

Excerpt

MORE THAN THIS

The Music of Healing, and the Triumph Over Violence

Macheis Wind

Everything in this book is real. It all really happened. I have disguised the people I've written about in various ways so they cannot be recognized. I've also taken artistic liberties in imagining the inner thoughts and perceptions of the "characters," though the material comes from actual information that was shared with me by many individuals over the course of twenty years spent in what I call the "hidden worlds" – domestic violence safe houses, homeless shelters, orphanages, a women's prison and other similar venues. I've created this book out of emotion, as I would compose a song. I've rendered an emotional painting out of the lives of the women, children and families with whom I've worked. As their stories unfolded, intense periods of my own life and history were unavoidably triggered and became part of the narrative, something I hadn't anticipated when I first began the five-year odyssey of writing this book. I approached the personal material artistically in the same way as I did everyone else's story. There are many different voices in this book, though much of it is about populations who have lost their voice. It is my hope and prayer that this book will help to return their voices to them. The titles of the chapters are the names of original songs. Every chapter has a song that goes along with it.

In the years leading up to my parent's divorce I worried intensely when they would go out together on a weekend night. I knew that there would be a lot of drinking and, to me, drinking meant violence. I would lay awake in my room into the wee hours of the morning, awaiting their return, staring at the shadowy ceiling. Every few minutes and, as the night wore on, with less and less frequency, a wave of darting, silvery reflections from the bead lights of passing cars would dance above my head. I waited and waited, mired in dread anticipation. Would this be their car, I wondered, as each stuttering wave of light trickled by? And my anxiety would grow with each passing hour. I must not fall asleep! When my room abruptly lit up and the illumination intensified, covering the entire ceiling, I knew that my parent's car had pulled into the driveway and they were home. Then every cell in my body would ignite and be on high alert. I would listen hard through the thin, otherworldly, middle of the night air, my ears perked up with total vigilance while I waited to see what would happen. I'd feel my muscles tightening like a spring being wound just in case I had to jump up from my bed and rush downstairs to prevent mayhem. This was a scary prospect. My parents were large adults and I was still a child. But their world was toppling out of control and with it, so was mine. I was convinced that if I did not remain on guard and prepared to stand between them, my father would hurt my mother and maybe even kill her.

It was during these long nights of waiting that I first discovered that there was music inside of me. I heard it plain as day, especially in the hours when dawn was approaching. It was very beautiful. Where was it coming from? It seemed to be coming from somewhere inside my head...but it didn't start there. It materialized like mist out of some place of mystery that I could not see. It seemed to be in the wind, the wind that came from far away but when it got closer it settled into a gentle breeze floating through the leaves on the familiar trees near my house. Then it traveled inside of me, somehow becoming part of me, the essence of me. And finally, when I could feel it washing over my body, everything came full circle. The music seemed to be coming from my own heart! It turned into something I myself was creating! I would close my eyes and put my hands over my ears to shut out all other sounds. I found that I could will myself to turn my focus inward. Then I could see actual musical notes suspended in the floating air of my mind. They hung up there, frozen in motion, with a design that felt like an ancient story. With excitement I discovered that I could stir them back into life and then observe with fascination their slow, intricate dance. I listened to the song that they made but I could also move the notes around in a way that I liked and which soothed me. It felt good. It felt like relief. My body and fast beating heart responded to the music I was making which washed over me like kind words. I discovered that I could ride the music like a horse or a high-flying bird. It could take me to a place that was far, far away, a place of peace and safety.

PART ONE: THE SAFE HOUSE

When Thomas looked out the window of his upstairs room both of his legs shook uncontrollably. He tried to will the shaking to stop, one hand dropping to his side off of the windowsill and clutching onto the fabric of his pajama pants. The foreign limbs inside the pajamas ignored him and shook crazily just like the branches outside the window which were snapping against the glass panes making a lot of noise that he had just begun to notice. He heard the sound of wind and now raindrops were tick-ticking against the glass. In his other hand Thomas could feel the smooth wood of his baseball bat. He had no idea how he came to be holding it. His mind was blank, his thoughts twisted into a thick