never said before. I think over time, I would like to get to a place where I feel like I can talk about it without feeling that guilt, and so I can process what has happened between us. I want to have a relationship with her, but I think I need to work on managing my expectations of that. I so desperately want to have that close mother-daughter relationship, I want us to have that. But maybe that isn’t entirely realistic... I don’t know...”¹⁰⁵

I nodded, understanding the pull for closeness, wrapped up in a complicated history.

¹⁰⁴ Pajaczowska and Ward 2008

¹⁰⁵ Goldberg 2016

As if even that initial disclosure was too much for Marjorie, she somehow managed to seamlessly steer the session away from her mother and back toward something happening currently in her friend group.

It felt as if we were coming up for air with a gasping breath.

She rambled on, moving further from her mother. Yet I felt like her mother never fully left the room. As she continued talking, my mind drifted. Letting her move us further away from the topic of mothers. I felt both mindful that she might need space before she felt ready to go back into it and grateful that she was giving me an out for today. I noted how that felt, like relief washing over me as I realised I needed to take this moment to create some space between us. Pushing my mother's face from my mind, I forced my attention to focus back on Marjorie. While I was hearing the words she was saying, as the minutes ticked by, it felt like her shadow lingered behind me, just out of view, trying to push her way back in.

This was about her and her mother, I reminded myself, not me and mine.

When Marjorie left, I sat for a while in the silence that lingered. As I wrote my notes, I realised I was still imagining Marjorie's mother and picturing my own. I wondered if they looked alike. If they were the same age. If they might have similar interests and tastes. Like Marjorie and me, what cultural and social context did they share? I thought to myself how they had raised women who were so similar, they must share some of these traits. I wondered how I would describe my relationship with my mother to someone new, what context would be left in and what would be left out. What did the selective storytelling mean for my narrative?

As I sat in silence, my ears once again picked up on the steady sound of the seconds ticking by. Time seemed to expand and stretch in our sessions. At times, an endless hour, and at others, a quick snap bringing me back into the present. I could not find the words to capture the experience, but something tugged on the edges of my awareness.

1.4 A developing identity

The following week, we sat together in what was becoming a very comfortable silence. There was a notable shift from previous silences, ones that felt like a vacuum or a bottomless cavern. For me,

this silence felt more like a cocoon, something soothing and relaxed. I was waiting to see where that day would lead us when Marjorie finally spoke.

“I was thinking about being a teenager recently and had this one memory pop up,” she said, her tone light and casual. “I must’ve been... thirteen? I had a major emo phase, which now feels humiliating,” she said and laughed. “Like the full thing, the thick black eyeliner, two-toned hair with side bangs, band t-shirts, checkered vans. I always wore this gross black hoodie that I had cut thumb holes into. I thought I looked so cool and edgy...” Marjorie laughed again. Her eyes were distant as she imagined a different version of herself. One that seemed very removed from the adult in front of me, wearing corded trousers and a white turtleneck. I thought of myself at the same age, also embarking on my first disastrous attempt at self-discovery.

She continued, “But I mean, come on, I was an awkward kid... I definitely did not look like the cool kids on MySpace and Tumblr. In my mind, I did, but now looking at pictures, it’s a joke that I thought I was giving that same energy... Anyway, I remember this one weekend, one of our neighbours down the street was having a big party and everyone was invited. She was actually one of my mom’s close friends, and I’d babysit for their family all the time, so it was just a casual thing. My friend and I walked over a little bit later. I think my parents had gone early to help set up or something. I was looking forward to it because I knew all the kids on the street would be coming, and my friend and I had gotten ready and thought we looked so cool. When we walked into the neighbour’s house, before we saw anyone, my mom was on top of us, literally grabbing me by my arm and dragging me and my friend into a side room. She was livid. She asked us what we were thinking dressing like that. She said we looked trashy and that if we wanted to come to the party, we needed to go home, scrub the makeup off, and change. She said that we were embarrassing her, and we needed to leave immediately. I was so stunned, this was just like... a casual party, like I don’t think it was a holiday or anything, not a special occasion, not meeting a bunch of new people. And I remember feeling so hurt because I was trying to figure out my new identity, that age is so hard when you’re still so young, but are trying so hard not to be seen as a little kid anymore. I was so embarrassed. It was so unexpected. This was early into my experimenting with wearing emo makeup and clothes, but we didn’t look any more embarrassing than any other thirteen-year-old trying out a new identity. I cried the whole walk home, and we decided to skip the party. Neither of us wanted to walk back in there.”

I left a long pause after she finished, and she looked lost in thought at the memory, having pulled me in with her. The present felt harsh and bright compared to the hazy nostalgia that had

settled over us. I sat there considering what she had said, how fresh the wound felt even though more than 15 years had passed, how this story served as just one example of the relationship that existed between the two of them.

I suddenly found myself incredibly interested in why this memory had resurfaced, what about it had rippled across the years.

Struggling to find the words, I said, “This pain still feels so fresh, like it is still so present,”.

“It is,” she nodded in agreement. “I think, honestly, it’s one of the first moments where I felt like I was not good enough for my mom¹⁰⁶. Like I was not up to her standards, I was not who she thought I should be and not only that, but she was clearly incredibly embarrassed by me. By something I was doing... or more than that, she was embarrassed by how I looked and how I had decided to present myself. By whom I decided to be. I was becoming someone independent of her, she could no longer choose what I wore and how I looked. And she hated that. She hated that I would have an identity separate from hers¹⁰⁸.” She paused again. “You know what’s also funny? I remember years later, I was at my grandparents’, going through old pictures, and I found this one I hadn’t seen before of my mom. She was a teenager, probably only a year or two older than I had been the day of the party, and she had this thick, dramatic eyeliner. She was wearing a band t-shirt and was sitting in her room smoking a cigarette, ironically, the room I was sitting in, looking at this picture, and her walls were just covered with posters and art. It felt so... hypocritical? I thought of all the times she’d yelled at me about my makeup being too dark, or days like that party when she said how I looked was embarrassing, and I just couldn’t believe it. How she hated the way I covered my bedroom walls with posters. She had been just like me.”

Those words landed somewhere deep within me. That once, like Marjorie, her mother had been just a girl experimenting with her own identity. I wondered how she had been met by her own mother, Marjorie’s grandmother. How the criticism she had received shaped her into the mother she would become. Had her mother scolded her? Had she been made to feel ashamed, the way she in turn made Marjorie? Had she, too, been rejected?

I sat with what Marjorie had said. Letting her hurt and frustration hang in the air.

“It also feels like a rejection,” I paused, thinking of how I would approach this. “You were exploring a new identity, testing out who you might want to be in that confusing time between

¹⁰⁶ Streep 2009

¹⁰⁸ Goldberg 2016

childhood and adolescence. The awkward fumbling when you are finally able to make choices about how you dress and what you do, instead of your parents deciding for you. You weren't asking your mom to like the same things you like, but maybe you were hoping to be accepted as you explored. But it sounds like it was a harsh, cold rejection. One that has left quite a lasting impact on you. It makes me think of something you have said before, about feeling like your mother wanted you to be this little doll that she could dress and shape into someone different from who you are. I wonder if this is something you feel has led to this tension between the two of you, a disconnect in your relationship? I wonder if this memory signifies the beginning of that rift. That initial separation or splitting?"

Marjorie stared out the window thoughtfully. She sat very still with her hands resting folded in her lap. "I knew she wouldn't like everything I liked, I mean, I was listening to some pretty angry screamo," Marjorie laughed yet again. I wondered if it was out of discomfort. It felt bitter, not humorous. Like, there was genuine anger in her words, but she was trying to brush it off as if it did not still bother her, even though it clearly did.

"But yeah," she continued, "it did feel like she wasn't just rejecting the music I liked, or the way I wanted to do my makeup. It felt like she was rejecting me as a person. I wonder if she even remembers this. It was such a quick, small moment. She probably forgot it happened the minute we walked out the door and didn't even realise we never came back. We never talked about it or mentioned it again. She didn't even say anything to me when they got home later that night."

Sitting with this, I found myself thinking about Marjorie's mother. Here, a clear line had been drawn, a moment that separated her daughter from herself. In this moment, Marjorie went from being her mother's doll, a plaything she could shape and dress in her image, into her own independent person. Someone autonomous who could choose their own way, even if that way was vastly different from the fantasy of their mother. I wondered if this caused a crisis for Marjorie's mother. Marjorie's moving into her own adulthood also signified a significant change in her mother's life¹⁰⁹. She, too, was moving from one phase of life into another¹¹⁰.

"I wonder if we could stay with this... this feeling of being rejected. There are a lot of threads in front of me... The moment when you found that photo of her has really struck me also. I can't help but think something is being repeated, maybe an interaction she had with her own mother, now

¹⁰⁹ Streep 2009

¹¹⁰ Streep 2009; "the coincidence of certain life stages - a daughter's adolescence and her mother's entry into midlife, for example - can often provoke a crisis for the mother, one with deep and far-reaching implications," page 9

playing out again in a new way¹¹¹? I keep wondering what she was like as a teenager, what ways she rebelled and whether she was rejected for it. There is something in the unspoken nature of it, too. That it was never acknowledged, that you still have never acknowledged it and yet continue to carry it. I'm not sure why, but I'm struggling to find the words, but there is something taking shape. Some connection my brain is desperately trying to pin down and grab onto. Something that feels just beyond our awareness..." I trailed off, aware that I had begun to ramble and was rapidly losing any sense of direction or purpose. It felt intangible still.

"Yeah, I can't find the words either, but I think I know where you're going. It's funny to think about how my mom had been when she was young. She grew into such a classic housewife, like she really has embraced that coastal grandmother look... but when she was young, she was pretty rebellious."

"You know, I read once something along the lines of 'mothers who love their daughters care about how they're perceived by society¹¹²'.... that author called them the 'Big Three', the 'three topics that are often the source of contention between mothers and daughters: hair, clothes, and weight,¹¹⁴'... There is this expectation of how a woman should be, should appear, and that when your mother criticises your appearance, it is in an attempt to push you more toward what she sees as an acceptable appearance. It causes a lot of tension when her perception of what is acceptable by society's standards is different from what you actually want."

"So, in an attempt to shield me from being hurt by greater society, she opted to hurt me herself?" Marjorie replied sarcastically.

"I suppose so..."

"How is it that our mothers can be both our biggest cheerleaders and our harshest critics? They want us to be accepted by society, but are incapable of accepting us ourselves? Yet, through it all, we are so desperate for their approval and love. It seems messy."

"I think one of our deepest wishes is to be seen and understood by our mothers¹¹⁶."

"I think so too... I feel like I am always desperately screaming for my mother to just see me for me, to just accept and love me for who I am. Not this idea she had of who I could be, or some fantasy for what she imagined a perfect daughter would be like¹¹⁷. But the full picture, the good, the bad, the

¹¹¹ Goldberg 2016; recreating the relationship we have with our mothers in other relationships

¹¹² Tannen 2006, page 124

¹¹⁴ Tannen 2006, page 124

¹¹⁶ Tannen 2006

¹¹⁷ Streep 2009

truth. And still unconditionally love me. Her love feels conditional. It feels like it depends on ... I don't know what..." Marjorie trailed off. Her words had become heated, vicious. Coated in the anger of hurt. "I honestly feel so foolish talking about it. I don't know why it feels embarrassing to admit it."

I let the silence settle over us again like a warm embrace, soothing away the pain.

1.5 Carrying our shadows: When the past comes into the present

The following week, when Marjorie entered the room, it felt as if she was no longer entering alone. After two weeks of discussing her mother, I felt like the shadow of that relationship was following closely behind as she took her seat across from me. The air felt heavy with anticipation, it crackled around us like static electricity.

Her mother's influence lingered, almost like she was in the room with us, as I felt the past threatening to overwhelm the present. In previous weeks, I had felt like Marjorie was working in the present tense. Like everything she was bringing into the room was something current for her, her day-to-day life experiences that were influenced by her life outside the room. Today felt different. It felt like we were firmly sitting in the past. We had drawn attention to the ghosts, to the way her mother influenced her, and now we could not ignore that.

"Sometimes I feel like my relationship with my mom has influenced all of my other relationships."

I looked up at Marjorie expectantly, waiting for her to continue. The silence stretched on, and I worried she might just leave it there, retreating like she had in past sessions.

Finally, she spoke again. "I've always struggled with being really anxious in relationships, friendships and romantic relationships. Whenever my boyfriend is upset about something, I spiral into every single thing I've ever done. I ask him if he's mad at me or if I've done something wrong over and over until he actually is mad at me. I can't just roll it off when people are in bad moods around me, I always assume it's something I've done or that they're mad at me. I apologise constantly. Then I feel like it's my responsibility to make them happy again. Even when it usually has nothing to do with me or anything I've done."

"You take on a role of being responsible for the emotions of others," I said absently, still processing and forming connections in what Marjorie had said. I thought back to our initial session,

how strongly I felt the need to find a way to contain someone who had given the impression of being uncontainable¹¹⁸. Was this how she often experienced interacting with others?

“Oh. I always feel responsible for keeping people happy, keeping the mood light. It has affected my relationships, but it has also affected me. I always end up feeling unsatisfied or unfulfilled by friendships. Like I’m the one doing all of the work, putting in more effort than anyone else is.”

“That puts a lot of pressure on you. To constantly be aware, attuned to everyone else's emotions and responsible for managing them. I wonder if it is a learned response... a learned way of interacting with others, like you learned your role was to hold the feelings of others without leaving any space to hold your own. Your emotions, wants, and needs all end up taking the back burner, and other people become the priority instead of you.”

“That’s so true. I always, always put other people before myself. I always put their needs first, and I bend over backwards to make sure everything is okay. Then I get upset and angry when they take advantage of that, even though I’ve never shown them anything else... I think my mom’s influence comes out in other ways, too. Like, I always put so much pressure on myself... I set such high standards for myself, and then I can never meet them and am so hard on myself. I always perceive them as my failures...” I could sense there was something more Marjorie wanted to say. Something she was dancing around and avoiding, trying to pull back. I had wondered if this was a defence mechanism of hers, whenever something became too much, too serious, too painful, she would pull far away. Dragging us out of the discomfort and back to safety.

This time, I was reluctant to let her do so.

Digging in my heels, I forced us to remain in this discomfort.

“What do you mean by that? I feel like there is more to it that you would like to say,” I said, prompting her to continue.

“Well... I don’t know, it feels weird to say out loud. And it makes me feel like I’m being dramatic because I never went to treatment or told anyone, and it’s not like it was ever bad enough for anyone to notice...” I picked up on her once again diminishing her experience. She fidgeted in her seat, twisting her hair tie around her fingers like she often did when she was anxious, finally continuing.

“When I was in high school, I used to be extreme with my diet. I was very restrictive and counted every calorie. I played a lot of sports, so I think people mostly just thought I took my health

¹¹⁸ Cartwright 2013

and fitness seriously. I mean, I think most of the girls I competed with had eating disorders... It got worse when I started university. It was my first time on my own, and everything felt so overwhelming. It was the one thing I had full control over... I binged and purged a couple of times when I was really overwhelmed, but mostly I just stopped eating. When I came back home that first summer, all my friends from high school just told me how good I looked. My mom praised me for really 'keeping that freshman fifteen off'. It just reinforced the behaviour, if anything. I fainted on two occasions from not eating..."

I was caught off guard by the seriousness of Marjorie's disordered eating, remembering how she had qualified it at the beginning, downplaying the true nature.

"That seems like it got pretty serious," I said, trying to keep the shock out of my voice.

"Yeah... I guess so. It's funny, no matter how much weight I lost, no one knew the truth. I think because I never looked underweight, it was never concerning to anyone. Being away from people who actually know me also isolated me. No one who knew me was seeing me on a daily basis... during my last year at university, I went through a bad breakup, and I gained a bunch of weight back. I feel like in the years since then, I've been able to have a much healthier relationship with food and my body. But I have always felt like I'm too much, too big, too heavy... but also too loud. Like, I just generally take up too much space. I don't know if that makes any sense."

I nodded, feeling Marjorie's plea to be seen, to be heard, to be understood.

"I always kind of wondered what my mom thought of it... She is an almond mom. She's always been very thin and concerned about her appearance, and she goes to Pilates and yoga almost every day. She's always on some extreme crash diet. She's obsessed with her weight. I guess it's not hard to see where I learned it... growing up with that."

I nodded again, following the train of thought that Marjorie was following. My mind was spinning as I found myself mulling over what would come next. There was some thread being tugged in a corner of my mind, some loose connection beginning to bridge one thought with another. It was not a fully formed idea, and I was not sure how to put it into words. The ghosts hiding in the shadows wavered.

I thought of a quote I had read once, wondering if this was the result of trauma's "destructiveness operating at a distance. No contact is necessary, not even a conscious intention or

attempt at communication”¹¹⁹. There was something about what Marjorie was coming into the room with that left me feeling as though these were ghosts of trauma that had been transmitted “from one time period to another, from one generation to another”¹²⁰. That she, even having no direct experience of the traumatic event, was still being “burdened by the oppressive past”¹²². These ghosts, which were operating somewhere on an unconscious level, were coming into the present for Marjorie. Influencing her relationships with others and with herself, playing out physically, emotionally, and relationally. I wondered where the trauma originated, whose trauma it was that Marjorie was bringing into the present, into the room with her.

“I feel like...” I tried to pull my thoughts into a coherent sentence, struggling to find the words. “I can’t think of how to name this, but there is something that feels inherited about this, like a pattern. I’m thinking of you... Your disordered eating habits and this learned relationship with food, which makes me think of your mother. She also learned it somewhere. I wonder what her childhood was like, what relationship with food was taught to her by her mother. It feels like this lives somewhere deep within your family history, something passed from mother to daughter?” I asked tentatively, aware that I may be forming a connection that had not yet been clear for Marjorie.

“I hadn’t thought of it that way before... my mom had to learn it somewhere, and then she just repeated the lessons with me. God, what a trap motherhood is... sometimes I think that I never want to be a mother. Especially not to a daughter. Maybe I could have a son. But I would be so worried about having a daughter,” Marjorie said suddenly, unprompted. My curiosity piqued as I wondered where this was coming from.

“How come?” I asked.

Marjorie shook her head. “I don’t know, I guess I’m just now at an age where people are starting to get pregnant on purpose,” she laughed, “and it seems like my worst nightmare. Kids are so expensive... and then your entire lifestyle has to change. I really value my independence. I love being able to travel... I love being able to spend my money on myself...”

I knew instantly that, based on the thread we had just pulled, she was speaking out of an attempt to deflect. An attempt to retreat as if the path we had found ourselves was getting too close to the root of something.

¹¹⁹ Frosh 2012, page 252

¹²⁰ Frosh 2012, page 242

¹²² Fraiberg 1980, page 165

“I wonder if there is something more happening beyond the surface there. I feel like those are general fears that may be protecting something greater... maybe something you are afraid to admit? They sound like excuses, which does not mean they might not be genuine concerns, but I’m curious about what else might be happening here. You specifically mentioned being worried about having a daughter, not just a general fear of motherhood.”

Marjorie furrowed her brow as I spoke, her face showed her process as she worked through my words. First denial, maybe even annoyance, before a softening that alluded to some new understanding.

“I think...” she finally said. “I am afraid of becoming my mother. I’m worried about doing the same things my mom did to me. It seems like a lot of work, a lot of pressure. How do you ever know if you’re doing it right? Or even if you’re doing any better than your mother did raising you. I mean... what if I try so hard to be the opposite of my mother, and I swing in the other direction and end up hurting my child in a different way? The other fear is that I don’t know anything else. I’ve never lived with any other example of motherhood. Without meaning to, I might just reproduce what I had learned from her anyway¹²⁴. Even if I had tried to be different. It feels like a trap. I don’t want to bring someone else into that, only to have them stuck in there with me... If that makes sense.”

“You know, there’s research that says the ‘ability to access and recover from childhood pain can prevent repetition in parenting, while repression and isolation can lead to perpetuating it¹²⁵’. Meaning, accessing this pain, finding the words for it, is what helps break the cycle. The silence, trying to hide the pain, is what perpetuates the cycle. Speaking about it is what helps us to break it, what allows us to parent differently than our parents parented us... allegedly.”

“I read this book during university called *My Mother, My Daughter, My Self* by Jane Goldberg¹²⁶,” Marjorie started, pausing as if to ask if I had heard of it before.

“I’m not familiar with it. What’s it about?” I asked.

“To overly simplify it,” she laughed, “it’s about how we both want to be separate from our mothers but still close to them. How we learn from our mothers how to have other relationships. I remember it being a powerful read, I cried more than once.”

“What about it made you cry?”

¹²⁴ Balsam and Bueskens 2021

¹²⁵ Fraiberg 1980, page 195

¹²⁶ Goldberg 2016

“I think it was the sense of... longing. Longing for this close relationship. But also having to pull yourself out of one that was too close. Like I had to separate myself from my mother, but in doing so, I risked losing that closeness. I think I did lose it, actually... when I finally became my own person, I separated myself from her, and part of me lost her. I’ve been thinking about my mom and our relationship recently, so... I don’t know, I decided to reread it. I thought something in it would unlock something for me... but I found it hard to read. I only made it through part of it this time... something about it hit too close to home. There is this bit, though, about her mother and her relationship with her grandmother. That her mother got the message of ‘I wish you were different’, that she always felt like she was not good enough, how she was and that she should be someone else¹²⁹. That she was recreating this dynamic in her relationships with other people in the hopes of having a different outcome. I really feel that way.”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked, having begun to form my own connections, but wanting Marjorie to make them on her own. To speak them out into existence.

“Well... I’ve always felt that my mother wished I were different. That I was someone else. Maybe someone like her? I feel like she’s disappointed in who I am. But I’m constantly seeking her approval...”

“Mmhm,” I nodded, following the thread of thought, realising we were once again talking around rejection.

“I think I’ve realised recently that I do that in other aspects of my life. I’m constantly seeking approval from people.”

“Repeating the same relationship dynamics in the hope of a different outcome?”

“Yeah...” Marjorie replied softly. “And always left feeling disappointed when I feel unfulfilled by those relationships. I feel like I still walk away from them feeling like I haven’t gotten their approval. Like they also wish I were different¹³⁰.”

I let the words drift in the space between us, giving them time to really settle. Holding the silence in an attempt to slow Marjorie down so she could sit with what she had just said. She tended to quickly back away from difficult topics, and I did not want her to run from this. I wanted her to see it, but also to see that I was sitting in it with her. That I would not back away and abandon her in it.

¹²⁹ Goldberg 2016

¹³⁰ Goldberg 2016

“We learn a lot,” I finally said, “from our relationship with our mothers. They’re our first example of relational dynamics, our first model of how to be in relationship with others¹³¹. I think that it makes sense that, when this relationship is unsatisfying, we recreate it in different ways in the hope of achieving a more satisfying ending¹³².”

“But what do we do with that?” she laughed. “Is it enough to have acknowledged it? Is it like people with an addiction, where the first step is acceptance? How do I actually change the behaviour?”

I smiled, “I do think it’s similar. Seeing a pattern and saying it out loud is the first step in breaking it. Being able to see a pattern or cycle while you’re in the middle of it is an important part of the process¹³³.”

“I suppose that’s true. I guess I hadn’t seen it until recently, I’d just been living in it... saying that it’s learned, though... that we learn how to relate to others from our mothers. It’s making me think again about my mother. How she might have learned how to relate to me because of her relationship with my grandma. I wonder what that says about my grandmother’s relationship with my great-grandmother. Or even my great-great grandma. How far back does the cycle go?”

I schooled my face into calm curiosity, fighting the urge to raise my eyebrows in shock as chills broke out across my arm. I had just felt these same questions within myself, searching for where this cycle began. The exploration that would lead us to the source. I felt as if we were standing at the edge of a precipice, and I just hoped we would be able to survive the fall. That our relationship would be enough to support and withstand any damage that occurred on the way down, deep into Marjorie’s family history¹³⁴.

“Oh?” I asked, pushing her to continue that train of thought.

“Yeah, I mean, my mom doesn’t exist in a bubble. She learned somewhere... actually, now that I’m thinking about it, being a mother is like any other relationship, only more intense... so my mother learned how to be a mother from her relationship with my grandma. That feels like such a silly, obvious thought. But she’s taken what she learned from her mother and is reproducing it in how she mothers me¹³⁵. Even if she is trying to be different, my grandma is the only real model of motherhood she ever had. I wonder what my grandma was like as a mother...”

“That is an interesting train of thought,” I conceded. “It can be easy to focus on our own

¹³¹ Orbach and Eichenbaum 2014

¹³² Goldberg 2016

¹³³ Wolynn 2017

¹³⁴ Ogden 1994

¹³⁵ Balsam and Bueskens 2021

experiences, looking at our life in a micro sense, I suppose. But when we pull back a bit, we can see that we are just a piece of something larger, a thread in the tapestry of our family. Each of us is being shaped by the generation that came before us.”

“It really is a cycle we’re all trapped in, isn’t it? We are just repeating the same relationships over and over, from generation to generation, from mother to daughter. How do we even begin to imagine breaking free from it? I hadn’t thought of it that way before. I guess maybe that’s the purpose of therapy, to ask the question and find the answer?” Marjorie asked, raising a question I had come to time and time again.

I nodded as I stole a quick glance at the clock. We had somehow managed to run out of time.

Our session creeping just over a minute passed our time. I seemed never to be able to end with Marjorie, always losing track of time as the minutes seemed to slip by, frequently ending at least five minutes over. Once again, curious as to what this might mean. What was it about this relationship that left me struggling to hold on to my own sense of time? With Marjorie, it never felt like we had enough time.

We were always chasing an extra minute together.

“We’ll have to leave it there for today,” I said. “Hopefully, we can pick back up here next week, I think we’re just getting into something important. Maybe something that will lead to more, maybe even something that will help us find an answer to your question of how to break the cycle. I’ll look up that book you mentioned, it sounds very interesting.”

With that, we stood, and I led Marjorie out.

When I returned to my room, I dropped into my chair, frustrated. I glared at the clock, as if it were its fault that we had run out of time just as I felt like we were reaching something important. It never felt like enough time. I had wanted more, had wanted to follow that thread back through Marjorie’s family until we reached the core. The infected rot that was poisoning the rest of the tree. My curiosity was piqued. I wanted to find the answers and felt frustrated that I would be left holding them for another week. Left holding onto that feeling of standing at the edge of a cliff, our toes just about to tip over, and then time was up.

From the outside looking into Marjorie’s world, I could sense the haunting. There was a still unknown trauma that was being reenacted across the generations of women in her family. I

considered that I may be witnessing a traumatic reenactment¹³⁶. Marjorie was unconsciously re-enacting an unresolved event from the past in an attempt to “get it right”¹³⁷. We just had to figure out what that trauma was, pulling it from the collective unconscious of her family and into the light.

1.6 Moving too close: Struggles with (or making use of) sameness

Later in the week, long after Marjorie had left but still days away from her return, I found myself still sitting with what had transpired in the room. It was as if she had left traces of her ghosts behind.

Leaving them to settle into the shadows, watching me as I went about the rest of my week.

From our first meeting, I had been caught off guard by how much of myself I saw reflected in Marjorie. Beyond the surface level similarities, like age or the way we were able to instantly connect over our American upbringing and things we missed about home. There was something about her that felt instantly familiar. As if all these little pieces of ourselves, these shared cultural touchstones and the experience of being alone in a strange land connected us. While these surface-level similarities had been obvious within the first few meetings, as we progressed, the further these similarities spread.

When Marjorie talked, I often found myself feeling increasingly drawn into her world¹³⁸. Blending her stories with mine, her mother’s face with my own mother’s. Her grandmother with mine. I felt like I needed to detangle myself. Like I was no longer seeing her story independently from my own. At times, it was overwhelming how similar I felt to her. How many of the words she spoke had been the same as ones I had said to friends in the past? I worried at times that I was projecting my own thoughts, feelings, and experiences onto her. Assuming I knew how she felt. Assuming I knew what her reactions would be.

I wondered if I could use this sameness in our work, if I could somehow leverage my feelings into building a more meaningful and useful relationship with Marjorie. Often, though, I felt like I was walking a fine line with Marjorie. If I were not careful, I felt that too much of myself and my own history might slip into the room. I wondered how I might walk this line. wondered if it would be possible to use this “sameness” to further the work we were doing together. If I were hoping also to use it to help the work I was doing within myself regarding my own struggles with the transmission of trauma within my family. It felt like both important and potentially dangerous territory.

¹³⁶ Wolynn 2017, page 15

¹³⁷ Wolynn 2017, page 15

¹³⁸ Grant 2002

'There must be a way to use this, to create something between us that allows Marjorie to process the trauma,' I thought to myself, scribbling absent-mindedly on a sheet of paper. It felt like there was an oppressive silence surrounding the trauma in Marjorie's family¹³⁹. This great, unspoken wound that had been left to fester and infect the future generations. If I could make use of the empathic bond we were building, if I could, as I'd read before, use this empathic bond to enter her world, without losing myself in it¹⁴⁰. If I could use this sameness, entering the third space we had created between¹⁴².

¹³⁹ Connolly 2011

¹⁴⁰ Connolly 2011, page 617

¹⁴² Ogden 1994

Part Two:
In the middle

2.1 Finding a theoretical framework

The following week, I felt disappointed.

Maybe in myself, maybe in Marjorie, maybe in both of us. We had once again pulled back from the edge and retreated into safety. Spending another session talking about her week, her friends, her boyfriend. It once again felt casual and almost friendly.

There was something in our work that I felt like I was getting stuck on. I could not find a way to move us from talking around her relationship with her mother to processing it. I was beginning to form connections that I struggled to name. I pulled out my notebooks from my training, looking for the words to put to my experience of Marjorie.

There was something about her that had knocked me off kilter. Whether it was our similarities or the way I sensed something bubbling under the surface. I felt unprepared every week. Unsure where to begin, how to start, how to get her to go deeper. I felt her reluctance and her trepidation. I was picking up on it and offering it back to her in the way I allowed her to coast through our sessions each week, not pushing her beyond where I felt she wanted to go, allowing her to continue just skimming along the surface of her issues¹⁴³.

My thoughts spiralled as I paced the length of my office, when suddenly I felt the overwhelming need to find answers. My fingers rested on the keyboard as I debated where even to begin, where to find my answers. Mindlessly, I typed Winnicott into a search engine, shaking my head at the foolishness of my exploration. Words I knew in my bones passed across my screen as I scrolled through the results. Good enough mothering, true self, holding environment¹⁴⁴. As I skimmed through the definitions, I began considering how I might apply this in my work with Marjorie, how I could

¹⁴³ Grant 2002

¹⁴⁴ Winnicott 1960; grasping at themes that were slipping through my fingers in the therapeutic work, knowing there may be a connection but unable to pin them down beyond words drifting by on a page

start to translate theory into practical action. I felt the desperate need to cling to my theoretical framework for support in our work.

Scrolling through the page, my eyes landed on the line, “For Winnicott, everything hangs on the mother’s capacity to relate to her baby, which, for him, means the ability to allow the baby to create reality for itself rather than having it imposed on it”¹⁴⁵. I had the strong impression that Marjorie’s mother did not have this capacity. That she could not offer Marjorie a holding environment, unable to allow space for Marjorie to develop her authentic self¹⁴⁶. Marjorie’s emotions were not held or contained, they instead were left to become uncontrollable. Spilling out into other aspects of her life, a desperate need to appear independent and self-sufficient, leading to the development of a false self. From what she had shared, I had the impression that Marjorie did not have the experience of “failing well”, she never learned how to self-soothe or build resilience¹⁴⁸. I wondered if her mother was emotionally inconsistent, not giving her space to explore and develop her own emotions safely. I wondered what the bounds of “good enough” really were, was I also imagining this mother instead of the actual one¹⁴⁹? What assumptions had I formed?

Feeling like there was still something just out of grasp, I went back to the search page and typed in Klein. Scrolling through pages on object relations and the expression of unconscious phantasy¹⁵⁰. As I began clicking through related searches, I thought of her relationship with her mother, her primary caregiver, and what her early infancy must have been like. Trying to picture Marjorie as a small newborn, crying out for her mother’s attention while two older boys created chaos around them. I wondered how much attention Marjorie had really been given, how much mental capacity her mother might have had. Through the way she spoke, I got the impression that Marjorie still viewed her mother as a bad object most of the time. Unable to see her mother as a more full or complete person, she was still operating from the paranoid schizoid position, splitting off good and bad¹⁵². Like before, I found myself wondering more about the life Marjorie’s mother had led. What experiences had shaped the way she mothered, what was she reproducing from her own childhood¹⁵³? What had she learned? What had her childhood been like? If Marjorie had become responsible for

¹⁴⁵ Minsky 1996, page 113

¹⁴⁶ Minsky 1996

¹⁴⁸ Minsky 1996, page 113

¹⁴⁹ Winnicott 1960

¹⁵⁰ Likierman 2001

¹⁵² Likierman 2001

¹⁵³ Balsam and Bueskens 2021; thinking of Chodorow’s theory about how mothers “reproduced” themselves inevitably across generations

holding her mother's emotions, did that mean she, too, had grown up without knowing a holding environment? Had she ever been given the space to process and express her emotions safely? What did that mean for Marjorie's grandmother? Her great-grandmother?

I finally found myself scrolling through Bion's Container Model, remembering the way I had felt absolutely overwhelmed by Marjorie¹⁵⁴. The way I struggled to contain her processing of emotions and experiences, feeling like she had needed me to step into that role, one that should have been met in her early childhood by a caregiver¹⁵⁵. I wondered if Marjorie's mother had ever been able to process her emotions as an infant, ever made those intense emotions manageable. It felt as though Marjorie's mother had never been contained either. I wondered if Marjorie had tried and failed to be a container for her mother, the roles and responsibilities switched, leading to a strain and tension in their relationship and experiences with each other.

This relationship. This core foundation through which Marjorie had learned to relate and exist in the world. This was it. This was what I had been missing, what I had been so desperate to seek out and understand. The theme connected everything she had brought into the room at this point. I suddenly felt more focused, as if I had missed the obvious this entire time.

Of course, it was all about mothers.

Of course, it was all about her experience of being a daughter.

Marjorie and I were so similar, once again, we both were avoiding what would be a sensitive topic. Forcing ourselves to look away from the glaringly obvious, the elephant in the room. Our relationship with our mothers. Our shame in exposing that relationship to a stranger¹⁵⁷. I had been unconsciously colluding with Marjorie in her avoidance. Knowing how difficult it felt to expose that part of myself, I had allowed her to keep it hidden in the room with me. Both for her comfort and for mine. As if I knew asking her to look at their relationship would force me to look at my own, to consider again where Marjorie ended and I began.

However, as I began to pull on the thread in my mind, following it led me only to an even larger web. A loom holding a massive weaving, of which Marjorie was just one row of yarn forming a greater picture. Marjorie's relationship with her mother existed within a context still unknown to me.

¹⁵⁴ Cartwright 2013

¹⁵⁵ Cartwright 2013

¹⁵⁷ Barnwell 2019

Still shrouded in mystery but shaped by something that was still out of focus. I could see Marjorie's line and her mother's, but the rest of the tapestry had yet to be discovered. There was more there.

I stood up from my desk to resume my pacing. Something was just out of sight, waiting for us to look, waiting for us to acknowledge it. I could feel the theme of the tapestry beginning to take shape, all built around the concept of motherhood and the dynamic between mothers and daughters. I just hoped I would be able to pull Marjorie out of it enough so that we could look at the loom of her family together.

I sat back in my chair, the names and theories I had just read spread into the corners of my mind. It seemed to make sense on paper, how an inconsistent emotional environment had led Marjorie to feel uncontained¹⁵⁸. How she projected things onto her mother, shaping her into the bad object¹⁵⁹. Something I was realising I had also done just now, as I blamed all these failings on her. I wondered how I could bring this into the room. Once these things are known, where do you put them?

2.2 An open wound

The following week, I could feel the shift in energy as soon as I walked into the waiting area to greet Marjorie. She sat with her arms folded tightly around her, as if she was already on the defensive and was bracing herself for what lay ahead. She smiled at me tightly as I called her name and followed me silently back down the hall toward my room.

Anxiety and anger rippled off her as she took her seat. I sat, opening my mouth to welcome her, when Marjorie's words rushed out, "Nothing I do is ever enough for her."

I said nothing as I watched Marjorie gather her thoughts and sort through her words.

"I just... I feel like I can't win. If I do one thing, she's mad. If I don't, she's disappointed. It's this constant battle of not doing the right thing and being punished either way. I hadn't told her that one of my aunts on my dad's side was planning to come visit me. It wasn't that I wasn't telling her on purpose, but it didn't really impact her. But also, maybe I wasn't telling her because I knew she would be jealous or angry or hurt. And I thought it would be easier. But of course, she found out anyway. She called me and was instantly yelling. Angry that I hadn't told her and she had to find out from someone else, she always says things like how it 'made her feel stupid' and how she hates when everyone knows

¹⁵⁸ Winnicott 1960

¹⁵⁹ Likierman 2001

something that she doesn't, like I had intentionally hidden it to make her look like an idiot... which is ridiculous. Why would this make her look like an idiot, it literally has nothing to do with her."

The words rushed out, leaving no space for me as Marjorie continued without taking a breath.

"She always says that", Marjorie continued, her words picking up speed. "That it feels like everyone knows something and she's being intentionally left out, or information is being kept from her on purpose. No matter how many times I said that that wasn't my intention, she still says that it was cruel of me. There are always things like this, moments when I pause and realise there is no right thing to do, when telling or not telling her will result in this. She'll call and scream and say hurtful things, but then I always get so worked up and so desperate for her to forgive me. I always end up grovelling and begging for her forgiveness. I tell her that she's right and I was being mean and hurtful, and that I'm sorry. And I always know once we go through this process, once she gets it all out at me and I beg for her forgiveness, she'll just move on and act like nothing happened. And I am left for days feeling hurt and still grasping at normalcy and like... desperate for her to like me again, if that makes sense?"

I nodded as she kept talking, but the faster she spoke, the more I felt her anxiety pulsing through the room. It was as if I, like Marjorie, could not catch my breath. She rushed to get the words out as if she had never said them out loud. She became increasingly animated, her hands moving as quickly as her words tumbled out. I tried to ground myself, aware that I was being swept up in her emotional outburst¹⁶¹.

Marjorie continued, "I always feel like I am responsible for her feelings. Like it's my job to make sure she's okay and to consider how she'll react to things before I do them. But then, when it goes wrong like always, I am still desperate for her to be happy and okay. Honestly, sometimes it feels like I'm the mother. Like she just needs to have her temper tantrum and let it out before she can get over it and move on. She needs to throw her fit, and I need to soothe her. It's so frustrating... and rationally, I know that's not my job. But I just feel so helpless when it happens. So desperate to just make it better."

Marjorie finally took a gasping breath.

¹⁶¹ Grant 2002

Slowing down enough to give me some space to process. I considered Marjorie and her mother. Their relationship was complex and at times hurtful, but it was also a relationship she seemed to want desperately¹⁶². She seemed to cling to this ideal version of what she and her mother could be, while being actively confronted with the reality of what their relationship was¹⁶³. When she spoke of the positives, it was so positive. So much warmth and love and joy, but when it was bad, it was incredibly bad. It would derail days, weeks. She described being left feeling an argument in the pit of her stomach and would feel panic when she sensed it coming on.

“That sounds intense,” I said, finally breaking through her ranting. “It’s hard when we rationally know something is not our responsibility to hold, but we find ourselves constantly reaching out to hold it anyway. It’s interesting that you point out that the roles are switched because I was thinking that as well. Instead of your mother giving you the space to learn how to process your emotions, you’re left managing hers. It’s as if she never learned how to process her own, so how could she possibly offer you that¹⁶⁴?”

“That’s exactly it. She never learned healthy coping skills, apparently.” Marjorie’s tone dripped with sarcasm.

“Or when she was a young child, she never had the safety of a holding environment. She never had the positive experience of a space where she could work through frustrating emotions and successfully self-soothe¹⁶⁵. It is like a toddler, still stuck acting out their emotions. But you’ve switched roles and have taken on the responsibility of holding and containing her.”

“It’s exhausting. And you’re probably right. But that doesn’t make it any less frustrating.”

“True,” I conceded. “But you’re responsible for your feelings and actions, not hers.”

2.3 Holding my “stuff”

I sat in group supervision one week listening to one of my colleagues, James, speak about one of his clients, when something snapped into focus for me. His client had a long history of struggling with men in positions of authority, and our group supervisor asked about James’s personal

¹⁶² Hasseldine 2017

¹⁶³ Winnicott 1960; the actual mother versus a fantasy of a perfect mother

¹⁶⁴ Minsky 1996

¹⁶⁵ Winnicott 1960

relationship with power. James started talking about authority figures in school and how he had rebelled as a teenager, but then somehow his answers had turned into his dynamics within his family and his relationship with his mother. The way she had used her position of power and ultimately was emotionally withholding when he was young.

“That’s exactly it, isn’t it!” I exclaimed. “Your history is coming into the room and meeting your clients, she is seeking out validation from an authority figure, and you are bristling against the role she is trying to put you in¹⁶⁶. All of your stuff and her stuff is coming into the room and clashing because you both have different experiences and different expectations.”

James looked off thoughtfully before nodding, “We can’t leave ourselves out of the room,” he said. “That’s why I always thought the concept of the therapist being a “blank slate” was impossible¹⁶⁷. It’s unrealistic to be completely neutral and come in with nothing. We are entire humans outside the counselling room with our own histories and issues. It seems unavoidable that some of our own stuff comes into the room with us. Spilling over into our client work. Of course, my issues with my mom are coming into the room with me, it would be impossible for me to leave them at the door.”

“I absolutely agree. We come into the room with baggage just like our clients do. We’re also repeating some kind of relational pattern when we meet them,” I said in agreement.

“It’s also making me think of projective identification, maybe,” the group supervisor broke in. “Maybe your client is projecting unacceptable thoughts, feelings, or traits into you and you are rejecting, or even accepting, those projections by taking on what the client is feeling¹⁶⁹.”

This exchange made me think of my work with Marjorie, who seemed to be taking up a lot of space in my mind lately. Whenever Marjorie left the room, I found myself considering my own relationship with my mother. I always found it so curious that, as Marjorie would speak, I would picture my mom in her mom’s place. I was imagining my own life instead of hers, my memories of home blending into the stories she told.

As the two of them continued to debate this, my mind wandered. When Marjorie first came in, I had figured that I was making basic assumptions about how she was feeling about her mother until this most recent session. When this major conflict with her mother had come into the room, the pain I had felt was incredible. I had felt anxious and overwhelmed. I could not sit still, my heart was racing,

¹⁶⁶ Winnicott 1949

¹⁶⁷ Fritscher 2024

¹⁶⁹ Grant 2002

and my breathing quickened. Thinking of past arguments with my mother, the anxiety and the hurt that lingered. Due to this, I found myself offering reflections that were suddenly more aligned with how I felt, the negative, uncomfortable feelings I had tried to deny and had often been reluctant to admit, even to myself.

Was I projecting my hurt into Marjorie, or was I absorbing the hurt she was projecting into me¹⁷⁰? During that last session, I had found myself saying something along the lines of wondering how to accept your mother for who she is and accept that she may never be able to fully offer what you want or need. A sinking feeling of sadness and a sense of loss washed over me. As the words tumbled out, I caught myself realising that these were things I needed to hear as well. I remembered the quote, “In its classic sense, projection is considered a defence mechanism, it helps to protect the individual from a perceived threat and to reduce intolerable anxiety and conflict¹⁷¹,” and I wondered how my defence mechanisms were coming into the room. Was I hoping to heal my relationship with my mother by helping someone like Marjorie heal hers? Was there some unknown motivation to my work this entire time? Was I just saying what I needed to hear?

As I sat with this, the group supervision session continuing around me as I drifted further away, I found my mind wandering to my mother. I wondered if she would even recognise herself if I were to talk about our relationship like Marjorie spoke to me about hers. Would she see herself in the way I experienced her? Or would my perspective be completely foreign to her? Would my concept of reality align with hers in any way? I wondered what her viewpoint might be. How did she remember our fights and disagreements? What role did I play in her memories?

2.4 Mothers and grandmothers

“I actually am really close with my grandmother, my mom’s mom,” Marjorie said thoughtfully. “We live just a few towns over from them, it’s maybe a thirty-minute drive. Growing up, we would go over to their house every Sunday for family dinner. When my mom and I would get into fights, I would go to my grandma’s house to cool off and get some space. She used to come pick me up,

¹⁷⁰ Grant 2002

¹⁷¹ Grant 2002, page 18

and we would go for a drive, walk around the mall, or go get something to eat. It just always felt so much easier to talk to her and like... I was never afraid she would judge me for what I was feeling.”

“Are you still close now?” I asked.

“Oh yes, definitely. We talk on the phone or FaceTime once a week. I helped her set up her new iPad last time I was home,” she laughed. “I spend a lot of time at her house when I’m visiting home. It feels calm over there. It’s peaceful. And she is such a great cook, much better than my mom is, so I love going there for meals. She’s always trying to feed me something, even when I’m not hungry.”

“Do your grandma and your mom have a good relationship?” I was curious about these dynamics, a strained relationship with her mother and yet a close and loving relationship with her mother’s mother.

“I’d say it’s... complicated. My grandma still lives in the house where my mom grew up. My mom has one younger sister who has two daughters. My grandpa passed away a few years ago, so it’s just my grandma there now. I don’t know how to explain it... my mom and grandma are close, but it’s intense sometimes. When my mom was young, I think their relationship was bad. At least that’s the impression I get from stories. My grandparents did not have a lot of money, they both worked full-time in physically and emotionally taxing jobs, so I think my mom and her sister were left to fend for themselves most of the time. I get the impression that it was a chaotic environment, which led to a lot of resentment. I also think they were neglected. They had very little adult supervision and got into a lot of trouble. Maybe they were desperate for their parents to notice them, so they acted out, but they never noticed. My mom’s sister is a recovering alcoholic... I’m guessing directly because of what their childhood was like. My grandma is an unrecovered alcoholic... she’s never stopped drinking,” she laughed, but it was humourless. As if she were seeing the darkness behind the bleak situation. She continued, “As I get older, I can see how my mom’s parenting is a direct reaction to that. She had an absent mother, so she wanted to be the opposite. Maybe she swung a little too hard in the opposite direction...where she had no rules, no boundaries, her parenting was all rules and hard lines.”

I let the silence hang a beat longer than I wanted to. I was itching to respond, questions clawing their way up my throat, I held back, sensing this thought was unfinished. We hovered there, ghosts taking shape in the room, becoming solid with each passing moment.

“I think,” Marjorie finally said, “it must have been hard for my mom growing up. She makes a lot of jokes about how my grandma is a much better grandmother than she ever was a mother. The older I get, though, the more I can see how my mother kept a lot about her childhood from my brothers and me. Now, I think that she did this so that we could have our own relationship with our grandma, one that wasn’t just shaped by her bad relationship... but sometimes I think my mom is jealous of how close we are. It almost feels like she feels she was robbed of some kind of relationship with her and is envious of the one that I do have. When I was younger, it was hard to understand that. I didn’t understand why my mom would get so angry when I wanted to go over to their house. But I loved being there.”

“Hm...” I considered how to respond to this, feeling the weight of the sentiment. “Your mother made a decision to withhold some of the truth to protect the image you have of your grandmother, keeping her own story silent so you can have your own.” Marjorie nodded but did not make an indication that she had more to say. We sat awkwardly for a moment, worried that what I had said did not land how I wanted it to.

“It’s kind of interesting to think about how it’s the same space, too,” I offered. “You mentioned your grandma still lives in the same home, it must hold a lot of memories for both of them. I wonder if it’s hard for your mom to be there, yet she still goes every Sunday.”

“That’s true. Sometimes I forget because I have so many of my own memories there. We always do holidays there, like Thanksgiving, my entire life was at my grandparents' house.”

“For you, it sounds like their home and even your grandma was kind of a haven. Somewhere that was warm and joyful, like special occasions and fond memories.”

“Yes, absolutely.” Marjorie continued to fidget. “I think my mom still goes there all the time out of a feeling of obligation. Not so much out of genuine want. Like she still feels like she should be there, she should have a relationship with her mother. Even if it may not be healthy for her. I guess I hadn’t really thought about it like that before...” she trailed off, shifting in her seat. She pulled the hair tie from her wrist again and began twisting it around her finger. She was anxious about something and was avoiding disclosing it.

Noting her body language, I found myself increasingly curious about what was happening for her in this moment, asking, “Is there something sitting with you? It looks like you’re holding back from saying something?”

Marjorie looks thoughtfully out of the window, making a face that left me wondering if she was struggling to find words or finding it difficult to express what she was feeling.

“My grandmother is the child of Holocaust survivors,” Marjorie stated in a detached way, as if she had been thinking of something else but found herself here instead.

“My great-grandparents originally fled their home in Germany for the Netherlands with just their children and a suitcase each. They left their entire family and all their belongings behind and never went back. I think they lived there for a while before eventually escaping to America, just as the Nazi’s invaded, with the help of a neighbour. Again, fleeing in the middle of the night with nothing. My grandma was born in America, but her older siblings were born in Germany. There is a lot of survivor’s guilt within the family. I don’t know what happened to the rest of the extended family¹⁷³. There’s a lot of whispered rumours, but it’s not talked about within the family beyond during that bit of the Passover seder where you acknowledge people who died in the Holocaust, I’m not sure if you’re familiar with that....” Marjorie trailed off, looking to me to either confirm or inquire for an explanation.

“I am familiar,” I replied briefly, instantly unsure how much to disclose about myself in the moment. I was surprised to learn Marjorie’s family was Jewish, like my own. I had met so few Jewish people since I had moved to Scotland that I felt an instant tug to share my own family history. My own memories of childhood Passover seders spent with my family flitted through my mind. Instantly recognising the part in the seder, the moment of remembrance for those lost in the Holocaust and other historical tragedies¹⁷⁵. I quickly catalogued my response and her reaction, wondering if she realised I did know, making assumptions about my own religious heritage, or if she assumed that I was just offering something placating to move the story forward.

I found it curious that Passover had come up during this session. A holiday dedicated to remembering the trauma and suffering of past generations felt like it landed almost too close to what we were discussing. Passover asks us to remember the ways the Jewish people have struggled, the pain they have endured. To memorialise it in the present, to be shaped by that suffering. The historical trauma that an entire population experienced. I wondered about what unknown ways that haunted both of us. What ways it may be coming into the room with us now.

¹⁷³ Mucci 2013

¹⁷⁵ “English Haggadah: Text with Instructional Guide”; included in American variations of the Passover service (written/known as the Haggadah), there is a section on remembrance specifically in remembrance of those lost during the Holocaust

Marjorie crinkled her eyebrows, making an expression I could not quite read, but ultimately seemed to decide she was content with my brief response as she continued.

“It’s always felt so present but unspoken. Both of my great-grandparents died when I was young, so I don’t have any of my own memories of them. I think I’ve said this before, but my mom was really close to my great-grandmother. She has so much love for her still and talks so highly of her. But sometimes I think about my grandma. What it must have been like for her to grow up with that immense shadow over the family. When she was a little girl, it was such a fresh wound, but her family tried to assimilate into American culture as quickly as they could and blend in. As far as I know, my great-grandparents never visited Germany, they never found out what happened to the rest of the family, but I think they assumed the worst, which... fair. My grandma and her siblings went once to try and find some peace, some proof that they had existed there¹⁷⁶. But ultimately, I think they always felt disconnected from their German heritage. None of them taught their children German or any German culture. My mom has never been to Germany. I only have because I live here, and it’s much easier to visit, but even then, I just did the big tourist things. My great-grandparents were super religious, but somewhere along the way, my grandma became less involved in the Jewish community. My mom was raised reform and me and my siblings were honestly barely raised with religion. I know some of the basics but feel guilty even calling myself Jewish sometimes...”

I thought again of my own family, who fled another historical persecution of Jewish people and left Europe in the mid-nineteenth century, only to face a different type of persecution as immigrants in America. Seeking the ideals of religious freedom and better opportunities. A ghost that was also never acknowledged but was known, unspoken, but always following my family from generation to generation. I wondered what other unknown trauma lingered in my own history. It occurred to me that the trauma may not be personal, but instead embedded in our history.

“I would imagine it would be difficult to talk about, especially to a young child,” I said. “From my understanding of that era, there was more of a move forward mindset versus a processing of the past mindset. There was not much discussion of trauma in the 1940s¹⁷⁸.”

“No, definitely not, it was not processed in therapy,” Marjorie laughed. “They just tried to move on. As if you could just move on from something like that. I have to imagine it fundamentally

¹⁷⁶ Kelly Lowenstein, Kelly Lowenstein, and Lowenstein 2016; a reflection inspired by the story and events of the Lowenstein family

¹⁷⁸ Barbour 2016; thinking of the lack of therapy and support post both world wars, how silence leads to continued trauma

changed my great-grandmother. The woman my grandma knew as a mother must have been very different from the mother her older siblings knew before the war.”

“That’s probably true,” I nodded.

“I wonder what it was like. To have left everything and everyone you know behind, to start over in a new country where you didn’t even speak the language. My grandma didn’t learn English until she started school. I don’t even know if any of our extended family survived. There might be cousins or something out there I will never meet.”

“It’s... interesting,” I said, struggling to find a word that fit the feeling better. “Historically, I’m sure you know about what happened in the world during that time, but there is so much unknown about your own family experience¹⁷⁹.”

“And now there isn’t anyone left to ask. Unless my grandma knows more than she’s shared.”

“Feels worth asking?”

“Yeah... maybe. She doesn’t really talk about it. She had a difficult childhood. I think she was forced to grow up and start working to help the family at a young age. And she got married and had children young, she never got to really live a life for herself. She had a lot of big dreams, she wanted to go to university, but she never had the time or money. I think my great-grandmother was... a harsh parent. I mean, I can’t imagine everything she went through, you know? But she was not very loving or nurturing. I think my grandma grew up feeling very unwanted, like my great-grandmother didn’t really know how to love her. Maybe she lost that part of herself, maybe she never had it,” Marjorie stated, but I could tell that something she had said was beginning to form some kind of connection for her. She looked off to the side of the room, her eyes growing distant.

“I don’t think my grandmother ever wanted to be a mother. I think that was just what was expected of her, there weren’t really any options for women then. I mean, this is suburban America, a middle-class family in Connecticut in the 1950s. Her whole purpose in society was to get married and have kids¹⁸⁰. She was raised and expected to be the perfect housewife. My mom was born in 1956, and her siblings were born right after. They lived the American dream with the white picket fence and everything. And I think my grandma didn’t want any of it, but had no other option. She was just

¹⁷⁹ Kelly Lowenstein, Kelly Lowenstein, and Lowenstein 2016

¹⁸⁰ Streep 2009; historically, there was a massive social pressure on women to get married and have children; things happening in society, outside, do not remain outside. They come into our lives and relationships, shaping and influencing us

expected to do it and to be happy with it, but I get the impression she was never happy, never fulfilled.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Stories my mom has told from her childhood... the way my grandmother talks. My great-grandmother might have been cold and strict, but my grandmother was withholding and absent. From my mom’s stories, she was barely a parent. She was never very nurturing, and she drank a lot. She still does, maybe it’s an attempt to escape her reality. I know she is proud of me, she tells me all the time, but sometimes I think she is kind of living through me... I have been able to do all the things she couldn’t. I was able to spend my twenties travelling, growing up... getting an education and having a career of my own. Sometimes I think she resented my mom and her sister, like it was their fault she didn’t get those things. My mom has said to me before that she doesn’t feel like her mother ever knew how to love her or how to be a mother...”

“It’s curious you say that. That sounds like what you had just said about your grandmother and great-grandmother's relationship. Maybe it was presented differently, but that sounds like a very similar felt experience. The same feeling of... hoping for a mother who is one way while living with the reality that she is not meeting your needs. Neither the cold mother nor the absent mother is meeting the emotional needs of the child, are they? I wonder how their experiences shaped each of them, how that influenced the way they then mothered. It’s almost like they did it differently yet ended up with the same results.”

Marjorie's gaze met mine, a new sharp focus passing in her expression. “I’d never thought of it that way,” she said softly. Considering the lines forming. “I don’t know if either of them ever wanted to be mothers. But you know, my great-grandmother and grandmother, they didn’t really have a choice. They lived in a time and place where they had no options, they were expected to have children. My mother had a choice... she chose to have kids. And yet, it’s also different, but I could honestly say the same things about her.”

Her words hung between us, coated in a bitter hurt. Generations of resentment lingering in the room with us. The anger of women resenting their daughters, resenting the societies that demanded this of them, resenting the cages they had found themselves in. Seeping into their relationships with their daughters, who went on to replicate those relationships. The anger in Marjorie’s words regarding her own mother was an interesting contrast to the sympathy she was able to offer her grandmother and great-grandmother. I debated if now was the time to call attention to

this, curious if it was the softening distance of time or another relational dynamic at play. I wondered if her mother would say the same thing about Marjorie's grandmother.

"And what would you say about her?" I asked, settling on a slightly vague response, hoping it would allow Marjorie to guide us instead of my own curiosity forcing a direction.

"I would say that she resents me and my brothers." Her response was sharp, and I bit back my reaction at her use of the word I had just been thinking. "That she had an image of what I should be, who I should be, and she doesn't like that I am not that person. That she doesn't know how to have a relationship with the adult I've become. That she is unhappy in her life, and she takes it out on me. That, at the end of the day, I am still so desperate for her love and approval, it's influenced everything I do and every decision I've made. But it still feels like it's never enough for her. She's always looking for something I cannot give her." Marjorie's words came out in a heated rush. It felt like a revelation that caught us both off guard. Words she never expected to say, anger and hurt that were buried under years of carefully protected defences. I waited to speak, watching her catch her breath. I was afraid I might say something that caused her to retreat into her default of wishing to shield and protect the image of her mother.

"It makes me think of a quote I read once," I said. "About mothers and grandmothers, it's something like, 'I watched how she acted with her own mother, a dance set to a melody of jealousy and competition. Slowly - very slowly - I had my first inkling that how she treated me might have nothing at all to do with who I was,'"¹⁸¹. That realisation that maybe it has nothing to do with who we actually are, and everything to do with who our mothers are. I wonder if part of the work is the act of coming to terms with that. Maybe it is a fantasy to talk about healing or forgiving our past, but it feels like an important part. To understand the role we play in our own lives as well as the lives of others... if that makes sense."

"Yeah, it's an interesting thing to consider. And so true. I think it wasn't until recently, as an adult for sure, that I would see my mom interacting with her mom or someone else and was able to be like 'Oh, it's not really about me. It's about her, her issues.' But they still came out at me throughout my childhood. I was still on the receiving end of it all, even if it was not my fault."

I nodded, "It's a curious dilemma. To both be aware of her flaws and her humanness but also hold onto the hurt and anger. To feel a mix of empathy for what she's gone through, for her

¹⁸¹ Streep 2009, page 3

relationship with her mother and her difficult childhood, and to also feel angry about what you experienced in yours. Both sides can be true, both feelings are valid... There is also so much that is happening outside of the relationship that is making its way in. We don't just exist in a vacuum. We, and our families, exist in a time and place in history¹⁸². I think it's also important that we consider the social and cultural traumas that haunt us, the context in which we exist, and how the dynamics at play in the social world have shaped the relationships between your mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. Those all shaped the context that you exist in, also." I forced myself to stop, to slow down. I felt the connections being made and could feel myself getting excited by the prospect of digging in and exploring them. I did not want to pull Marjorie into that with me, I wanted her to lead the way, making her own connections. However, it was hard to stop once I began, feeling like all these connections were being laid out in front of me. I bit my tongue, holding back my eager endeavour to give Marjorie the space to get there on her own.

Marjorie looked off thoughtfully, considering my words. I forced myself to lean back into my seat as I realised at some point I had begun leaning in toward Marjorie.

As we sat in silence for the moment, I took a glance at the clock and silently chastised myself. We had gone over almost five minutes.

I had been so caught up in Marjorie that I had completely lost track of time. Recognising that I needed to quickly pull us back to an ending, I felt reluctant to move us away from where we had been going. The room had never felt more full. Full of emotion, raw and painful, a vulnerability I had not seen from Marjorie when it came to her relationship with her mother. The room also felt full of the ghosts of pain experienced by generations of women. I felt acutely aware of the increasing role these historical women played in her life and in the work that lay ahead of us. I was drawn to the story of Marjorie's great-grandmother. Of the way she had survived and the silence she had suffered in. How her trauma had silently been passed down to her daughter, and how that continued to shape the women still living in the shadow of it today.

Wishing we could continue and bristling against the need to contain this session, I said, "That is our time for today, we will have to end there for now. I think we're starting to pull on a significant thread, though. I hope we can come back to this next week."

¹⁸² Williams 2021

My words snapped Marjorie out of her trance, breaking her from thought in a jarring return to reality.

“Yes, that sounds good. I’ll see you next week.”

After walking her back toward the door, I sat at my desk to quickly write up notes from our session before my next client arrived. I was desperate to know what was happening for Marjorie in those last moments. Something either she or I had said had clearly met its mark, had hit something within her. I wished I had the time to ask, I hoped she could hold onto it for the next week. It had felt so important, and there had not been enough time. I wanted to do more. As I tried to write quickly, I packaged all my thoughts and feelings about Marjorie back up into the neat mental box I stored her in.

Just as I finished, the door buzzed, alerting me to the arrival of my next client.

I stood, shaking off the lingering energy that danced along my skin, before going to greet the next person.

I stood in my kitchen later that afternoon, staring out the window with a lukewarm cup of tea in my hands, as my mind began to wander. Drifting through thoughts of the day, I eventually found myself thinking of my grandmother.

Like Marjorie, I was always very close to her. While we lived across the country when I was growing up, we would always go stay with her and my grandfather for the summer. When I moved away from home for university, and then off and on in the years following, I had lived in their house. Again, like Marjorie, it was the same house my mother had grown up in. I could see a pattern branching out in front of me, knitting together like a spider's web. Curious, I tried to pull on the tread closest to me. It seemed to jump from one generation to the next. A similar dynamic unfolding from mother to daughter. I came back to thoughts of our session, and I wondered if that had been the moment that stuck with Marjorie. The realisation that it is not just about her and her mother, but her mother and grandmother, her great-grandmother.

I found myself wondering how her relationship with her mother shaped my mother’s parenting of my sisters and me. How, in turn, the way my grandmother parented was a direct result of the relationship she had with my great-grandmother. I was always curious about their dynamic, my

grandmother idolised her mother. Praised her as if she were the emblem of a perfect mother. I found it fascinating how my grandmother put her mother on a pedestal, especially considering how, in every story I was told, I found my great-grandmother to be extremely harsh and critical of her.

I did not have many of my own memories of my great-grandmother, she had passed away when I was young, and the end of her life was spent in a care home as she suffered for years from Alzheimer's. According to family lore, she was loud and funny, warm and fashionable. In old photographs, she looks like a classic, vintage Hollywood starlet stuck in the Midwest. While she was beloved and was never short of male attention or admirers, she grew up being told she was overweight and spent her teen and early adulthood struggling to fit into the extreme beauty standards. She worked very hard to be the perfect 1940s American housewife, her hair in place, makeup tastefully done, and a small waist. She was a tall woman, like my grandmother also would be, and she had grown up feeling embarrassed about her body and was determined to make sure her daughter did not suffer the same way she had. However well-intentioned this may have been, it was experienced as a critical evaluation of my grandmother's appearance and worth. Just like her mother, my grandmother had told me how she grew up feeling too big, too much. Always wishing she could be smaller, she worked to squeeze herself into what she felt was a more acceptable version of herself. Through it all, my grandmother worshipped her. She was the gold standard for her, and she was consumed with wanting to earn her approval. Ultimately, they were incredibly close until the end.

The relationship my grandmother had with her mother had shaped her construction of herself and her identity. She was always trying to live up to these impossible standards she set for herself in an attempt to reach the high standard set by her mother. Growing up, my grandmother would relay stories of struggling with her weight and always feeling so angry with her body. She kept a strict diet, supplementing cigarettes and black coffee for meals. There was a clear message of never being good enough, never meeting the standard her mother had set for her. I often got the sense that she spent years of her life constantly working on herself, but being left unhappy in her own skin, which would seep through her language when she talked about herself. I found myself wondering about the little girl my mother had been, the little girl who lived in a house where that language was constant. Her self-worth was developed based on a shaky foundation passed down through the language of my grandmother. Where my grandmother was passing down these impossible standards unconsciously, but explicitly. Did my mother grow up feeling not enough? How did she feel watching her mother

starve herself and criticise herself at every turn? Was the message that she, too, would never be able to be good enough?

I sat with these thoughts, trying to imagine the world my mother grew up in and the way she tried to offer us a different message. The way her words did not always match her actions. I thought about what I had said to Marjorie, how we can hold both the empathy for our mothers and the anger for what had been done. I wondered if my mother could offer my grandmother that same empathy.

I added more hot water to my mug in an attempt to save the tea that I had let cool to room temperature. My thoughts still drifted along this train of thought, wondering what role I played in this dynamic. What was I recreating unknowingly? I felt myself being pulled more into the rippling effect of my grandmother, constantly seeking her mother's withholding approval, which seemed to echo across generations. I considered how I act, how I, too, find myself constantly seeking impossible standards. Often, this results in my being incredibly hard on myself for not achieving things I think I should. I am harsher on myself than I would ever be on a friend or stranger. Is this the result of this trauma being passed down? Am I unknowingly reenacting the experience of something that transpired decades before I was born¹⁸³? I also never feel like enough, but I never understood why or what standard I was trying to reach. The critical voice in my mind is just as loud as the one my grandmother had spoken out loud.

As I thought of these generations of women branching out behind me, I wondered about the relational pattern I sensed developing. While strained with her own mother, my mother always had an incredibly strong relationship with her grandmother. She felt unconditional love and support from her, speaking highly of her and their relationship. Yet, for how complex my mother and grandmother's relationship was, I, like my mother, was incredibly close with my grandmother. It was almost as if the distance between generations allowed for a deeper level of connecting. Which is then also replicated across generations. Is this the nature of mother-daughter relationships? Are we destined to have complicated dynamics with our own mothers, only to run to theirs?

I was curious about this development of a strong bond between daughter and grandmother, a new recurring family dynamic of excluding the mother. An action that punishes the mother, leaving them out of a loving and connected bond. Further excluding and alienating the mother when she has

¹⁸³ Frosh 2012

her own complicated relationship with the grandmother. I wondered if this led to a generational pattern of seeking out companionship with the grandmother. I found myself thinking of Julia Kristeva's theory of maternal abjection, the theory that the child must reject their mother in order to become their own individual, allowing them to develop their own subjectivity^{184,185}. I wondered if the rejection of the mother and the action of forming an alliance with the grandmother were part of this experience. Part of the need to become an individual separate from the mother.

As the thoughts buzzed around in my mind, it still felt like smoke, remembering Frosh's description of intergenerational trauma as something that was material but not graspable¹⁸⁶. Smoke, a ghostly mist, lingering around us, hovering in the air. Something you could walk through but still see, just at the edge of our awareness. It felt hard to capture in words, but it was a feeling that lived deep within me, almost indescribable. I could not stop wondering what I would do with this.

2.5 Whose task is it?

I sat across from my friend Clara, a fellow therapist, half-empty glasses of wine between us, in a dimly lit restaurant. The conversation seemed to naturally flow from the weather, to people we both knew, to things we were struggling with in our clinical work. I swirled my glass by the stem as she caught me up on her new private practice and the growing pains she seemed to be facing each day. As we waited for our food to arrive, she started to talk about a piece of work she was struggling with.

"You know that book *The Body Keeps the Score*¹⁸⁷?" I nodded as Clara continued. "I just bought it the other day. It keeps coming up in the professional development courses I've been doing recently on trauma, so I figured it was about time I read it."

"It feels like most therapists have," I laughed.

"No, I know, it's definitely a trendy read. I was hoping to get a bit of a better understanding of how trauma is experienced and what we as therapists can do about it."

"Have you started reading it yet?"

"No, not yet."

"I do think it's worth a read," I took a sip from my glass before continuing. "It makes an

¹⁸⁴ Kristeva 2024

¹⁸⁵ Masschelein 2023

¹⁸⁶ Frosh 2012

¹⁸⁷ Van der Kolk 2014

interesting case for how experiencing trauma changes our literal brain chemistry, you know... how the experience of trauma doesn't just leave emotional wounds but how it physically and biologically changes us¹⁸⁸. The studies he references show how our brain chemistry changes as a result of trauma, how we are physically reshaped by it¹⁸⁹. So, it's more of a biological psychology take on trauma and working with trauma. Truthfully, parts of it really rubbed me the wrong way, so I'll be interested to hear your take when you read it. There's a lot of criticism that *The Body Keeps the Score* stigmatises survivors and blames victims¹⁹¹. I found it minimises the experience of trauma and reduces it to a diagnosis or a data point."

"Wow, I didn't realise you felt so strongly about this! No, that's so fair. I'll try to read it, but I will definitely look for other options also. I've just been feeling stuck on this lately. I have this client whom I feel like I've really been struggling with. They had a traumatic childhood and a long history of abuse. Their father was very violent and domineering. They recently learned that their father was also abused as a child, and they've really been struggling with the fear that it might be some kind of unavoidable pattern in their family. They are about to have a baby with their partner, and they're now afraid that they will also have a violent temper because that was the model they grew up with. Some weeks, when they leave, I feel myself still sitting in their fear. They're so aware of the intergenerational aspect of the trauma and are so afraid that they are helpless to change it. I can't help but wonder if we are all just doomed to repeat these patterns. Is it enough to see them, or do we actually have the power to heal from and resolve them? Is that our task as humans to heal our family's collective trauma?"

"That is such a great question, I wish I knew. There's a quote that always comes back to me when I'm thinking of the experience of trauma being passed down through families, it's something along the lines of, 'What troubles us now is laid at the feet of a ghost, that ghost must be identified, appeased, laid to rest,¹⁹³'. When I think of it, I feel like that image of a ghost haunting family member after family member is so strong. Is it enough to see the ghost and to name it, or do we have to lay it to rest? Are we responsible for exorcising the ghosts that haunt our families as if we live in haunted houses?"

I paused to thank the waiter placing my entrée before me. My thoughts slipped toward Marjorie as I took my first bite, barely tasting my food as I wandered off into my thoughts.

¹⁸⁸ Van der Kolk 2014

¹⁸⁹ Van der Kolk 2014

¹⁹¹ Nietfeld 2024

¹⁹³ Frosh 2012 page 245

“It’s such a strong visual,” Clara said, pulling me back to the conversation. “Like these traumas are tangible things that we can see but can’t grasp in our hands. If only we could just open the windows of our haunted houses and let these ghosts drift off in the wind like smoke¹⁹⁵.”

“Wouldn’t that be nice! I have a client I’m working with right now that you’re making me think of. I think there is something there, some intergenerational trauma that we’ve been dancing around in our work, but I have been struggling to pin down what the trauma is.”

“Trauma feels like such a big word, doesn’t it?” Clara mused, twisting her hair thoughtfully around her finger. “It elicits such a strong reaction. I often feel myself hesitant to call something trauma. I don’t know why or where I draw that line, but it’s hard to come out and say ‘yes, this was trauma’, even when I feel like that’s what we’re getting at. When each person has their own perspective, their own definition of trauma, how do you begin to label it as such?”

“I know, I keep finding myself referring to things in their family as ‘patterns’, but that just minimises the experience, doesn't it? I have the fear, though, that I’ll call it trauma, and my client will have this visceral reaction. They can already be defensive when talking about their family. I think there is a lot of fear that I will pass some kind of judgment against their family, as if talking about their family will make me believe they’re all bad people. They often say things to excuse their family, like ‘they did the best they could with what they had’ or ‘it was never really that bad’. I’m just playing into that minimisation by not coming out and calling the trauma, trauma.”

“It’s like that cliché, just because other people may have it worse does not mean your stuff is not bad. You don’t have to measure their trauma against other people’s. It does make me think back to what you were saying about what do we do with it, once we have named our ghosts. If we were to listen to someone like Bessel Van Der Kolk, and we are strictly looking at how our trauma biologically changes us, how do we even repair that¹⁹⁶? That feels like a hopeless outlook, our brain chemistry is changed, and so are we! How sad is that? How do you fix that? What a daunting task to be up against!” she laughed, spearing a piece of fish with her fork.

A moment of silence passed between us as we both mentally wandered off toward our individual clients, the only sound between us the scraping of cutlery against ceramic dishes. I found myself replaying moments from my recent sessions with Marjorie. Was this what we were working toward? Had we been building toward an acknowledgement of the generations of trauma that had

¹⁹⁵ Frosh 2012

¹⁹⁶ Van der Kolk 2014

come before her? What trauma was rippling through the generations that ultimately led Marjorie to my door? Once we have found it, what do we do with it? It felt like an intimidating task, exorcising Marjorie of her family's ghosts. I suddenly felt overwhelmed imagining Marjorie's family tree unfolding before us, ghosts peering down at us accusingly as we nicely asked them to leave. I wondered if it could ever be enough. Suppose the biological scars of trauma are passed down in the same way that the emotional scars were. Had Marjorie been chemically changed by the trauma her great-grandmother had survived?

"I think there must be a way," Clara finally said, pulling me again from a trance as I snapped my attention back to the conversation before me, "to live with our ghosts. Maybe I'm an optimist, but I feel like they must serve a purpose. Whether it's protective or part of some historical remembering, there is a reason some traumas haunt us while others do not. Maybe the task at hand is not to find a way to get rid of our ghosts, but to cohabitate with them in peace. Honouring our family's historical trauma and recognising the role it played in who we are, but also not letting it pull you into repeating it."

"That is a very optimistic take," I laughed. "It's an interesting thing to think about, though, especially if you're looking at patterns that were based on some protective or defensive position. What about the negative patterns, like your client with a family of abuse? What purpose does that serve, and is it beneficial for your client to try to live alongside those ghosts? Surely, they are ones they would rather be rid of."

Clara nodded thoughtfully, "True. But maybe there is some greater lesson in there, too... but that sounds like dangerous 'everything happens for a reason', we 'manifest good and bad things' thinking."

"Good point. So, what are we left with?"

"That is a great question, back to the drawing board, I suppose. Maybe learning to live alongside the bad is just as important for breaking the pattern or cycle of trauma."

"Hmm... Maybe," I said, considering.

"You know what is really frustrating?" Clara asked.

"What?"

"Watching people play out these cycles. Seeing it happening, seeing them just continue to live out the patterns without even being aware of them. Before my sister had her daughter, she always said how she never wanted to be like our mother. That when she had kids, she would do everything

differently. But now, my niece is four, and I've just watched my sister become more like my mother every day. It's funny, on the surface, it looks different, but when you really listen, you can see that she's just repeating the same patterns. It honestly makes me never want to have kids! It seems like, even if you can see it, it's inevitable. We're all just destined to become our mothers, no matter what we do," she laughed, shaking her head.

We again sat in silence. I pushed the last few bites of my meal around my plate as I mulled over what this meant in terms of my work with Marjorie. Would she be able to live alongside the ghosts within her family, or did the work ahead mean we would need to process these unknown traumas? How had her experiences in life been shaped by those who came before her? Was finding some kind of peace in her relationship with her mother really a matter of finding peace with these generational ghosts? Was this really the goal of our work together, or was this my own personal goal? Did I want to exorcise my ghosts or hers?

When the waiter came by again to collect our empty plates, I felt even more overwhelmed by the question of what our task was.

2.6 Exploring emotional containment

A few weeks later, Marjorie's mom came into the room again.

"Wait until you hear this, it's even worse than the last time," she said with a dark laugh as we sat down. "My mom absolutely lost it on me the other day. We were on the phone talking about some upcoming plans I have, we really were talking about nothing serious, and I made a comment about something that like, in my head, felt so small, but as soon as it came out of my mouth, I could tell it was not the right thing to say. As soon as the words came out, I wished I could take them back. I could feel it in the pit of my stomach like I had the wind knocked out of me. I don't even know how we got there, but somehow it ended with her screaming at me that she was a good mother and had done everything she could for me and had made so many sacrifices for me. I wanted to scream back at her, but I felt like I couldn't, I never feel like I can. I felt so small and angry, but all I could manage was to cry and admit that she was right and I was wrong. When she finally got off the phone, I just felt so sick for the rest of the day. I could barely eat, I felt so nauseous all day. I called my brother to ask if he'd talked to her, and he was like, 'Yeah, I just saw her, she's fine.' Totally fine. Unaffected, going about her day. Meanwhile, I felt like my entire day was thrown off. I couldn't focus on work. I couldn't stop

obsessing over how to fix it and get her to forgive me. I thought about it for the entire day...” She paused, finally taking a gasping breath. “I am so sick of begging for her forgiveness when I haven’t done anything wrong. I have felt like this my whole life. I have felt that it’s my responsibility to make sure she’s okay. Desperate to keep her happy. I spent the whole next day checking in on her, making jokes or comments to get back on to her, I don’t know, good side or something. Like, this feeling of so desperately wanting her forgiveness for some wrong, but also so desperately wanting her to be happy and okay. Whenever I feel like she is upset about something, I end up doing so much work to try and make it okay, so much work reassuring her and comforting her. I am always trying to read her mood, like I’m trying to predict how she’ll respond so that I can prepare accordingly. When did it become my responsibility to manage how she feels?”

As the words rushed out, Marjorie began to cry. Hot, angry tears streaked down her cheeks as she rubbed her hands over her face. She shut her eyes, taking a few deep, calming breaths before she began to speak again.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to get so worked up. It’s just so frustrating. I feel like my whole life I have been tiptoeing around her needs,” she said, drying her tears with the sleeve of her sweater.

I nodded. Noticing that I was becoming the emotional container, much like Marjorie’s mother used her as. My mind spun as threads connected, and I considered my following words. Mindful that I was also trying to give Marjorie space and fighting an internal desire to rush in and soothe her. As if I wanted to assume the role of a gentle, protective mother.

“When you talk about your mother, it sometimes sounds like the roles are reversed,” I finally said, speaking carefully. I was hoping to get my point across without pushing Marjorie into the defensive position she took when she perceived me to be critical of her mother. I was aware that the theme of emotional containment was becoming increasingly present in the work we were doing¹⁹⁷. It seemed to be a heavy burden for her to carry, and Marjorie often spoke of the labour that went into her relationship with her mother. I felt that she had learned from a young age that she was responsible not only for anticipating but also for managing the emotions and reactions of others.

“What do you mean?” She asked, pulling a tissue from the box on the table between us.

¹⁹⁷ Cartwright 2013

“Well... I think people assume that the mother would be the one anticipating and managing the emotions of their child. It is a very nurturing and mothering task, tending to someone’s emotions. Trying to protect or shield them from negative ones.”

“Yeah, I guess so...,” Marjorie blew her nose into the already damp tissue.

“So, I think I’m just curious about that. How it became your task to tend to her needs, instead of her tending to yours.”

“I do that in other relationships too,” she said, shifting the focus away from the dynamics at play between her and her mother. “I always put other people’s needs ahead of my own. I go out of my way, sometimes even hurting myself, just to make sure other people are happy. It feels like it’s always my job, I’m always the one responsible for everyone else and am always left feeling like no one thinks twice about me.”

“You learned from a young age how to manage other people’s feelings, and now feel responsible to continue that role,” I reflected back to her. “Now, you’re repeating this dynamic in other relationships. Maybe because it is a role you know, or maybe because you’re trying to recreate this relationship but with a different outcome.” As I spoke, I felt like I was gaining a greater sense of clarity. As if the pattern was taking shape, laying itself out in front of me as I worked backwards. I remembered what Marjorie had shared about her grandmother and great-grandmother. The generations of silence and tiptoeing around emotions.

“I also wonder...” I continued, “About where you were in that. You spent so much time and energy containing your mother’s emotions. Did you ever learn how to contain your own? Your emotional needs were not being met as a child, how does that come out in your life now? Who do you become for other people, and who do you become for yourself?”

“Honestly, I don’t know... sometimes there isn’t any space for me.” Sorrow coated her words, an empty acceptance of her lack of space.

I felt lost, unsure how to respond. Letting the despair wash over the both of us.

Just like she had in previous sessions, Marjorie retreated back into safety. Pulling us further away from her mother, further away from the hurt that she had brought into the room.

And I let her.

2.7 Patterns of rejection

I went back through my notes after Marjorie left. I felt that we had been circling the same themes week after week. As I reflected, the word rejection kept coming to mind. Specifically, the raw pain of maternal rejection. Marjorie often used phrases like “nothing I do is enough,” or “she is never happy for me or proud of me”. I thought back on moments like Marjorie’s story about her mother being angry about her experimenting with her fashion and makeup as a young teen. Or even the first time Marjorie had brought up her mom, when she said their relationship changed when she no longer wanted just to be her mother’s “doll”. These moments felt significant as they were times when Marjorie had attempted to be something separate from her mother. In both moments, that tentative new identity was met with rejection. I found myself wondering what happens to us when we reach out to our mothers, only to be left disappointed.

A memory came to mind of a story one of my friends had told me once. Years ago, she had been shopping with her mother and was trying on clothes. She had come out of the fitting room excited to show her mother a dress she had loved. Only to be met with sharp criticism, her mother told her that it looked bad and highlighted her worst features. My friend had returned to the fitting room and collapsed on the floor in tears. The sting of the rejection was as harsh as a slap in the face. I wondered about the way we are affected by our mothers. Why do we seek their approval so desperately and feel so strongly the visceral pain of being rejected by them? I wondered about my friend’s mother. What had her mother said to her that led her to speak to her own daughter that way? Was she also just repeating a dynamic that had been taught to her?

I decided to bring this thought up the next week, tossing it out like bait into the open ocean, waiting to see if Marjorie would take it. It somehow felt risky, maybe leading? It was somewhere I wanted to take us and somewhere I could see us needing to go, but I was not sure if it would be received. Over the weeks, Marjorie had seemed to be increasingly open when it came to talking about her relationship with her mother, but this still felt like sensitive territory. I was afraid that one wrong word would have her retreating. I wanted to find a way to bring her mother and grandmother back into the room. It felt like this was a theme in their historical trauma. A maternal rejection that was being transmitted from one generation to the next. Marjorie felt like she had not been enough for her mother, had not been what she wanted. From her telling, Marjorie’s mother had also felt this way about her mother, and her grandmother with her mother before that. They were all striving to reach a goalpost that kept moving.

“I was thinking about something you said the other week,” I started, treading carefully. Marjorie looked at me curiously. We had been sitting in a peaceful, quiet place, the pace of this session feeling slower than previous weeks had. “I forget your wording exactly, but the impression I was left with was that you have never felt like you were meeting your mother’s expectations of you. I was wondering if we could pick that thread back up and look at it more closely.” Marjorie scrunched her nose, eyes crinkling. “You don’t seem to like that,” I laughed in response, using humour to deflect from the discomfort.

“It’s hard to explain, I think...,” she said. “It’s not always specifically said if that makes sense. It’s more of a feeling?”

“When have you felt it?”

“I have felt it whenever I’ve brought her something I’m proud of or something I’m excited to share with her. Time after time, I’ll bring her something I can’t wait to tell her. And then I’m always disappointed by her response, even though I know I shouldn’t be surprised... I’ve felt it my whole life. Like, I’m not meeting some unspoken expectation she has. Is it a rejection or is it disappointment? Maybe it’s both...” she trailed off.

I chewed on the inside of my cheek nervously. I was worried I had completely missed the mark. I was wondering how I could keep the session centred on Marjorie while also finding space to process what I was assuming was a long line of daughters who felt they had disappointed or been rejected by their mothers. Aware that my focus needed to stay with Marjorie, it was not my task to heal the wounds of her mother, but I wanted to make space to acknowledge the generational transmission at play.

“I think it can be both,” I finally said. “Maybe they’re connected feelings? If someone is disappointed in us, is that another way of saying that they are rejecting who we are? They’re disappointed we aren’t something they’ve imagined us to be, and they are rejecting our true selves?”

“Hm... Maybe... When I think of someone in my family feeling like they are being rejected, I think more of my grandmother.” My brows lifted in surprise, as if Marjorie had read through my veiled questions and was bringing us to the point I had hoped to make.

“How so?”

“Well, I think she felt rejected by her mother,” she said, and my heart leapt at the disclosure. I felt myself lean forward in my chair as if I were physically urging Marjorie to continue that train of thought, eager to see where it might lead. “My great-grandmother was a very particular woman. I

think I've said before how cold she could be. She had a lot of her own trauma, I'm sure, but it was never talked about. So instead, she had children. She used to tell my grandmother all the time how she only wanted sons because, in my grandma's words, 'she couldn't be bothered with daughters'. So, she was really absent throughout my grandma's life. She was perfect in my grandma's eyes, but my grandma was always striving for her love and attention. And she never got it. She spent her whole life chasing after it."

This rejection had rippled across the generations of women in Marjorie's life. The ghosts of these women hung in the air around us, their shadows dimming the light in the room. The past coming into the present, shaping the way Marjorie came into the room.

2.8 Seeing patterns

The further into our work we went, the more I began to see these patterns of intergenerational trauma all around me. It was as if ghosts were suddenly pouring out of everyone I encountered. They were there in the room as I worked with other clients, in the stories my friends told, in the encounters with strangers I passed on the train. I wondered if they had always been there, waiting to be noticed, or if, now that I was looking for them, I was forming my own connections that were not actually there.

One evening, I stood in my kitchen washing the dishes while music played through my phone on the counter next to me. I paused and then broke out in a laugh when Noah Kahan suddenly sang, "I'm still angry at my parents for what their parents did to them¹⁹⁸". I had listened to this song more times than I could count, and yet I had never connected to this lyric before. I thought to myself, is this just a universal experience? Are we all just acting out these patterns that are the rippling results of trauma that is unknown to us? Are we destined to live in and repeat the actions of generations before us? Are we all grappling with our relationship with our parents for things done to them by their parents and the generations of parents before them?

Mothers and daughters entered my awareness again a few days later when I found myself particularly struck by this overwhelming understanding. I had just finished watching the film *Petite*

¹⁹⁸ Kahan 2022

*Maman*¹⁹⁹. In the movie, a young girl encounters the childhood version of her mother in a magical realist setting²⁰⁰. The young girl's maternal grandmother had just died, and they were returning to her mother's childhood home as her mother and father worked to pack away the grandmother's life into boxes. When she encounters the child version of her mother in the woods, she begins to gain a better understanding and appreciation for her mother. She can see the little girl within her who was still seeking love, friendship, and approval. The little girl is able to fully embrace the person her mother was before being changed by motherhood. It is bittersweet when the adult version of her mother finally returns, both mourning the loss of the grandmother and the loss of this childhood self.

As I lay in bed, curled around my cat and my laptop, watching while the end credits rolled across the screen, I found myself crying. Tears silently streamed down my face, but I could not even find the words to explain why I was crying besides this lingering sense of loss. I was overcome by the desire to meet the child my mother once was. Struck by the notion that it is impossible to ever really know who your mother had been before you. I thought of my mother, of who she was when she was young. Who had she dreamed of being? What hopes did she have for her future, and what plans had she made? If I were to meet the child version of my mother, like the protagonist in the film, could I make sense of the trauma and break the cycle? I felt so enmeshed with my mother, unable to separate her existence from my own. I found myself mourning that, mourning that I would never truly know who she was without me. Recognising the childish way I had tied my mother to my identity, removing her autonomy and stripping her of her life beyond motherhood.

I felt the urge to pick up the phone and call her, needing some form of connection and reassurance. Wishing I could know who she really was, who she had been.

“Hi sweetie, is everything okay?” she asked, answering after the first ring.

“Hi! I just watched a great movie and wanted to chat about it... Do you have a minute?”

We drifted off into easy, comfortable conversation. My cat was purring next to me as I watched rain steadily falling outside my window. The glow of my desk lamp and the softness of my mother's voice lulling me into a safe cocoon. I felt grateful to have such a bond, such a strong connection with my own mother. As we hung up the phone almost an hour later, I wondered if

¹⁹⁹ *Petite Maman* 2021

²⁰⁰ *Petite Maman* 2021

Marjorie ever reached out to her mother for comfort. Even across the ocean, if she felt like she could feel her hug and smile over the phone, like I had felt mine.

The next morning, I walked into my yoga class. Just as we were getting ready to begin, the instructor, a woman whose classes I had been regularly attending for years, announced to the class that she was pregnant. A few months along with her first daughter. *'Is everyone having daughters?'* I wondered to myself. It felt inescapable. I felt like everywhere I looked, I was confronted with the idea of motherhood. More specifically, the relationship mothers have with their daughters. I tried to push the thoughts out of my mind and stay present in class, but my mind wandered. I wondered what kind of mother my yoga instructor would be. *'She always seemed to be calm and put together,'* I thought to myself, and then immediately laughed silently, *'of course, I would experience my yoga instructor that way.'* I wondered what ghost might follow her into the nursery when her baby was born²⁰². What unresolved trauma lurked beyond the shadows of her family? My thoughts floated through the room as we flowed through the rest of the hour.

"I'm actually off to my own therapy now," my friend Cassandra said to me as we walked out of the yoga studio and headed down the hall toward the changing rooms.

"Oh, really, how's that going?" I turned to her, slinging my tote bag over my shoulder as I slipped my shoes back on.

"Really well, actually. I have a new therapist I just started seeing recently, and we're getting along so far. It's still new, so I'm trying to figure her out a bit still, but it feels very comfortable. She's easy to talk to. It's already so much better than the last person I saw."

I laughed, "Why, what was wrong with the last one?"

"She always made it about my mother," Cassandra rolled her eyes. "Every time I would say something, she would respond like, 'That will be because of your mother,' or 'I bet your mother did that to you'. Sometimes I didn't think she even heard what I was saying. It was just an automatic response, an all-encompassing response. Every single issue I had or challenge I faced, she somehow turned it back into something my mother had done. It was always my mother's fault or something she

²⁰² Fraiberg 1980

had done to me. Not everything is because of our mothers!” She threw her hands up, exasperated. “It got to the point where, when I’d get home after a session, my mom would call and be like, ‘So what did I do this week?’ I felt like I couldn’t go anywhere with her besides the topic of my mother.”

I laughed, surprised by how close her words landed to my own distracted thoughts.

“Sometimes it is!” I said as she rolled her eyes at me again. “No, seriously,” I continued. “Not just the bad things, but think about how much we learn simply from observing our mothers. They are our first model of humanity, the first person we are ever in a relationship with, the first person we watch engaging with others or acting out habits²⁰³. We’re always watching and learning from them.”

“Okay, I will give you that. And I’m sure there are a lot of things in my life that are because of my mother. But I cannot go about my entire life blaming my mother for every bad thing that ever happens to me. That feels like an unhelpful way of processing things. My mom is a great mother, I don’t harbour any anger or resentment toward her, and I definitely don’t want to spend an hour each week feeling like I need to defend that.” Cassandra shook her head in annoyance as we made our way back toward the front of the yoga studio, waving at the receptionist on our way out.

“Fine, fair.” I laughed. “Have fun in therapy!” I called to Cassandra as I left.

As I walked down the block toward my neighbourhood, the sun just rising from behind the buildings, Cassandra’s words rolled around in my mind. My thoughts made their way back to Marjorie, something that seemed to be happening a lot lately. Something about her had struck me and followed me as I moved throughout the rest of the week. I had found myself holding her in mind more than I usually did with other clients, unable to shake off our work when she left the room. I thought of things she had shared with me about her mother, how she often felt responsible for holding and managing her mother’s feelings and emotions. How she at times felt consumed with worry over her mother’s well-being. Was that what was happening between us? Were we reenacting this dynamic? In this enactment, Marjorie was the mother, and I was the daughter. We were playing out the cycle of daughters containing their mothers, as she was uncontainable, and I was left trying to hold it all. Or did I have that backwards? Was I attempting to offer Marjorie the containment her mother could not provide? Was I desperate to right some kind of mothering wrong?

I wondered if it was our sameness that seemed to make Marjorie inescapable for me. I struggled to disentangle myself from her, and now she was spilling out of the office and into my

²⁰³ Winnicott 1960

personal life. Following me, haunting me as if she were my own ghost. I walked up the stairs to my flat, my mind still lost in a hazy fog of thought. It felt like there was a problem to solve, something gnawing at the edge of my awareness. Pulling me back again and again to the question, I did not know if I would ever be able to answer: What do we do with it? When we see these cycles, when we acknowledge the unspoken historical trauma, can we ever be healed from it? Can we ever break these cycles? I came back to this thought time and time again, and I felt frustrated by my lack of answers. My need to problem-solve coming up against an unmovable wall. I wanted answers to all of these questions. Wanted to free Marjorie of the ghosts that haunted her. But realistically, I knew that may not be the true task at hand.

That night, as I lay in bed scrolling mindlessly through social media, a video of Charli XCX came across my screen. It was footage from a recent concert she had performed, “This is a song for everyone who’s experienced intergenerational trauma,” she shouted through an autotuned microphone before launching into her song Apple.

“I think the apple's rotten right to the core
From all the things passed down
From all the apples coming before²⁰⁵”

I shook my head. *‘It really is inescapable,’* I thought to myself. In my life, my friend’s lives, my client’s lives, and in the media through music and movies. It seemed to be a universal experience. Shared knowledge that we are shaped by the traumas of those who came before us. I could not believe how I had never really considered it before, but now it was glaringly obvious. Everything we experience is a culmination of events that occurred before we were born. Of course, we are shaped by the lives of our parents, grandparents, and great-great-grandparents. It suddenly seemed so clear how trauma silently ripples through the generations, each generation’s parenting shaped by the trauma they experienced, in turn influencing their parenting of their children, their children’s children. Until one day, decades have passed, and someone like Marjorie is still reenacting the patterns taught to them by parents long since removed from the actual experience of the trauma. Ghosts haunting a family in silence, existing in the unspoken, lurking in the shadows beyond the touch of light.

²⁰⁵ Charli XCX 2024

The song continued to play as I, for the first time, really heard the lyrics. The seemingly mindless pop song suddenly taking on a new shape in my mind. There was an underlying sense of wishing to run away from the trauma, wanting to just get into the car and drive to the airport, to escape²⁰⁶. Yet, it's not that easy. Running does not free us from these hauntings. The ghosts can just as easily follow you, no matter where you run or fly to.

2.9 How do we work with this?

“I like to call these ‘ordinary traumas,’” my supervisor said thoughtfully after listening to me toil over how we measure and quantify trauma. It felt like such a big word, a heavy word, to label Marjorie’s experiences as ‘trauma’. It felt traumatic, the relationship with her mother and the way it had left long-lasting scars on her and ghosts that followed her even across the ocean. I had a sense she wished to shake them, to heal herself from their influence. Yet the word trauma felt harsh. A strong statement I was, for some still unknown reason, struggling to make. I wondered where the reluctance lay, was it mine or was it Marjorie’s? I thought back to her hesitation in even speaking of her mother when we first began, wondering if I was now pulling that hesitation along with me. Hesitating to make her mother the bad object, the person at fault for causing the trauma, the villain in Marjorie’s story. Because ultimately it was not that simple.

“They might be ordinary, felt in the everyday and occurring just under the surface, but they’re not small, I don’t want to minimise them that way, but they are ordinary. They occur during daily life and are experienced over time.” She continued, “They are still traumas.” Her words struck a chord so sharply that I had to reach for a pen to jot down quick, messy notes on the scrap of paper beside my computer.

“Why do we have to measure someone’s trauma against another’s? Just because someone is experiencing their own traumatic events does not mean your clients are any less traumatised, they just are different.”

“That’s a good point,” I responded, rolling the word ‘ordinary’ around in my mind. As if it softened the blow. A word that, at first, I was eager to grab onto, and yet now already felt myself pulling back. Was this just another way of avoiding looking at something I already knew?

²⁰⁶ Charli XCX 2024

As I left my supervision meeting, I considered where I hoped to go in my work with Marjorie. Waves crashed on the shores of my mind, something was coming so close to being seen, to being known. I retreated to my office, pulling up old notes I had taken on working with trauma in therapy. I was getting too stuck on the details. Too worried about the consequences of labelling what was occurring that I had lost the real purpose of our work. I was avoiding something. Whether that avoidance was mine or hers, it was keeping us at an arm's length from what we had been dancing around for weeks. Pulling us back when we got too close, getting us caught up in the details and the semantics instead of actually looking at what was in front of us. Shrouded in a cloak of shame and fear of being judged, or maybe of her family, her mother, being judged. Of wanting to protect and defend.

Marjorie had experienced trauma. Trauma that was not only hers, but the whispers of the trauma of generations of women before her.

As soon as I made this connection, more bridges seemed to form in my mind. How she spoke of her mother, the dynamic between her and her grandmother, and the stories from her grandmother's childhood. As I closed my eyes, it was almost as if I could see the shadow of these women, faces blurred but presence known, each one laying a hand on the shoulder of the woman after them. Their trauma flowed between them just as strongly as their love, from one generation to the next, until finally reaching Marjorie. Who was being shaped by the life of a great, great-grandmother that she had never known or maybe had never even heard of. I thought of the context in which these women existed, the lives they had led. The social world around them, the known and the unknown trauma that had shaped how they raised their daughters, until all that lingered was the ghost of traumas long since passed²⁰⁷. The trauma that my supervisor had called "ordinary" was just the ghosts that continued to haunt and make themselves more actively known.

I opened my eyes. Now looking behind me, and the hands on my shoulder. Was I avoiding naming Marjorie's trauma because I was too fearful of looking at my own? Just like when we first met, I felt the connection between us. This sense of similarity, even in our differences. By looking too closely at her trauma, I had realised I had actually been looking into a mirror this entire time. She had made me think of my mother, my grandmother, my great-grandmother. Of the lives they had led, of the trauma they had endured. The unspoken and spoken experiences that had guided one after

²⁰⁷ Williams 2021; the outside comes in, our social world influences our inner world

another until reaching me. Shaping and guiding me until the moment I had entered the counselling room and encountered Marjorie and her ghosts. Both of us living in the shadows of these silent, maybe ordinary, traumas.

'And what do we do with this?' I wondered to myself as I continued my search through my old notes and files, pulling out readings on theory and counselling skills. Thinking of the unspoken nature of the trauma, how the years of silence may be part of the reason it was still prevalent so many generations later²⁰⁸. How we had been reenacting that silence by not naming it, by not being able to reach it fully. If we could speak into this trauma, making space to explore her worries, fears, and fantasies about what her great-grandparents and grandmother survived, would it be enough? To acknowledge and speak about this trauma out loud, could we begin the journey of healing? With Marjorie's great-grandparents long deceased, she would never have the answers she sought, so we may have to settle for this and hope it could be enough.

Marjorie also never had the experience of feeling like she was validated and emotionally contained. She was perpetuating a cycle of daughters feeling responsible for managing and containing the emotions of their mothers. I wondered if, through therapy, I could become the container that Marjorie had needed. Could I offer her a space that was containing enough that she would feel like she was being held and supported in a way that allowed her to process her trauma? To express her grief? To feel all of her emotions instead of worrying whether she was regulating someone else's? I wondered if I would be able to hold and contain her the way she needed²⁰⁹.

Through our time together, I was becoming increasingly aware that we would need to look backwards while looking forward²¹⁰. There was trauma in her history, a generational trauma that would need to be faced before she could move forward. We would need to process and resolve the trauma of the past to enable her to have a future where she was able to break the cycles and patterns. I had the impression that, at the core of this, was the historical trauma her great-grandparents had survived through the holocaust. Beginning there, and the silence after, were the rippling consequences of surviving such a horror. It rippled out into how her great-grandmother was able to parent, the love and affection she withheld. Further into her grandmother's absence and neglect in her own parenting,

²⁰⁸ Kavner, McNab, Byng-Hall, Mason, Flaskas, and Perlesz 2005; silence as an active contributing factor to the perpetuating nature of trauma, allowing it to seamlessly pass from one generation to the next while hiding in the shadows

²⁰⁹ Minsky 1996

²¹⁰ Isobel, McCloughen, Goodyear, and Foster 2021; healing the past to resolve the future

the rejection of Marjorie's mother and the inability to meet her needs. Even more, I could see the tendrils spreading to Marjorie, the rejection she experienced, and the way she was responsible for managing and predicting the emotional responses of those around her. Across these four generations of women, there was pain that was seen but not spoken of. It was now a cycle, impacting not only their relationships with one another but also their ability to enter into other relationships. It was also impacting their ability to enter into a healthy relationship with themselves, as evident by Marjorie's disordered eating habits, lack of confidence, and extreme pressure to always be high achieving.

We needed to look back, processing the original trauma, in order to break the cycle. Marjorie needed to accept, or come to terms with, the past so she could have a future. So, one day, she could potentially have a healthy, positive relationship with a future daughter. So, the cycle of the transmission of trauma would end with her.

I thought of a quote I had come across recently, "Cumulative trauma is the result of breaches in a mother's role as a protective shield over the course of the child's development, from infancy to adolescence, tendering the fact that the mother is unable to provide sufficient auxiliary ego to support her child. But what if a mother herself inherited from her parents her protective shield with holes²¹¹". Generations of trauma had left the shield that had protected Marjorie threadbare²¹². A moth-eaten scrap of fabric that had been passed from mother to daughter. How could any of the women in Marjorie's family have done any better when the shield, when that protective barrier that was meant to shelter her, was filled with holes? When more and more holes were burned through as it was passed to the next woman in line. If Marjorie's mother had a tattered shield, how could it have been any different for Marjorie? I started to think of this protective barrier as I wondered what could be done about it. Could it be repaired? Could we patch the holes up like an heirloom quilt?

For some reason, this thought lingered as I moved throughout my week. It felt somehow important that the scars, or patches, were not forgotten. It felt important that the trauma is still seen, still known, but without being passed to the next generation as trauma. Like it was a disservice to the women who had survived the trauma to simply wish to resolve it and move on with a smooth, unblemished shield.

²¹¹ Lenherr 2019, page 16

²¹² Lenherr 2019

“I’m thinking,” I said to Marjorie the following week. “About the unspoken nature of the trauma in your family... I’m getting this real sense that there are these layers of trauma... your great-grandmother’s experience in the Holocaust, your grandmother’s emotionally cold and withholding upbringing, your mother’s neglect during her childhood, your own stories of rejection and containment... and yet none of it is talked about. None of it is necessarily a secret, these are all stories you know and have been told or have seen firsthand. Yet, it’s never been directly spoken of. I was reading some research about trauma within families, and one of the big questions is, now what? What do we do with it? How do we actually heal from it? I think maybe the first step is giving it a voice, putting it into words, finding a way to express what has happened.” I looked at Marjorie to gauge her reaction.

“I think that makes sense,” she paused. “I think there is a lot of guilt in talking about them so candidly, though, I feel bad... like you might think badly of them.”

“You’re worried that if you say something, I might pass some kind of judgment against them?”

“Yeah, it’s like... these are things that are kept in the family, you know? It’s not a secret within the family... but to let someone from outside the family see into it... It’s like I’m putting all of our embarrassing shame on display²¹⁴. I feel guilty. I don’t want to make them sound like bad people, or to give some impression that they were bad mothers or grandmothers.” I could sense Marjorie’s reluctance, the shame that served as motivation for her silence²¹⁵.

“Hmm... that’s interesting. But I do wonder if that is the way trauma is able to be passed through generations. We wrap it up in a layer of guilt and shame, burying it deep within us and carrying it. Only to have it appear in different ways, shaping our relationships and actions²¹⁶. Trauma persists in the silence, it feeds off the darkness, its existence enabled by the act of keeping it hidden in the unconscious recesses of the collective family mind²¹⁷.”

“Rationally, I do know that, but it’s hard to bring to light the trauma that’s been hiding for generations. Until now, I’d never really made the connection between the unresolved trauma of my great-grandmother’s experience surviving the Holocaust and how I am living today. It’s surreal to think that something that feels so removed from me has been shaping the way I live my life²¹⁸. I wish

²¹⁴ Barnwell 2019; shame contributes to the silence, allowing the trauma to remain hidden

²¹⁵ Mucci 2013

²¹⁶ Menzies 2010

²¹⁷ Mucci 2013

²¹⁸ Wolynn 2017

my great-grandmother and grandmother had gone to therapy,” she laughed, shaking her head in disbelief. “I wonder what my mom’s life, what my life, could have been like if they had talked about their trauma instead of languishing in silence. Why didn’t they talk about it?” It took me a moment to realise she had begun to cry, a tear silently escaping.

“There’s this Elie Wiesel quote I love, ‘Had we started to speak, we would have found it impossible to stop. Having shed one tear, we would have drowned the human heart,’²¹⁹. I imagine it was too hard to speak of. And then there was this pressure just to get back to life²²⁰.”

“To survive that... and then to think you could just... what, go back to work? Start a family? Exist? I can’t imagine what that was like for them... but did they really have to take their trauma and say, ‘I’ll double that and give it to the next person?’” Marjorie wiped the stray tears from her face.

I smiled, recognising her need for humour to offer a bit of reprieve from the intensity of the session. I felt a shift in the air between us, the ghosts had not gone, but something in them had changed. The darkness of the shadows just barely growing lighter. ‘*Maybe this is how we work through it, bit by bit, shining light into the dark,*’ I thought to myself. Feeling more positive and hopeful than I had in weeks. Change felt possible, optimistic even.

Marjorie had existed in the shadow of this great family secret, which led to a myth of suffering passed from generation to generation. The origin had been lost, but it was now found²²¹.

2.10 A sudden change

A week later, I had an email forwarded to me by the counselling office administrator from Marjorie. It was brief, just a few lines, but I felt my stomach drop as I read them.

Hello,

My grandmother passed away suddenly over the weekend, and I will be flying home to spend time with my family. I wanted to send my apologies along to my therapist. I will be away for a few weeks, but I would like to resume our sessions when I return.

Thank you,

²¹⁹ Wiesel 1977

²²⁰ Mucci 2013

²²¹ Pincus 1980, page 14

Marjorie

I read her email again and again, the words settling in heavily. I quickly sent an email back to ask if they could pass along my condolences and let her know that it would be absolutely fine, to take more time off if she needed it. I felt my heart aching for her as her pain leaked out of the computer into the room around me. I knew how close she had been with her grandmother and how devastating this loss must be. Marjorie had described her grandmother as the core of her extended family. The matriarch that everything revolved around, from hosting holidays to organising family reunions and serving as the family historian. It would be an indescribable loss for both Marjorie and the family system as a whole.

I sank back into my chair. Closing my eyes against an onslaught of tears that were fighting their way out. Another parallel between Marjorie and me. A thread branching out, connecting us to one another. One I wish did not exist. The raw pain of loss hung in the air as my thoughts were pulled. It had been just barely a year since I suddenly lost my father. Still so fresh that the words Marjorie had sent stung and brought my own grief bubbling over the surface. The loss had cosmically and irrevocably changed my family. My sense of safety was shattered so severely that I was unsure whether I would ever fully recover. The sudden and unexpected nature of the loss caused a rippling of trauma throughout every aspect of my life. I knew the sinking, stomach-churning feeling of loss that was tightly hidden behind her put-together email. Flashbacks of the emails I had sent in the days following my father's death came to mind. Carefully worded, cold explanations about why I would be absent from work and when I hoped to return.

I reread her words for the third time as the first tear escaped and slid down my cheek. My heart ached for her, the pain was visceral, as if it were my loss as well. I knew that this would be a significant shift in our work together, hoping Marjorie would, in fact, return. A single thread of worry wormed its way into my thoughts: what if she did not return? What if we were unable to continue? If we did continue, where would we find ourselves?

The loss had changed me so much that I wondered if the version of who I was before would even recognise who I was now. My outlook and perspective shifted. My family dynamics had changed. My relationships had taken a new shape. My priorities were different. I found myself wondering how Marjorie would be changed by her loss. Would I recognise her when she returned?

During our scheduled time that week, I held Marjorie in mind as I filled the hour doing other work. Wondering how she was and what she was doing. I thought back fondly on the stories Marjorie had told me of her grandmother, the warmth in her voice when she had described their relationship and the unconditional love she had always felt from her. Suddenly, time felt so short, so fleeting. I knew all too well how a sudden death can bring so much into focus, can highlight how lucky we are for the brief time we do have. Looking at the clock, mentally calculating how much time I had until my next session and what time it currently was in New Jersey, I pulled out my cell phone and called my mother. She answered on the second ring, her voice on the phone was like a warm, familiar hug.

“Is everything okay?” She asked as she answered without even saying hello.

“Yes, just had a break in my day and wanted to call and say hi.”

The loss of my father had made me even more grateful and aware of the precious nature of my relationship with my mother. Feeling closer to her than I had in years, even across an ocean. I cherished every phone call and was grateful for every text. While we talked, I heard her wander into the kitchen at my grandparents’ house. My grandma muttered in the background over the soft sound of dishes being washed in the sink. I asked my mom to put me on speakerphone so I could say hello. The warm greeting from my grandma brought a smile to my face.

“When are you coming to visit?” She shouted, even though I could hear her clearly.

“Soon!” I laughed as my grandpa yelled, “Who are you talking to?” in the background. I could almost hear my mom roll her eyes as she took me off speakerphone. We talked about the weather, about my plans for the weekend, and about what she was cooking for dinner. I closed my eyes while she spoke, picturing her sitting in the living room of my grandparents’ house. My heart ached with a familiar homesickness as I imagined I was sitting on the soft powder blue couch next to her.

“Alright, I have to go take grandma to a doctor’s appointment. I’ll talk to you later, love you.”

“Love you too.”

I hung up the phone, left feeling even more grateful for the time I had with all of them.

As the next week passed, Marjorie moved in and out of my thoughts.

Even though the extra hour was a welcome break in a busy day, I was restless. Unable to settle into myself. I would watch the clock as the minutes ticked by, unable to focus on whatever task I had chosen to busy myself with. During the third missed session, I found myself looking up the book she had mentioned during our first conversation about her relationship with her mom. I downloaded a copy on my Kindle and began to read it.

Toward the end of the third week, Marjorie sent another email to let us know she had decided to extend her trip another week, but she promised that she would be attending the following week.

I spent the hour that fourth week sitting in my chair, staring at the empty one across from me. Uncertainty hung in the air. I imagined what I might say to Marjorie when she returned. What could I even offer her? Having lived through a similar loss recently, I knew that no words I offered could ever be enough. No platitude would soften the sharp edge of grief.

2.11 Processing the loss

When Marjorie returned, I could tell the loss weighed on her heavily. She looked tired, with dark semi-circles under her eyes and a pale tint to her skin.

“I’m so sorry for your loss. How have you been?” The words felt foolish and inadequate as soon as they were out of my mouth.

“Thank you, I’ve definitely been better,” she said with a hollow laugh. “Honestly, right now I just feel exhausted. I think the shock has worn off, and it’s left me feeling drained. The last few weeks, I just felt like a shell of myself.” I nodded, holding space in the silence in the hopes of giving her the room she needed. “I was really so shocked when my mom called me, I barely remember talking to her. I just went into autopilot. I barely managed to email my work and cancel my appointments before booking a flight home... it was surreal. I just went through my phone the other day because one of my friends said I’d texted her and I didn’t even remember...”

Marjorie continued. “Then, when I got there, there was so much logistical stuff to deal with. No one talks about how much business and paperwork there is in death. I just immediately jumped into action, helping my mom and aunt with planning the funeral and organising everything. It

happened really suddenly, but she at least had a will and her estate all in order. I think she did that after my grandpa died... so at least that was fairly smooth. But then there was this huge argument because in her will, she left the house equally to my mom and her sister. My aunt wants to sell the house, and my mom thinks it should stay in the family. So that was another nightmare. It was just weeks of business, cleaning, organising, and planning. Then suddenly it's all over. The funeral happens, the out-of-town family leaves, and I'm getting ready to fly back to Edinburgh and am supposed to just pick back up and keep living?" Tears shone in her eyes as she spoke, her words picking up pace as she went. "How am I supposed to just get back into life, when in an instant everything is different?"

I was struck by the parallel between this and another conversation we had had. The question of how her great-grandparents had been expected to simply return to life after surviving the Holocaust. Now, decades later, after surviving another trauma, Marjorie was asking those same questions of herself. How could one return to whatever real life was after surviving something unimaginable? After being utterly changed? What life are you even returning to?

I felt at a loss for words. Marjorie's pain and grief was pulsing off her, filling the room and consuming the air. I felt myself mentally rifling through my mind's catalogue of responses, desperately grasping for something to help alleviate the tension building within me.

Marjorie pulled her knees up to her chest, folding into herself and began to let out shuddering sobs. My need to respond, to soothe, to offer some kind of words of comfort, was becoming overwhelming, but to speak would only be for my benefit, not because it would bring Marjorie any real comfort or solace²²².

So instead, we sat there, together in an uncomfortable and full silence while Marjorie continued to cry. I tried to take slow and steady breaths, sitting with her in her pain and grief. My chest felt tight, my heart pounded against my ribs. The minutes ticked slowly by as we sat in the rawness of her loss.

Eventually, Marjorie took several gasping, ragged breaths, "I'm sorry. I just miss her so much. I wish I could call her."

"I know," I said softly. I felt like there was nothing else I could offer. I was adrift in the sea of her sorrow and was completely helpless. No words would ever be enough. I sat with her, holding

²²² Grant 2002

myself still, barely allowing myself to breathe as I stood witness to her devastation. Wondering if anything would be enough, but knowing nothing would take this pain away from her.

So, we sat together.

Part Three:

In the end

3.1 “It’s as if I suddenly saw her for the first time”

Weeks passed, and our work together continued. We primarily focused on the experience of loss, how, in the aftermath of the shock, Marjorie felt like she was floating through life in a fog. The weeks at home had numbly drifted by. She barely remembered what she had done, if she had eaten, who she had seen. The shock allowed her to move on autopilot, helping her mother where she could, making herself useful through planning the funeral and making arrangements for the house. Now that she was back in Edinburgh, she tried to pick up the pieces and continue living her life, returning to work the week after she had come back. She eventually saw a few close friends, but most of the time felt too drained, too exhausted to function beyond making it into work and attending her sessions with me. Marjorie admitted that she spent most of her time in bed, scrolling mindlessly through social media as she watched the people around her continue to live their lives. She wondered when she would ever be able to join them or whether this was her new normal. As she spoke, I worried that her grief would consume her. Like when we began, I debated my role in that. At what point did I intervene, and would I ever feel as if I was doing enough?

“Things have been different with me and my mom lately,” Marjorie said thoughtfully one week. Her words hung in the air between us as I waited for her to expand. She looked as if she were sorting through her thoughts and feelings, processing this revelation in real time.

“It’s hard to explain,” she continued, picking over her words slowly. “Recently, it feels like the entire dynamic has changed. It’s weird to say, but honestly, I feel like I’ve blacked out every argument I’ve ever had with her. As if almost thirty years were erased in an instant. Like, this horrible, cosmic shifting of my grandma’s death has helped me see the humanity in her. Lately, I feel even more defensive of her than ever, more sympathetic to what she has been through, and more connected to her than I ever have. Even the fear of losing her has suddenly become so tangible. So much so that I am willing to forget everything that has come before in an attempt to hold on tightly to something that I now know could be gone in a moment. I don’t know if our relationship has changed, or just my understanding of it. I have never seen my mom like I did when my grandma died, and I think I

realised I was only seeing her through the lens of being my mother. Through the lens of what she is to me, in relation to me, and her role in my life. Not as a separate person, but simply as an extension of me. I hadn't even realised how I was diminishing her to that. I thought I had learned the lesson that everyone does as they age, that their parents are flawed humans just like everyone else. But I hadn't. And now, I think I have begun to... if any of that makes sense.”

A quote I had read from Susie Orbach came to mind: “Not surprisingly, my feelings of hate dissolved in the face of his pain. It would have been too much for both of us to be ‘in hate’, one of us had to hold the feelings that make human life bearable when we are faced with a pain that is so great²²³,”. The anger and hate had dissolved, and what was left was this new understanding and appreciation for her mother's humanity. It was as if Marjorie could see her pain, her hurt, and she could no longer hold the anger that had built all these years.

“I think we can hold both,” I finally said. “We can have empathy for our mothers as humans and the experiences or pain they have been through, while also still feeling that they have hurt us. This loss has given you a new sense of understanding of your mother's experience. You're able to see her more as the human she is, also just experiencing life for the first time. A human who is now mourning the loss of her own mother. It has shifted your dynamic, maybe even put your relationship into a new context or given you a different perspective.”

“Yeah, it's bizarre. It's as if I suddenly saw her for the first time. Saw her for who she really is. I think I can forgive her, not forget, but forgive so we can move forward with a new relationship. If anything, I have realised how much that means to me, how important it is to really cherish people... I think it's been really important for me to talk about, though. I have been so used to holding these thoughts to myself, but now I feel like... I don't know, it doesn't have just to keep living in my body, we can hold it together²²⁴...”

When Marjorie left the room that day, her words hung in the air like mist after a storm. I sat back, sinking into my chair, mulling it all over and untangling the hurt from the revelations. Considering how she spoke of her mother today compared to the first day she had brought her into the room. Initially, she spoke of her in fear. Shame and guilt in the disclosure of her hurt from her

²²³ Orbach 2002, page 146

²²⁴ Linkletter and Vanek 2025; a sentiment that lingered with me from a podcast, the way we can lessen the pain by sharing the burden, or help by holding someone else's

mother's rejection, and the struggle to contain her mother when all she wanted was to be contained by her. Today, though, there was something new. A tentative change in perception that was leading to a shift in Marjorie's experience of her.

As I picked my way through this, a thought seemed to dawn on me. For so much of our work together, I had found myself grappling with "now what" feelings. I wondered time and time again what we do about the transmission of trauma. Thinking in circles, whether it is our responsibility to solve, and how do we break the cycle? I wondered if it was enough to acknowledge and see the patterns in our families or if there was some magical action we needed to take in order to prevent them from continuing beyond us. However, in this moment, I realised what was occurring with Marjorie now was maybe an essential piece of that work. Through this loss and grief, she had gained something valuable. She was seeing her mother and grandmother now in a new way, in a human way. It did not excuse the past, but I wondered if it would change the outcome. If seeing these previously untouchable subjects in her life as just another human fumbling their way through, would it be enough to help heal that piece of her? Heal it in a way that would enable her to change and break the cycle of trauma? Could it help her make sense of the rejection and shame?

It felt very fragile and tentative, but I was beginning to feel these connections forming. In an instant, Marjorie's entire world had shifted, and I wondered if it would be enough to right past wrongs. I also wondered if that was what mattered. Did she need forgiveness in order to break the pattern? Was the responsibility of owning that even on her? Like usual, I seemed to think myself in circles. Debating the need to come up with a solution and whether or not it was possible to really stop the transmission of trauma. Marjorie had lived her entire life in one version of her family. How could this moment undo all of that?

Like the shadow behind Marjorie that I had felt in the room, these questions and wonderings hovered behind me as the days passed. Lurking in the shadows in the corners of rooms and down dark hallways, I could not seem to escape these thoughts. I came back to my own mother. Of how I saw her, how our relationship had grown and developed over the years. How it too had changed.

3.2 When I return home

The ghosts Marjorie had left behind still followed me as I moved through life the next day. Realisation that two weeks of annual leave loomed on the horizon. Early the next morning, I would be making my way home to New Jersey, staying at my grandparents' house in the town where I had been born to spend the weeks visiting family, friends, and the life I had left behind.

As I packed my suitcase that night, my thoughts drifted toward Marjorie and the guilt I was holding for missing two weeks of work. It felt like we were just on the edge of something big. Some breakthrough looming just out of reach, but close. It also felt like the clock was ticking on our time together as we raced toward our session limit, and I was eager to reach whatever this breakthrough might be before we had to end our work together.

I also felt guilty about missing time after she had missed so many weeks following her grandmother's death. I knew it was unavoidable, and my annual leave was my time to take, separate from her needing to be away for those weeks. However, an irrational voice whispered in the back of my mind that I was abandoning her when she needed me most. I wondered what Marjorie would be doing with these weeks off. Wondered how she would pass the time, if she would even think about our sessions during our usual scheduled time. I thought of how I had held the space, sitting in my office, thinking of her during the sessions she had missed and wondered if she would mark the time in a similar way. Or would I simply be out of mind? Maybe she would not even notice, maybe she would forget completely and would not return when I was back three weeks later. I wondered where this fear lived. Was this an unconscious enactment of a past experience? Was that experience mine or hers? The threads between us twisted and tangled, and I once again wondered what was mine and what was hers.

While the guilt gnawed, I was also eager to go. It had been almost a year since I had last been back, and I was eager to return to the comfort of somewhere old and familiar.

The next morning, while I waited at the airport, mindlessly scrolling through my phone, Marjorie came to mind again. It occurred to me that I had been telling everyone that I would be off visiting home, but it was not really home, not anymore. I had not lived there in years and felt so

disconnected from the life I had once led. I thought of our shared discomfort over the experience of visiting a home that was no longer home. The sentiment of leaving somewhere behind, only to have it continue to exist and change without you, while still existing unchanged in your memory.

Similar to Marjorie's recent journey home, when she retreated to her mother's childhood home, the home I was returning to visit and stay in was my grandparents. Having moved several times throughout my childhood, their home remained the only constant in my life. This home was the same home my mom was raised in, the same home where she struggled and suffered. The same home where my grandmother grappled with her addictions and her own unresolved trauma of the loss of her first husband, leaving her a young single mother. Later, the home where she lived with her unwell second husband. Here, now, all these decades later, what did it mean that I walked where they once stood? I closed my eyes and imagined what it would feel like when I finally arrived. As I pictured the journey, I thought of the home I would be returning to. The home my grandparents had bought in the early 1960s, where they raised their children, including my mother. I was going home to the home where my mother had been a child, where she had experienced her own twists and turns, growing pains and difficult life lessons.

I had been thinking so much about mothers and daughters lately, I found myself returning to these musings. Applying the theory I had read and the questions I had mulled over onto myself instead of to my clients, instead of to Marjorie. Again, the threads between us grew taut, the similarities between us growing more apparent the more my thoughts reached out toward them.

I had so many fond memories of that home. A physical space that had been the embodiment of comfort and security. When I was young, we spent every summer at their house. When I closed my eyes and imagined those summers, I would think of the long days we spent swimming in the neighbour's pool. The smell of charcoal as my grandfather cleaned the grill off after cooking, so we could roast marshmallows over the dying embers. The crack of lightning and the steady fall of rain as we would watch the late summer storms rage from the shelter of their front porch, dusty bare feet kicking off the tile floor to rock the swinging bench. The smell of freshly mowed grass and the soft lilting songs of birds as the morning sun warmed my bedroom.

In my early and mid-twenties, I had even lived in my mother's childhood bedroom. Literally living in the shadows of my mother's life. The ghosts of her childhood darted up the hallway behind me. I had moved a few boxes and my cat in with me to live there while I finished my undergraduate

degree following a painful breakup. Seeking the safety of my grandmother's quiet companionship. My cat and I went on to move out and back in twice more in the years that followed, using the home as both a landing pad when I fell or a stepping stone as I waited for something new to begin. Through different phases of my life, from my childhood well into my adult years, that house was my home. It was a welcoming sense of comfort that would pull me up in a warm embrace as soon as I walked in the door. My grandmother would rush over, now inches shorter than she had once been, and pull me into a deep hug. I felt safe and loved whenever I returned. Lulled into a restful and peaceful sleep every night, still waking up to the songs the birds would sing as the sun would crest the hill the house perched on each morning.

Yet I was now becoming increasingly aware of what that home just might symbolise to my mother. It was a shell, a structure not a home, one that was laced with painful memories, like the time my grandmother had sent her to school in dirty clothes with unwashed hair for school picture day, or the times my mother had hidden in her closet to avoid confrontation. There was the year my grandparents had forgotten my mother's birthday, her waking up at nine years old to a normal day and no celebration. In that house, there was a suffocation that she could not seem to escape. Like me, she had moved in and out over the years. At times, she was eager to, and at others, her tail was between her legs, shame coating her memories and anger lacing her words. She moved in and out of that very same bedroom, the room where I had experienced so much joy, but for her, she was surrounded by the memories of a different childhood. One with less warmth and affection, one where she was met with absent-minded, neglectful rejection. In my adult life, my grandmother had mostly stopped drinking, which allowed her to be an attentive and involved grandmother, but I could not deny that she had been a cruel mother. My mother had even opted to finish out her high school education in another state, moving in with her grandparents to get some space from her turbulent home life. When she was young, it was not the home filled with a warm, loving embrace that I knew, and at times, I struggled to grapple with that knowledge. Trying to hold both my fond memories and her years of heartbreak.

Since I had last visited, my mother had moved back in and taken on a caretaking role for my grandparents, who were no longer able to live as independently as they once had. She had converted my old room, her older room, into an office and living space, while she had claimed the spare room as her own.

As I imagined this home, the ghosts that haunted it rippled around me while I strode onto the airplane.

When I arrived in New Jersey, my grandparents' home wrapped around me like a warm cocoon, instantly feeling the embrace of its holding environment²²⁵. Its familiar scent and sounds instantly comforting. The last time I had visited, a visit that felt like both a lifetime ago and yet only a year before, it had been the week of my father's death. I had pulled myself into the comforting familiarity like a tomb and locked myself away for almost a month.

This visit felt lighter, tinged with grief but in a new way. A quieter, more gentle grief compared to the visceral pain of the previous year.

Sprawled out on the air mattress, office furniture pushed to the sides of the room to make space for me, I stared out the window. Watching the trees softly blow in the wind, listening to the crooning of mourning doves.

A soft knock at the door pulled me from my daydreaming.

"Want to go for a walk?" My mom asked, peaking her head into the room.

"Sure! Let me change, and I'll be right down."

"We can do the normal loop. It's a beautiful day, we might as well enjoy it. Maybe getting out in the fresh air will help with your jet lag." She shut the door behind her, and I listened as she padded across the carpeted hallway and down the stairs to the ground floor.

The normal loop. The same circuit around my grandparents' neighbourhood that I had walked my entire life. That my mother and my aunt would walk when they were teenagers. The walk they would take into town to meet up with friends as young adults. The same circular journey, my mother had pushed my pram when I was young and would later hold my hand as we followed the same path to the playground halfway through it. The one I would go on with my cousins when we were all crammed into the house for the summer and needed to get some space to complain about our parents freely. More steps that I was repeating, treading again where they had before me.

²²⁵ Winnicott 1960

'How literal,' I thought to myself, recognising the loop to be a physical circular manifestation of the cycle we lived in, before I dragged myself up from bed, pulling on my shoes and grabbing a sweater before running downstairs.

Later that night, I sat upstairs, curled up on my bed with a book in my hands. I was struggling to focus. Staring at the words on the page in front of me until they blurred as I zoned out, distracted by the voices drifting up the stairs from the kitchen. My mother and grandmother had been arguing about something. I had missed the beginning of it, but my ears had perked up when I had noticed that their voices were taking on a more heated tone and my mother's irritation seemed to spill down the hallway. I closed my book and set it down on the duvet beside me, trying to grasp onto some of the words they were saying to figure out what they were fighting about this time.

It seemed to be a regular occurrence lately, and I quietly wondered to myself if I should be concerned for their mental health now that they were living together again. My mother had lived with my grandmother off and on over the years, always ultimately leaving, exasperated and frustrated with her. I could not put a finger on their dynamic. It was one that was both close yet somehow strained. Years of tension had been bubbling under the surface of nearly every interaction. There was a bitterness in the way my mother approached her, yet she still sought out her companionship. Like she was still that little girl who desperately wanted her mother's love and approval, even though she held onto her adult feelings of anger and disappointment.

In her old age, my grandmother had been regressing, both mentally and physically. While this had been going on for years, this time I felt it even more presently. It was unavoidable and no longer a secret. Once quick and sharp, someone I looked forward to coming home to and having passionate political debates with, she had become lethargic and confused. Often repeating herself even within the same conversation. She struggled to move around the house, needing help to accomplish household chores, although terrifyingly enough, she was still driving. Noticing it more since I had arrived, my heart ached as I watched her shuffle around the house, slippered feet dragging across the tile floors. When I was a young adult, we used to spend the day at the mall together. Walking around for hours before making our way to lunch or dinner, spending the entire day together as we shopped, laughed, and ran errands. Now she was barely leaving the house, sometimes not going anywhere for days at a

time. Hours passed by as she sat at the computer, scrolling mindlessly through social media, or drifted off to sleep in a recliner while my grandfather watched the news. *'What a difference a decade makes,'* I thought to myself.

As I continued to listen to them, I made a mental note to ask my mother when we should talk about taking away my grandmother's car keys. The thought of her out on the road suddenly was terrifying as I heard her repeating something to my mother that she had already talked to her about just a few hours ago.

In the time since I had arrived, I was beginning to feel like she was now the child. Needing to be helped and mothered. Even the way we all spoke to her had taken on this placating, docile tone. As if we were all working to soothe her and keep her happy to avoid a temper tantrum or outburst. Without even intending to, we were treating her like a child. The roles between my mother and her were switching. I watched as my mother took on the responsibilities of tending to her needs, like buying groceries, doing the laundry, and making sure their finances were in order with bills getting paid.

Their argument continued, from the words that I could pick out, it seemed to be related to a doctor's appointment my grandmother had forgotten to make. Her neglected health was a significant source of concern and frustration for all of us. Minor ailments had been left or forgotten, leading to several major issues throughout the past year. My grandmother seemed content to wither away while my mother pleaded with her to take her health seriously.

I wondered how my mother felt as she became the adult in the relationship. She often described her childhood as lawless and unsupervised. Which led to an extreme overcorrection in the way she raised my sisters and me. And now she was expected to provide this nurturing, motherly care to the same woman who had withheld exactly that from her for her entire life.

As I heard my grandmother start a slow ascent up the stairs, I quickly picked my book back up and opened it so I would not be caught eavesdropping, trying to find the page I had abandoned moments ago.

"Whatcha doing?" She asked, taking careful steps into my room as she leaned onto the dresser to support herself. I noted how her posture dipped low, making her seem shorter every day. The once-tall woman, often embarrassed of her height, was now shrinking before me as if time was pressing down on her shoulders.

“Just reading, I might try to get some sleep soon.”

“Okay, I’ll see you in the morning. Goodnight.”

“Night,” I replied as she shut the door behind her. Sealing me alone in the silence with my thoughts and worries.

The next morning, I sat in a small but busy cafe waiting for two of my friends to arrive. Although I had met them both at different points in my life, the three of us had become close over the years. Making a point to meet up at least once each time I found myself in town. In the last few years, these meetings had changed from late-night drinks to mid-morning coffee as each of them now had young daughters in tow.

Abigail arrived first, her 5-month-old daughter sleeping peacefully in the pram she pushed ahead of her. She waved and smiled brightly at me as she found her way through the chairs and tables, giving me a tight hug as soon as she reached me.

“Oh my god, she is just precious!” I cooed into the pram, eager to meet the newest addition to our group.

“I hope she wakes up soon! She is so smiley, she just started laughing recently, and it is so sweet it’s almost overwhelming. I can’t even explain it, my heart aches just looking at her!” Abigail beamed down at her sleeping daughter. “I’m going to go up and order while she’s still asleep. Do you need anything?” I shook my head no as she hurried off to the counter.

I stared at the small bundle in front of me. She started to move, sensing she was about to wake up from her sleep. I looked up, scanning the room for Abigail as a sense of dread and panic washed over me. If the baby began to cry, I would have no idea what to do. I felt increasingly helpless as she blinked her eyes open at me. No maternal instincts guided me as I looked wide-eyed at the baby and silently begged her not to cry until her mother returned.

We were saved just in time as Abigail arrived back at the table, coffee in hand.

“Oh, there she is!” She gushed, reaching into the pram and scooping her daughter into her arms. “Good morning, my darling. Are you hungry?”

“Look at this angel!” We both turned to see Sophia approaching us, her almost two-year-old daughter perched on her hip. Abigail and I both jumped up as the three of us clung to each other in an awkward hug.

We meandered through easy conversation, picking up exactly where we left off the last time we had all been together. Laughing about mutual friends, reminiscing on the irresponsible days that were long behind us. Settling into a comfortable silence, I found my attention turning to Sophia’s daughter. She sat in her lap quietly playing with a small toy in front of her.

“I don’t know how you both do it,” I found myself saying. “I feel like I would have no idea how to be a mother. I don’t even know how to change a diaper,” I laughed. “It all seems so intimidating. I feel like I might never be ready. The stakes feel so high.”

“We definitely did not feel ready,” Abigail shook her head. “It was an absolute shock, but we just had to roll with it. Once it happens, it all happens so fast and suddenly, you’re bringing home a human. I still sometimes think, ‘When are her real parents coming to get her?’ I think now, though, that if it hadn’t just happened, we would have probably never felt ready. I think you can plan and prepare for years and still not feel ready.”

“I still don’t know what I’m doing! I cannot believe I’ve kept this little human alive for almost two years. Some days I look at her and think ‘how did this even happen?’ and we had been trying for almost a year when I found out I was pregnant!”

“Honestly, I just think of my own mother. She really was such a perfect mom, and when I’m stuck on trying to make decisions, I just think what would she do.” Abigail said.

“I do the opposite!” Sophia responded with a laugh, “I want to do everything differently. I don’t want to be anything like my mother. I don’t want her to ever think of me the way I thought of my mom, she was so intense and cruel. I honestly don’t think she ever wanted to have kids, but somehow ended up with two. Maybe that was more of the expectations of the times. Even though it was the late 1980s, women were still expected to give up careers to become mothers, even if that wasn’t what they wanted. I always felt like she resented us, like we had somehow ruined her life.... I never want my daughter to feel that way. I never want her to feel anything but loved and cherished.” She paused, thinking carefully before speaking again. Even though I knew Sophia had gone no contact with her

mother almost five years before, her words were still shadowed by a sense of shame²²⁶. As if she still felt guilty for speaking poorly about a woman who had been so cruel to her for decades.

“That’s a lot of pressure for both of you! Like, there is this expectation that you always have to be perfect, always have to know what to do and how to do it,” I shook my head.

“Do we have to be perfect?” Abigail asked. “I think right now I’m just aiming to do as good as I can with what I’ve been given²²⁷. Perfect seems unrealistic, but being human and doing my best, offering my daughter as much love and support as I possibly can, that seems like enough.”

“Mothers have so much pressure on them to always get it right,” Sophia nodded in agreement.

“That’s true... Very Winnicott, the actual versus the fantasised mother... the idea that the mother doesn't need to be perfect, just ‘good enough’ to foster healthy development in her child²²⁹.” I conceded. “It still seems like there are so many ways it can go wrong.”

“But there are also so many things that can go right!” Abigail laughed. “Isn’t being good enough the whole point? We just have to do the best we can with what we have and hope that our daughters see that and feel loved. All we can do is take what we learned, take what we have seen, and do our best to be better. I know I am taking everything I have seen my mom, my sister, my aunt, and my friends do and am adapting it based on what kind of mother I want to be. What kind of relationship I want to have with my daughter.”

“I’m glad I waited to have my kids,” Sophia added. “My mom had me so young, it was more like we grew up together. She had so much of her own life to live still, she didn’t get the chance to explore and learn about herself like I did. I feel so much more settled into who I am as a person, I have my own identity beyond being a mother. That’s a real privilege that I think a lot of women in generations before us didn’t have.”

I rolled these words around in my mind before ultimately agreeing, “I still have no idea who I am, maybe that’s why I feel so far from ready.”

3.3 Are we moving toward an ending?

²²⁶ Kavner, McNab, Byng-Hall, Mason, Flaskas, and Perlesz 2005

²²⁷ Winnicott 1960

²²⁹ Minsky 1996

Returning from my trip, I settled back into myself as the therapist. Shaking off the feelings of being home, like a reptile shedding a layer of dead skin. Reconciling the versions of myself, the one that existed in my family home, almost childish and clinging to comfort, with the one that existed in my adult life, independent and across the world from everything I had once known.

I felt disconnected from my work. That morning, I arrived early at the counselling centre to give myself an extra hour to read client notes from the sessions from before my holiday. I spent time fussing about my room, readjusting the chairs, setting the clock, and turning the lights to a lower brightness in a desperate attempt to come back to myself. To remember my work, to remember my clients. When I finally sat down at my desk and opened my laptop, I still felt like I was floating just beyond myself.

Marjorie's notes were at the top of my pile, and as I reviewed my rambling summary from our previous session, I was caught off guard by the number of sessions we had already used. Fifteen of our allotted twenty. I was surprised, scrolling back through my previous notes and double-counting the dates that passed by. How had so much time passed? Between Marjorie's unexpected break and my own holiday, we had actually stretched the time much further than previously scheduled. Yet it still felt like we were so early in our work. The real nature of it seemed to have only just revealed itself.

Practically and realistically, I had known our end was approaching. The nature of time-limited counselling is that you are always aware of the clock ticking. You are always actively moving toward an ending²³¹. I felt guilty admitting it to myself, like a parent choosing a favourite child, but I was sad to acknowledge the approaching end with Marjorie. I had felt a connection with her from the very beginning. Building rapport had felt natural, the dynamics between us seemed to develop steadily throughout our work, and I felt like Marjorie had been active and engaged in the process. What makes a 'good' client, I wondered. '*Something to bring to supervision next week,*' I thought to myself as I got settled into my room and waited for her arrival.

I was rereading the notes from the previous week when I heard the door buzz. I quickly made a mental plan to review at the start of the session, preparing my standard, rehearsed speech about endings as I walked to the waiting area to greet her.

²³¹ Murdin 2000

“Welcome back! How was America?” Marjorie asked as we walked down the hall toward my room. I waited to respond until we had reached my room, always feeling awkward about the decision whether to fill the silence of the walk to and from the reception area. Uncertain of the liminal space that existed between the two.

“Good, it was nice to be there, but I’m happy to be back,” I responded briefly, shifting the focus back to her and the business side of our work before we were pulled into whatever today’s session would bring. “Before we begin, I wanted to check in, just so we’re both on the same page with the practical bits and business,” I said to Marjorie as we sat down in the same seats as always. The room felt calm, and Marjorie seemed in good spirits. “We are allowed up to twenty sessions, and today is our fifteenth, so we will have five sessions remaining after today.”

“Oh wow,” she responded. “Yeah, I guess in the back of my mind I knew it must be something like that, but I didn’t realise how close we were. It really came up quickly, I guess.” Something about her tone had me sitting up straighter, the energy between us seemed to shift.

“It does feel that way, doesn’t it. I’d love to spend some time these next few sessions reviewing and talking about the upcoming ending if that sounds okay with you.”

“Sure, yeah,” she said, a bitter tone seeping into her words. Energy crackled in the room between us like static electricity as I felt her shift, her following words coming out with more bite, “I’m quite bad with endings, I hate saying goodbye. I always cry.” She laughed, but the tone was sharp instead of humorous.

“I do too,” I smiled outwardly while inwardly kicking myself for the immediate disclosure without thinking. I felt desperate to break the tension that was forming between us, caught off guard by where it had come from and surprised by the tone this conversation had taken. I had been reluctant to acknowledge the ending, but I had not expected her to react like this.

She crossed her arms tightly over her chest. I felt like she was shutting me out, like she was pulling back into herself and defending against me.

We sat in a tense silence, only the sound of the clock ticking. Highlighting the very tangible passing of time. I tried to piece together what had happened. We had never talked about endings or how it would feel for us to end, but I had not been prepared for her initial response to come from a place of anger. My first instinct was to soothe, to find a way to bring us back to where we had been before I spoke. As I weighed my options, I wondered if my need to keep the peace was actively blurring the line between the therapist and friend boundary. Did I want her to forgive me? Was that

therapeutic for her or for me? The silence stretched on, and I could see Marjorie working through her own thoughts as my mind raced. I wondered what she was thinking, if she could sense my panic. I suddenly became aware that I felt as if I was becoming the withholding mother. That Marjorie wanted more time and more affection from me, she wanted my attention like she wanted from her mother. And, like her mother had so many times before, I was rejecting her. I was withholding myself, my love, from her.

I wanted to break the silence desperately.

I mentally scrambled for a question that I hoped would refocus us and bring us back to the exposing statement she had made, one I realised I had nearly missed. She was bad at endings.

“I feel like that has landed poorly,” I clumsily said, struggling to name what was happening in the room. “What do endings make you think of?” I finally asked, hoping it hit close to what I was aiming for.

Marjorie hummed thoughtfully, “I’m not really sure why they’re so difficult for me. Whenever my parents drop me off at the airport, I sob. Like a messy, ugly sob. Saying goodbye can feel so permanent.”

There was sadness rippling under the anger. I was hesitant to acknowledge how permanent this ending was. How, realistically, she would walk out that door, and we would never see each other again.

I was struck by a sudden thought: how similar this goodbye was to the permanent goodbye of death. A world where we would never see each other again, would never know if the other continued to exist somewhere in the universe. It felt heavy in the air between us, the small room changing from cosy to cramped. I wanted to tell her I hoped I would see her again. I hoped, months or years from now, we would run into each other in the street. I imagined a smile brightening her face as she recognised me out in the world. How she might approach me and say hello, tell me that she was doing really well and had achieved everything she dreamed of. But I knew that was unrealistic. That was my way of clinging to an idea that this ending may not be as permanent as it felt. That we both still would exist somewhere, just not in a world that involved the other. I wanted to tell her that she would still exist in my world, even long after she stopped physically seeing me. My mind raced as I thought of all the things that I wanted to offer her, wondering if it made sense to share these things now or wait until our proper ending, holding onto something to offer during that painful goodbye.

“I can’t imagine not coming here...” she whispered into the silence. “I feel like we’re just starting, and suddenly we’re ending. I actually don’t know what I’ll do when we end. I don’t want to start all over again with someone else, that already feels so frustrating.” Her tone had shifted, from anger to something more like disappointment.

She still held her arms tightly around herself. Guarding against what I might say next. I felt like I was abandoning her. Leaving her forever, like her grandmother had. Rejecting her like her mother had. She was reaching out, and I was pulling away, closing the door permanently. Forcing her to be left alone with all she had brought to me. I had held every delicate, painful memory she had offered to me, and now I was handing them all back to her.

3.4 In the end

“Hi - just forwarding along this email we received from your client...”, I read the email that the administrator of the counselling centre had sent me as I drank my coffee on a chilly Monday morning. The following was a brief message that Marjorie had sent over the weekend. She was letting them, and me, know that her schedule at work had changed and she would no longer be able to attend our sessions at our previously scheduled time. Just like that, as of this week, she was no longer available on Thursdays at one o’clock. What followed was, what felt like, a half-hearted attempt to inquire if I had any other availability and a notification that if not, she would be unable to attend going forward. She signed the email asking them to thank me for all of my time and help, as if she knew the answer would be “no” before even really asking. As if she felt like suggesting the possibility of continuing was the polite thing to do, but not necessarily the outcome she was hoping for. “Please let us know how you would like us to respond,” the email from the administrator concluded.

The shock felt like a punch to the gut. My heart picked up speed as I read the email again. I sank deep into my chair, watching the steam from my coffee unfurl in the air above my mug. We only had three remaining sessions of our allotted amount, and we both knew an end was approaching. Over the past few weeks, we had begun planning for it, reflecting on our time together and what we still hoped to accomplish in these last few sessions. While Marjorie had shared her aversion to endings, the request to end unexpectedly over email had caught me completely off guard. I had assumed we would use the full twenty sessions allowed. I had hoped that, even with the complicated feelings it might bring up, she would attend until the end out of a similar want to see this through. I did not have any

other availability, even though there was this internal pull to find space for Marjorie. In my gut, I felt like that was my need, not hers. My need to have a complete and satisfying ending. Internally, I often felt this need in my client work to have the imagined perfect ending, something that is often quite rare in a real therapeutic relationship. My imagined, idealised ending is one where both the client and I have been building up to our goodbyes. We would carve out time in our final few sessions to process our time together, offer our individual reflections, and share our internal process with each other. We would close our work together and tie a bow on top, leaving the work resolved and the client and me feeling the impact of our time together. In my fantasy, there are even tears and, depending on the client, a hug goodbye as the client leaves the room for the final time.

Instead, more often than not, I was left with an unfinished, imperfect ending. One where the client suddenly either stopped attending or, like Marjorie, had to end sooner than planned due to an external event. Or at times, I was left feeling unsatisfied in an ending where we were not able to reflect or process, one where we were suddenly jolted from being in process to a slamming stop. Technically finished but not resolved in a way that felt complete for me. One where I was left wondering how the client felt and what they were leaving with. One where I felt there were words left unsaid between us, and days or weeks later, a thought would manifest that I wished I had shared with the client, only to be left holding onto it with the knowledge I would never see them again.

We had ultimately been ending from the beginning. And I was watching in real time as Marjorie's difficulty in ending, which was possibly learned from her previous patterns of ending, was keeping us from having any type of closure in our work together. I recalled reading once that, "Because so much of the work that is done in therapy relates to losses and the way that we face them, the ending phase provides an opportunity that most people find in no other context to live through an ending that has all the measures of sadness, anger, disappointment, gratitude that go with bereavement and loss in other contexts²³²," I wondered if this ending, this loss, was too close and similar to the loss of her grandmother. If we had been replicating those feelings of loss in the anxiety around ending. If the similar emotions that were being once again brought to the front had become too much for her to continue holding, too much for her to face²³³. I felt disappointed that I would never know. I would never have the answers, would never be able to unpack this process with

²³² Murdin 2000, page 139

²³³ Murdin 2000, page 139

Marjorie. She would never come back. I thought again of my experience of time throughout our work, I always felt like we did not have enough of it. And now our time was up.

We had officially used up all our time together, and the work was being left undone. My fear had been realised, we really did never have enough. Just like her stories and memories, I, too, would be left in the past. Another ghostly haunting that would remain unresolved.

As I stared blankly at the screen, I allowed myself to sit in my dissatisfaction. Considering the weird nature of the client/therapist relationship. We enter these intense, deeply personal relationships with clients where we are literally using ourselves and our ability to form that meaningful relationship. Then, at the end of some predetermined and at times arbitrary number of weeks, you are just expected to say goodbye forever. Never knowing how their story will continue or what good or bad might befall them when they leave the room. An intense relationship that is always destined to end in the unknown. Why did that leave me feeling left behind? Stuck in a time that my client would move on from. The world would continue moving forward for Marjorie, a world that I was no longer privy to.

We expect, or maybe at least hope, that our clients will be changed by their time in therapy. But what of the therapists? Are we not expected to change by embarking on the journey alongside them? Are we not expected to be moved and impacted by their stories and the power of the relationship? We enter into it as fully as our clients, so how could we not be changed? As much as I hoped I had done something meaningful in my time with Marjorie, I could not shake the feeling that it was I who was left changed by our work together. Through our time together, I had begun to look at these patterns differently. I was seeing them everywhere, and I kept returning to the question of what to do next. I was hoping that in the weeks leading up to our ending, we would find some kind of resolution. Some way for Marjorie to leave therapy with an understanding of how to heal from and break these patterns of trauma. Yet now it would be left unfinished. Named but not resolved and laid to rest. Instead, I was left with the seemingly impossible task of exorcising the ghosts she had left in my counselling room. More so, I was left grappling with whose task that really was. Was it enough that we had named and acknowledged the hauntings in Marjorie's life and family? Or was that simply shifting them from one space to another without actually doing anything to resolve them?

I started typing an email back to the administrator. Writing and deleting it several times before settling on a cold, "Thank you for letting me know. Please let the client know I do not have any

other availability at this time, but I send along well wishes. I will do all the closing admin on my end, thank you.”

Just like that, with no fanfare, no hugs, no tears, we ended.

Part Four:

And me?

4.1 Me, the person: Where am I, what do I get left holding?

Later that week, during what should have been one of my final sessions with Marjorie, I found myself sitting in the communal office space at the counselling centre. Feeling unsettled as the clock ticked by, I had felt the need to escape my room after spending the first ten minutes of our hour unable to sit still or focus on anything for longer than a minute. I was restless. I needed some new air, a new view. Somewhere that was not actively reminding me of what I should have been doing with this time. I grabbed the book I had been reading on the train, fittingly, as if I could never really escape, a book about a mother and daughter, out of my bag and dashed down the hallway.

The room was empty when I arrived, and I was grateful for the silence, already feeling as if my own emotions were under a microscope. The silence of my room felt too heavy, as if the space to sit alone with my thoughts, to discover how I felt for myself, might crush me under the weight of it. Overthinking, over-evaluating why I was so affected by this lack of an ending. It was not the first time, and surely would not be the last, that a client would have a sudden, unplanned ending. Yet this one had felt like a harsh blow. I was left holding so much. So many unanswered questions. This crushing uncertainty that I had done something wrong, the inky tendrils of self-doubt leaching into my thoughts as my worries grew. Had I pushed Marjorie away? Was she running in an attempt to continue the pattern of silence? Was she avoiding what would be another ending? Was I not gentle enough? Was I too gentle? Had I pushed my own motives? Was I thinking too much of myself, my mother, my grandmother? The questions spun on and on.

I had tucked myself away in one of the plush armchairs in the corner of the room, half-read book in hand, while I stared absentmindedly out the window. The book, *My Mother, My Daughter, My Self*, was one that Marjorie had recommended to me a lifetime ago, in a different world, a different relationship²³⁴. One where we still existed in each other's lives. I struggled to focus, opting to watch the clouds drift by outside silently, music softly playing through my headphones. My thoughts floated by, drifting from what I was left holding after my unfinished ending with Marjorie.

²³⁴ Goldberg 2016

A while later, another therapist wandered into the room. Laptop and coffee in hand, she settled into the desk across the room from me. She was an older woman, maybe close to my own mother's age, with a warm presence and a friendly smile. I wondered if her clients thought of her as a mother figure. If they were trying to recreate something in their relationship with her.

"Hello! I haven't seen you in here lately," she said to me as I took off my headphones, the guilt of avoiding this third space causing my face to heat. I often preferred to hide away in my office, rarely making an effort to mingle with the other therapists. "You're glowing!" She said to me.

I laughed, as a dream I had the night before popped back into my mind, "You know what's so funny, I had a dream last night that I was pregnant, and someone said the same thing. Hopefully, that's not it!"

Without missing a beat, she responded, "Are you trying?"

The words rushed out of me, "Oh, absolutely not, I'm too young!" Laughing at the ridiculousness of it, as if being in my thirties and married was an unthinkable time to consider having a child. "Honestly, if I got pregnant now, I would feel like a teen mother."

She laughed, "Well, when I was your age, I was already pregnant with my second. You never feel ready, but somehow it happens, and you figure it out. I think you would make a wonderful mother one day." She turned to her computer and began typing.

I smiled awkwardly, feeling relieved the interaction was over, and putting my headphones back on, I attempted to read my book again. The words blurred on the page in front of me as my thoughts once again drifted away. The sounds of her typing a steady beat behind my music, I began to feel restless again. Closing my book, acknowledging that any attempt to read was a lost cause, I stood to leave the room.

"I'll see you later," I tossed over my shoulder to her as I walked out of the room, hoping to politely avoid any further small talk.

As I walked back down the hallway to my room, I found myself wondering why this notion had left me with an overwhelming sense of dread. I felt paralysed by the fear of what I could unintentionally pass on to my future children should I have them. I was seeing these patterns of trauma, this transmission down the line of generations of women. Good-intentioned mothers, hopeful daughters, doomed to repeat the past over and over again. Would I be any better? Any different?

As I entered my office, I glanced at the clock on the wall. There were still five minutes in what should have been Marjorie's hour. I opened the small window with the uninteresting view of the building next door, and a soft breeze brushed by me, shaking the stagnant air in the room.

The only sound was the tick of the clock as seconds passed. I wondered if, in my family, I would be able to do enough to ensure future generations are not haunted by the trauma that plagued those who came before them. Was my fear of becoming a mother connected to the shadows of the mothers who had come before me? I thought of my sister, who already had two children of her own, and what was she repeating. My thoughts finally settled back on Marjorie and her fears of motherhood. She had firmly stated that she would never have children and had no interest in recreating the relationship she had. I thought of a younger version of myself, once also so sure out of fear that I would never have children of my own. Where does that leave us, leave me?

The hour felt endless. Heavy and oppressive, I began pacing the length of the room once more. Where did this leave me? *'Unresolved,'* I thought to myself. Everything I had read, the time I had spent wondering about my own family and looking at the transmission of trauma in Marjorie's family. I was still stuck on the question of what could be done. Can we ever actually heal from a trauma that is not truly known to us? If we are to give voice to the ghosts, do they leave us, or do we live alongside them? Is the purpose to be healed and free from the cycles caused by trauma, or is it to learn from them, embracing the pain and hurt because it played an essential role in shaping us?

'I think that is what it is,' I realised. I still did not have the answers to these questions. Just like my work with Marjorie, the exploration felt unfinished. The results were unsatisfying.

Opening my book again, I found my place. Landing on the line, "I see her laughing, and then I laugh, too, filled with the joy of her existence on earth. The laughter between us becomes contagious²³⁵". Something about it tugged at my heart, bringing a smile to my face. I wondered if that could be enough. If that could be the point of all of this. To have a better relationship with our own daughters, to forgive our mothers for what they did or did not do. To accept the humanness in them, to see their flaws and their trauma. To acknowledge the way their trauma may have kept them from offering anything different from what they were able to offer us. It felt optimistic, existing somewhere just beyond my reach. Jane Goldberg had an intensely close relationship with her mother, one that she

²³⁵ Goldberg 2016, page 80

had to separate herself from in order to find herself²³⁶. Through their enmeshed relationship, she never developed her own identity, but she was always close to her mother and longed for a daughter of her own.

I thought back to what my colleague had said to me: could I ever be a mother? If I had a daughter, what of my mother and my grandmother would be passed down to her? Surely there was good alongside any bad.

I glanced at the clock again, relieved that what had felt like one of the longest hours of my life was finally at an end.

4.2 Me, as a researcher? Where do I put this?

“I feel like I need to write about this,” I joked to Clara as we talked on the phone. “I still feel like I have whiplash, like I’m still untangling the work we did and the ending. I feel like I didn’t do enough.”

“Do we ever feel like we’ve done enough?” she laughed.

I paced the length of my flat, feet treading softly back and forth, phone cradled between my shoulder and my ear. “Honestly, maybe we never do. No matter how much, or how little, time we have with someone... it always feels like we could have used more time.... I don’t know, I’m still thinking so much about our work. It feels like there was so much still to do, we barely even got to what I think was the real point of it all. I think we spent so much time talking around what the real point was, and we wasted so much time. I don’t know if we actually did anything meaningful besides graze the surface of it. I don’t think we had the time to actually resolve anything. We definitely did not have time to lay any of those ghosts to rest. I don’t know if we broke any of those patterns or made any meaningful changes. If she ever has a daughter, will she just reenact the same patterns? I wonder if she is thinking about it at all. I wonder if she regrets not having a real ending.” The words rushed out of me as I finally stopped talking to take a breath.

“I’m sure she is thinking about it still. And I am sure that you did what you could with what you had, good enough, remember? All we can do is meet clients where they are,” Clara responded almost mindlessly, consoling the impostor syndrome I was sure she could hear in the tone of my voice.

“I wish we could have had a better ending.”

²³⁶ Goldberg 2016

“That is your need speaking, not hers,” I could hear her smile as she spoke.

“This is why it is good and bad to be friends with other therapists,” I laughed. “I just wish we could have ended differently. It felt like we were on the edge of something. I was beginning to see the cycles being broken, as if us talking about them, giving a voice to the unspoken, could have been enough. When she first came in, all of these patterns were shrouded in mystery. It felt like this great unknown, hidden behind layers of guilt and shame. They were able to exist in silence and were being replicated beyond her awareness. We were just pulling back the curtain, exposing the trauma to the light for the first time in generations. She was working through her grief, starting to develop a new relationship with her mother. But then it was suddenly too much, and she pulled away, shutting me out completely...”

“I know, but sometimes clients are not ready. And we cannot force them to be. That does not mean nothing was done! Think about the immense progress she made in those weeks. What you’re describing sounds like she has been able to name and process some of the trauma. Hopefully, this is work she can continue to do more of on her own, too.”

“I suppose so...” I paced the length of the hallway again. “She was also like looking in a mirror. I saw so much of myself in her. I felt so much of my own desperation in wanting to understand my mother and my grandmother. So much of my own grief and shame around talking about my family, my inability to name my trauma. Even the way we met each other in the room was shaped by our sameness and the way we both wanted to understand what had been transmitted through our families. I’ve been thinking so much about the complicated nature of mothers and daughters. I feel like every mother and daughter is doing their own relational dance. Why does such a universal experience have to be so difficult to talk about? I feel like everyone I meet has struggled with their mother at some point, and yet we’re still secretive about the nature of our relationships. I feel like that just further isolates us in our experiences. She’s made me want to do more work on myself... I just really can’t stop thinking about it. I’m frustrated by her, but also so frustrated by me... I don’t know...” I trailed off.

“Absolutely, that’s what makes this work so challenging, but also so rewarding. I wouldn’t want to have it any other way! What good would we be as therapists if our clients did not move us? If we were not changed and shaped by our experiences, like they are? It’s what makes this job human, but also what makes it possible. That humanness, the way we are affected, it’s what makes the work possible. Hang onto that feeling, let it move you, let it change you. You’ll be all the better for it.”

“You’re too wise for your own good,” I laughed.

“I know! You’re welcome! I’ll add that to your bill for all the therapy and supervision I give you,” she laughed. “Hey, I have to run, I have a client coming in any minute. I’ll text you later. Let’s find a time to get dinner or something next week.” She hung up the phone without giving me a chance to respond.

Wandering back into my kitchen, I put on the kettle to make a fresh cup of tea, dumping out the cold mug I had neglected while on the phone. I listened to the water boil as I picked back up the book I had left on the counter. I flipped it back open to the page I had tabbed, eyes skimming the page to find my place. The book, *Pieces of My Mother* by Melissa Cistaro, was a memoir about a daughter whose mother abandoned the family, which resonated deeply with me, given the lingering thoughts that still buzzed around in my mind²³⁷. Throughout the book, the author grapples with the question of whether there is a “leaving gene” that is hereditary²³⁸. Whether she, too, is doomed to abandon her family like her mother and grandmother before her had. Is this gene inescapable, inevitable? Is it in her, or has it been taught to her through her experience? How can she fight this seemingly biological drive? The questions burned within me, and I realised I still did not know. Were we all trapped in our own patterns? Had the path Marjorie started down been enough to shake something loose and help her heal from the cycle of trauma, or was she just as doomed to repeat them as her mother had been? This notion of a “leaving gene” seemed to run parallel to the concept of the return of the repressed²⁴⁰. A need that was not met in childhood was manifesting itself in a negative behaviour in an attempt to resolve this unresolved conflict. Marjorie was experiencing this unresolved relational conflict, the dynamic between her and her mother, returning like a pot of water boiling over. Ultimately resulting in this behaviour in her ending with me. I had become the bad object²⁴⁴. Marjorie had projected her undesirable feelings toward endings onto me, as if it were my choice to abandon her²⁴⁵. I was the problem. I was the one who had told her the limits of our work and that I would be leaving her. So, she left first.

The click of the kettle snapped me out of my trance. I absentmindedly poured the hot water into my mug, watching the colour seep out of the herbal tea bag floating on the surface.

‘Maybe I should write about this,’ I thought to myself. I was making assumptions, drawing conclusions as to what Marjorie’s motives may or may not be. Some questions rested heavily in my

²³⁷ Cistaro 2016

²³⁸ Cistaro 2016

²⁴⁰ Fairbairn 1994

²⁴⁴ Likierman 2001

²⁴⁵ Likierman 2001

heart, something demanding to be explored, analysed, and interpreted. But also, something fiercely human. Something that could not be understood through graphs and charts, something that existed beyond data collection and structured interviews. It lingered in the space between sentences, the rapid beating of an anxious heart, the deep, settling breath before an important disclosure. Anything I wrote felt like it would be inadequate in capturing the truth of the experience, of measuring a gut instinct or a powerful therapeutic revelation. I wondered how I would even begin to describe the chills that ran up my arms when a client would make a connection, the way their eyes would light up when something dawned on them, on the smiles we shared at the feeling of being heard, being seen, being known. It felt almost indescribable. Intangible but felt.

However, I felt there was a story to be told, one that was known not just through the brain but through the heart. One I wanted to write, one I wanted to tell. Of mine, of Marjorie's. How could one even begin to capture the unique details of a person's life? How do you measure or qualify the intricacies of a relationship? The lyrics from *Rent* drifted through my mind as I laughed softly to myself, wandering toward my desk as I sang them aloud to myself.

“In daylights, in sunsets

In midnights, in cups of coffee

In inches, in miles

In laughter, in strife

In five hundred twenty-five thousand, six hundred minutes

How do you measure a year in the life?²⁴⁶”

I shook my head as I sat down at my desk, at the foolishness of this song coming to me now. Yet as the song continued in my mind, I was struck by something. ‘*How do you measure a person's life?*’ I wondered as I pulled out a fresh notebook, crisp blank pages waiting for me. The real question I realised was, how do you measure the dynamic between a mother and a daughter? How do you tease out the intricate details that make up such a personal and intimate relationship? I had once read, “these relationships are like any other, only more so - and thus the tensions, disagreements and arguments involved are more intense, personal, and potentially damaging”²⁴⁷. Through my work with

²⁴⁶ Larson 1996

²⁴⁷ Tannen 2006

Marjorie and the conversations with people around me, I had seen firsthand how they can be this “more so”. How many women I knew, including myself, felt their relationship so profoundly. How they were so shaped by it and so wounded by it. How their mothers could be both held up to the highest esteem, and yet the person who had caused the most deeply painful scars. Mothers had the power to deal the sharpest blows while remaining our greatest source of comfort. How could that be measured? How could I even begin to capture the complexity that existed in the nature of the relationship alone, not even taking into consideration the endless web that branched out once I considered the intergenerational trauma and context that each mother and daughter existed in?

It seemed like an impossible task. How can you even begin to quantify all the aspects that shaped and made us who we are? Where would I even start? I wanted to write it as I had lived it, from my perspective, my experience. What I had seen and what I had learned. The questions I still had. The messy, unfinished nature of existing as a human in this world. The raw wounds of relationships, the patterns we were repeating. The cycles of trauma that we found ourselves in. I wanted to write about families. About Marjorie’s family, and how I was left still wondering about them. About my own family. About my mother. My grandmother. My friends and their daughters. About doing the best we can, about times when we did not do enough. I had found myself stuck, deep in the weeds of my own rumination on mother-daughter relationships. What makes someone a good mother, or a bad mother?

So I began, imperfectly. Not knowing what my goal was, not wanting to force a direction or purpose, just to write. To let the story tell itself, to let that guide me and allow me to ask questions, to explore. At the end, I still wondered what would be enough. What would heal the cycles of intergenerational trauma, and how could we stop the transmission? It did, however, feel like a good enough start.

4.3 Me, as the Therapist: Looking forward

Two weeks after my final session with Marjorie, a new email appeared in my inbox. Her appointment slot had been filled by a new client.

Just like that, I was to begin again with someone new. Someone unknown.

Opening the file attached, like I had all those months ago, I found myself reading through the notes, imagining this new person and the new journey ahead. As I read, I found myself thinking how,

no matter how many times I ended or started with a client, it still always seemed so odd to me that just like that, I was beginning something new all over again. That we could meet someone and develop a meaningful relationship, share space and time together through an intense piece of work, and be left with the ghosts of that encounter lingering in its wake, only to see them to the door and out of your life. Marjorie's life would move forward. She would have experiences, meet people, and suffer hardships that I would never hear about. I would be left wondering how she was, while my mental image of her stayed frozen in time, perpetually in her late twenties, learning to live through her grief and repair the cycle of trauma she had experienced. I knew this would not be the last time I thought or wondered about Marjorie. Like the ghosts we had encountered, she too would haunt me. Days, weeks, or years from now, I would find myself remembering her, wondering if I had done enough, wondering if she had learned and grown like I had. Maybe I would try to look her up online, seeking some piece of how her life had turned out. A sudden ending always felt unsatisfying to me, like a story I would never see the resolution of. But I would have to settle for living in the unknown. Imagining a happily ever after and hoping to one day cross paths with her again.

As I sat in my office, sunlight illuminating the room, mulling over the assessment in front of me, I found myself once again forming assumptions and trying to imagine a new person. I wondered what they might sound like, how they might dress, how we would meet and interact in the room. Would we be able to build a relationship? Would there be an instant rapport, or would it be something delicate, building over time? What if there was no connection and they ended before we had a chance to begin? Like before, I found myself battling jittery nerves and anxious excitement about what lay ahead. Another blind date, but this time a man in his sixties who was struggling with isolation and depression. His assessment briefly mentioned the loss of both parents and a hospital stay in his twenties.

I settled back into my chair, closing my eyes against the warmth of the sun.

On paper, he could not have been more different to Marjorie, yet my thoughts drifted back toward her as I wondered what ghosts would follow him into the room. How would these new hauntings shape the work we were about to begin? The buzz of the front door cut off my wandering thoughts as I took a deep, calming breath, using the moment before the receptionist would knock on my door to ground myself.

At the soft sound, I stood and walked out to see what, or who, would greet me.

Postscript:
After & discussion

Discussing the process

At the end of this writing, I found myself struck by the way it unfolded. When I first began, I knew I wanted to tell a story of mothers and daughters. I also knew I wanted to find a way to incorporate clinical work and my experience, not only as a daughter, but as a therapist. Through using fictionalisation, I hoped that I could root my writing in the real²⁴⁸. I hoped I would be able to capture how these real experiences truly felt. Giving the reader the experience of looking in on a rich and genuine therapeutic relationship, as well as the process (internal and external) of the therapist. Once I had begun to craft this fictive setting, I let the writing guide me. Initially, I had wanted a set plan. I created a storyboard to map the journey I wanted to go on with my client. However, quickly the control became stifling, and the story stalled. This is where I leaned into the method of writing as inquiry. Removing the structure and careful planning to let something unfold naturally. I followed the feelings, letting myself be surprised by my fictive client the way I would be surprised by a client in the counselling room.

Something I did not expect through this process was the strong reaction I would have while writing the counselling dialogue. The story felt as though it flowed naturally, taking shape and growing into something new. However, the counselling scenes felt clumsy to write. I felt insecure about my ability as a therapist, as if I was putting my own counselling skills on display. The impostor syndrome was loud, I felt silly writing phrases that I often use in my real-life counselling sessions. I found myself increasingly concerned about how I would be perceived as a therapist in this fictional version of myself. I went back to some of my core theories, rereading my notes from my training, fearing that I would be seen as an inexperienced or unprepared therapist by my readers. Some of these sessions I had to go back and rewrite over and over again, coming back to them long after finishing the main story. The process reminded me of the listening practices I had done while training, where I was watched and given feedback on my ability. I felt like I was once again putting my counselling skills and identity under a microscope, opening myself up to be seen and criticised.

²⁴⁸ Leavy 2018

However, I wanted to capture all of this. The real strain that I feel as a human and as a therapist. Pulling as much of my authentic self and my honest feelings into my writing. I wanted to draw the reader into my world. Thinking much like Patricia Leavy when she wrote, “This is the experience readers can have when captivated by a particular piece of fiction. This is a very different experience from what most readers have with traditional academic writing. And it is within this disjuncture that the possibilities for fiction as a research practice emerge. Likewise, the practice of writing fiction allows us, as researchers, a new form of engagement with the data or content at the heart of our efforts,”²⁴⁹. I wanted to pull my readers into the world of my research, hoping they would form meaningful connections with the characters and the stories. I have always found that I learn best from the stories of others and from research that I find engaging and enjoyable to read. In this writing, I had to put aside my impostor syndrome and stop dictating what is worth being produced in the hopes of offering that same experience to others.

My writing-story²⁵⁰

As I read back what I have written, I find myself wondering about my own writing choice, about the writing decisions I made and whether I have met the aims I set out to achieve at the beginning of the process.

There were some things through the writing process that I did very intentionally. From the beginning, I knew I wanted to tell a story that followed a therapeutic encounter from start to end. I wanted to capture the newness of a beginning and the uncertainty of an ending. Therefore, I shaped the unfolding story around these bones. Using the traditional beginning, middle, and end of a time-limited therapeutic encounter to serve as the initial structure. I feel this enabled an exploration into the therapeutic process in a way that feels genuine. The time-limited nature allowed me to focus in on a very specific piece of work, while highlighting the unique nature of a therapeutic relationship. One that begins with an end in sight and only exists within a very specific and very contained context.

I hoped to capture something that felt as real and true to my personal experiences as possible. Using the feelings of insecurity in a beginning, hope through the middle, and an authentic feeling

²⁴⁹ Leavy 2018, page 190

²⁵⁰ Richardson and St. Pierre 2018; The concept of a writing-story comes from Laurel Richardson’s work, she refers to these as “reflexive accounts of how you happened to write the pieces you wrote” (page 975). As used in this section, it is a narrative account that reflects on the writing process and writing choices I made through this piece of research. Specifically, considering what personal stories and experiences I felt were important to include in the storytelling and how I wanted to use stories to shape the reader’s experience and learning

ending to allow the reader into the internal process. I also very intentionally wanted the end to feel more realistic, deciding to try to capture an unsatisfying ending, versus the fantasy of a perfect or complete ending. My initial instinct was to have a perfect ending where all the loose ends were tied up, and the client left feeling healed of their trauma. However, as I wrote and worked to capture something that felt close to real, I realised how disingenuous that would be. Often, clients leave the room before we or they are ready. For various reasons, the work is left unfinished, and the therapist is left still holding on and wondering. I have many clients I still wonder about, ones who still cross my mind. It felt like Marjorie would be this type of client for my therapist, someone who lingered like the ghosts they had been discussing. As I approached the end, it felt more natural that Marjorie would go on to haunt the space, leaving things unresolved.

Throughout the writing process, I had hoped to be as truthful as possible. I wanted to find a way to incorporate not only my story but stories I had been told, mostly by previous clients and friends. I intentionally made my narrator anonymous; she is the only character without a name or any specific descriptive features. While I was writing, she was inspired primarily by my story, and her voice often is similar to my own. However, I did not want her to be an exact mirror of me or a representation of who I am. I wanted her to be more of an anonymous vessel for the reader. Someone they may see themselves or someone they know in. A window into their world, eyes through which anyone is able to look through. I wrote from a perspective that is known to me, but she is not me, she is a work of fiction that I was able to project my stories and the stories and words of others onto.

The creation of Marjorie and the other side characters was a similar process. Marjorie especially reflects people I have met in real life, but she is also not based on any single real person. The side characters, such as Marjorie's family and the therapist's family and friends, were inspired by moments but are not people who exist outside of my imagination. They were more so characters through which I could tell a story. Real conversations sparked ideas for dialogue or situations I would later write, such as moments talking with friends about their experiences with becoming mothers and how they have reconciled their relationships with their mothers once they had children. In writing, I was able to shape and push these narratives in a direction that allowed for exploration.

However, there are moments in the writing that I did pull directly from my own life. These were moments that occurred during the writing process from my personal life that felt crucial to include. Moments that shifted my own thinking on the topic. The first was my decision to write about the loss of my father. He passed early in my writing and the irrevocable change that occurred within

me felt important to include. My grief and lived experience became part of the process and ultimately led to a major shift in my own relationship with my mother. This experience, my own grief paired with witnessing my mother's grief shifted my perspective on mothers and daughters, which felt important to explore through my writing. There was a significant change in my personal life, and it felt like something I needed to capture, explore, and ultimately process through my writing. It enabled me to embark on a path I never expected my story to take. One where grief and pain could lead to healing and growth. Having my therapist and Marjorie embark on their own journeys with grief allowed me to write into the different feelings around loss and the way it can come up in our lives.

Another personal experience I wanted to capture was my experience as a newly qualified therapist. I wanted to capture the internal process, especially the insecurity, nerves, and struggles therapists may encounter in their work. The anxiety around beginnings and endings, the way our clients may haunt us and linger long after they have left. I hoped that, by shining a light on my own fears, I would be able to normalise this experience amongst therapists in similar places. It felt like something I had spoken with peers and colleagues about, but not something I had come across in my training. I often felt embarrassed or ashamed within my practice, as if I were missing something I should know. I also wanted to include the moments outside of the therapy that influence what occurs within the session. Like group and individual supervision, conversations with friends, and our own ordinary or historic traumas. Aiming to communicate the human that also exists within the therapist, a person who, much like the client, brings their own ghosts into the room. How the therapist's ghosts may also influence the work that can happen within therapy, sometimes positively and at times working against the therapist. Like the moments where my fictive therapist was distracted or pulled by thoughts of their own mother during the sessions. I struggled much more than I expected to while writing these vignettes of counselling work, but I felt it was important to keep them in as they captured the clumsy reality of dialogue between therapist and client. The moments where something really connects with the client, when you feel a shift in the room that sends chills up your arm. As well as the moments where your mind is racing and you are desperately seeking something to say, or when something lands poorly and you wish you could take it back as all the air gets sucked out of the room. All of these pieces make up the reality of therapy, grounding this piece of fiction in reality.

Now, at the end, I wonder where I find myself. Has what I have written met my goals? Does it effectively communicate what I set out to say, does it engage and pull the reader into my world,

does it encourage the reader to think differently²⁵¹? At the start, I aimed to create a world that felt real, people that felt real. I was hoping to use fiction to convey these themes. By creating a world that represents what is real, by letting the story speak for itself, I hoped to bring the reader into the story. I aimed to create characters that people could connect to, people they may see themselves in. My writing design, my plan, and the themes I was hoping to communicate. The ending I chose. The way my characters spoke to one another, the way they thought to themselves. The moments I felt were important to capture. All of these pieces came together to create this world, a reflection of my real one but one that I was able to shape and use as a means of exploration. While at its core, this work is deeply personal. Fiction served as a means to process my own experience, especially my own relationship with my mother. By telling my story, I endeavoured to enable others to learn from and feel empowered to make sense of their own experiences. When I first began my inquiry, I felt that my initial method did not meet the needs of my inquiry. However, once I shifted to writing fiction as inquiry, I feel that I was able to meet the aims and goals that I set out to accomplish.

Personal development

I was initially drawn to the topic of mothers and daughters in the hopes of coming to a deeper understanding of my own relationships with both my mother and my grandmother. My curiosity was piqued by my experiences with friends and through my own client work, however, the questions were born out of my own life. In recent years, I watched my older sister navigate motherhood, the words ‘I will never be like mom’ dying on her lips as she unknowingly began repeating the same patterns. I watched as an unspoken cycle was recreated before my eyes. I wanted to understand, wanted to make peace, wanted to know if this cycle was something that could be broken. I also wondered who I might become if I ever decided to have children of my own. Thus, I ended up using this space to explore more of my personal stories and questions than I had initially intended. It served as a release and a means for exploration. In a way, I found myself in the narrating of others.

Like my fictive client Marjorie, I experienced a major loss when my father passed away suddenly and unexpectedly. Like Marjorie, this loss completely disrupted not only my life but the lives of my immediate family. As this occurred in the middle of my writing, I could not deny how this

²⁵¹ Leavy 2016; the key tenets for a creative arts-based research design, having a foundation on which you create around, knowing where you are beginning and when you will end

experience completely upended the relationship I had with my mother, the devastation brought me a new understanding of her. Similar to Marjorie's process, I felt as if I was finally seeing my mother for the first time. Truly separate from me and her role as my mother, but as a human experiencing their own major loss and trauma. It brought me even closer to her and helped me find a sense of peace in our relationship. This change felt essential for me to write into and explore, pushing me to wonder how we could heal from our traumas by healing these relationships with our mothers. I wanted Marjorie to experience the same cathartic growth that I had, but in a way that felt genuine. It does not undo the relationship we have known for thirty-plus years, and it does not heal or cure the unspoken generational traumas. However, it was an essential step in my own journey and relationship. It was a step that enabled me to see the patterns of trauma within my family in a new light, giving them a voice and allowing me to walk beside them. There was an impulse to recreate this in the characters in my research. At first, it was unconscious. I had not reconciled it within myself, but as I wrote, I began to feel the therapeutic nature of research. While fiction, this felt almost autoethnographic²⁵². Seeing these dynamics occur between my fictional client and her mother helped me gain a greater understanding of what was happening within my real life off the page. Writing about my experience enabled me to step outside of it and have a clearer understanding. Writing about a challenging experience, perhaps in the unconscious hope of feeling better about it myself²⁵³.

Throughout this writing, I feel I have experienced a significant shift in my own relationships. I feel as if I developed a new vocabulary, a new language for naming my experience with intergenerational trauma. This personal shift has also led to a change in my professional practice. I have realised that I now see my clients through this new lens and am bringing these changes into the counselling room with me. Considering what may lie in the shadows when I encounter a new client.

Emerging themes

Considering the use of a creative arts-based method, the notion of "findings" must be reconceptualised as the results are considered differently from other methods of inquiry²⁵⁴. Instead, I considered what emerged from this writing, what insights were found along the way by using this method of inquiry and what knowledge was therefore generated. Through my research, I found several

²⁵² Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011

²⁵³ Wyatt 2022

²⁵⁴ Leavy 2016

key themes emerge. Some of these themes I had anticipated, others caught me off guard. One of the most persistent themes that I had somehow both expected but was still surprised by was the pervasive nature of shame in talking about mother-daughter relationships. I have always felt this sense of guilt when I would speak of my mother. I would notice the uncomfortable laughter as friends would make light of something their mother had done. Part of my initial thinking was greatly influenced by Jennette McCurdy's memoir, in which she explicitly states that she felt her mother needed to die before she could feel safe enough to talk about their relationship²⁵⁵. I was struck by the strength of this shame and the way this shame could be experienced as some sort of embarrassment or failing²⁵⁶. The shame served as an obstacle, a barrier to overcome before any work could begin. This feeling of shame was even present in my writing, I often found myself reluctant to name the trauma, hesitant to write into it. I danced around themes, avoiding saying it directly. My own shame coming through in the process. Through reading the existing literature on how intergenerational trauma exists in silence, I found myself wondering how shame leads to a continued silence, which in turn contributes to the transmission of trauma²⁵⁷.

Another emerging theme I was surprised by was the universality of this experience. The more I worked, the more I saw patterns of trauma within media, client work, and the lives of my friends and family. For so long, I felt isolated in my experience, alone in silence. I found, though, that I am not alone. Increasingly, I learned how common this experience truly is. The unspoken nature of transmitted trauma, and the deep-rooted shame and guilt that lay alongside it, keeping us all silent. This then keeps us isolated in our experience, which only allows for further transmission of trauma. That unspoken nature not only keeps us separated and alone in our trauma but also keeps us from breaking the cycle of trauma within our own families and lives. And thus, an understanding blossomed. This shame and unspoken nature keep us feeling isolated in our experience, but in reality, we are all at the whims of the generations that have come before us. Our very nature is shaped by the lives they led, the trauma they endured. What once felt personal and isolating was now something that allowed me to understand those around me better, professionally and personally.

Contributions and further implications

²⁵⁵ McCurdy 2022

²⁵⁶ Balsam 2009

²⁵⁷ Mucci 2013

When I first began this project, I felt that much of the research I encountered fell into two separate categories. First was research done on the transmission of trauma and how we can break cycles of trauma within families. Second, was research done on the nuanced and complicated dynamics of mother-daughter relationships. Through my research, I hoped to create something that would bridge that gap, exploring the intersection of cycles of trauma within complex mother-daughter relationships. I set out with the intention of bringing these themes, bringing the research, together as I see them as interconnected processes. We cannot separate our relationships with our mothers from the trauma they have passed down to us. I hope that this research will serve as a beginning to that exploration. This discussion of how the two intersect, contributing both to the research on the transmission of intergenerational trauma and the research on the complex dynamics of mother-daughter relationships.

When I first began, I knew I wanted to contribute something that was rich with human experience. I thought of a quote I had come across once, “In the traditional research and psychology, there was something missing, namely, people,”²⁵⁸. I had found this as I read, desperately searching for the humanity in research. I felt unsatisfied when I struggled to find it. I feel that my research contributes to other studies on the transmission of intergenerational trauma by bringing those people to the forefront. Through using a creative method, I have been able to focus on the therapeutic relationship, including the therapist’s internal workings in the face of their client, in the room and as they linger outside it. I was able to, therefore, offer a glimpse behind the closed door of a counselling room, which contributes to the existing literature on therapeutic work and therapeutic relationships. This research provides a look into the internal and external processes that occur for a therapist, the development of a therapeutic relationship, and the external dynamics that influence clinical work. This focus on the clinical aspect, as told through a first-hand narrative of a therapist, offers a different insight from other existing literature.

Ultimately, this writing contributes to several main areas. First, this research adds to the literature on counselling practice through the use of writing into the counselling relationship and dynamics. Using first-person narrative to explore therapeutic work, it contributes to material that can be used in therapeutic training by allowing the reader to consider the therapeutic relationship and look behind the closed door and confidentiality of therapy. This work also contributes through how it

²⁵⁸ Freeman 2018

speaks to dialogues on relational and unconscious dynamics in therapy and in the therapist's processes in and outside the room. Following the therapist as they move through their life beyond the counselling room, but with their client still in mind. With the use of fiction, the reader was allowed into private spaces, which allowed for an exploration into internal processes and thoughts a therapist may have.

It also contributes to the literature on intergenerational trauma, specifically through the exploration of how it may present in therapy and how it may be worked through or processed. The ways trauma may manifest throughout the therapeutic relationship in ways like the unplanned ending. This writing also contributes to the literature on intergenerational trauma through the exploration into the way shame and silence allow patterns or cycles to continue across generations. By specifically focusing on mothers and daughters, this research also adds to the literature on intergenerational trauma through exploring the way shame and silence is compounded in this relationship, which further enables the persistence of family hauntings.

Finally, this research contributes to the literature on trauma in psychoanalytic accounts through the exploration into everyday or ordinary trauma. This is unique as the writing focused on the way a historically traumatic experience can become a behaviour which becomes traumatic in its own right, versus exploring the historic trauma itself. In this text, I specifically explored how the historical trauma became a more ordinary trauma in the fictive client's life. It explores the way historical family trauma manifests generations later in more ordinary ways. How these ordinary traumas are replicated across relationships and spread throughout a person's life. Ultimately becoming something that they in turn pass down to future generations, even removed from a historical trauma.

Limitations and further questions

I do recognise there are limitations to this research. Specifically, how much this narrative style of research is shaped and influenced by my perspective and rooted solely in my reality. It is told through my understanding of relationships and the therapeutic process. It also only includes the inner dialogue of my fictional therapist and is told through their point of view. From a subjective stance, I recognise how this only offers one version of the truth. It is knowledge based on my lived experience. I tried to include other voices, other perspectives and narratives through the fictionalised encounters with friends, supervisors, and peers. However, ultimately, they are all still told through my subjective

lens of reality. Another limitation was in the scope of this project. The further I explored, the more questions I felt generating. Something so complex and layered as the transmission of intergenerational trauma from mothers to daughters quickly became difficult to contain. There was so much I wanted to say and do, it seemed the further I looked, the more I saw connections and threads branching out. I struggled to contain my thoughts into a cohesive piece of work. I feel like this question could be a lifelong exploration. Going far beyond what I was able to convey here.

Due to these limitations, I feel that this research generates new questions for further study. Such as viewing this same encounter from a different perspective, how might any of these interactions be viewed or experienced from another subjectivity? What is the client's experience of processing intergenerational trauma through therapy? What of the experience of a mother? How might this narrative be different if I or my fictionalised therapist self were the mother of a daughter? The lasting and lingering question is, when is it enough? All of these thoughts later, I still find myself coming back to the initial question. Are we ever actually healed of these traumas? Can we ever actually break these cycles, or is it more likely that we are left to acknowledge and live alongside them?

Another area for further study would be to expand on the way feminist literature connects to these processes. Readings like Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis & the Sociology of Gender* and Claire Arnold-Baker's *The Existential Crisis of Motherhood*^{259,260} raised questions within me regarding the way society pressures women to become mothers and the way these feminist writers' critique the traditional psychoanalytic tendency to blame mothers. I feel that this would be an important avenue to expand upon in future work.

Conclusion

This very much feels like the beginning. It is not a definitive answer, I have not found the solution, and I am not claiming to know the secret cure to breaking the cycle of trauma being transmitted from mother to daughter across generations. However, it feels like a start. I feel confident in stating that through this research, I have found that mothers pass their experiences of trauma unknowingly to their daughters and that the patterns are able to persist through the unspoken nature of both the trauma and the mother-daughter relationship. I believe that the first step in breaking this

²⁵⁹ Chodorow 1992

²⁶⁰ Arnold-Baker 2020

cycle of trauma is by giving it a voice, through seeing the ghosts that haunt you and acknowledging them. I cannot say whether I think the goal is to exorcise our families of ghosts or to learn how to make peace with them, but I do believe we must talk about them. We must speak of our mothers, the good and the bad, talk about the trauma they experienced, and learn the stories of the women who came before them. It does not serve us to keep these ghosts hidden, to suppress the feelings and emotions that live within them.

I grappled with how to end this writing, ultimately calling back to Winnicott's good enough mothering²⁶¹. I had to hope that, in the end, I had done enough and could walk away saying that I had done what I could, with what I had, much like how I felt writing into my ending with Marjorie. Much like my fictional therapist, I find myself seeking a perfect and complete ending. Wishing to wrap this research up with a bow, loose ends tied, and questions answered.

However, as therapists often are, I am left holding onto a good enough ending.

And, like Marjorie, without fanfare or celebration, we find ourselves at a good enough end.

As Frosh wrote, "What troubles us now is laid at the feet of a ghost, that ghost must be identified, appeased, laid to rest. This is not just a matter of naming it, but also of understanding it in a very particular and comprehensive way, offering it something that acknowledges it, that embraces the damage done,"²⁶².

I feel I have named my ghosts, and I welcome their haunting.

²⁶¹ Minsky 1996

²⁶² Frosh 2012, page 245

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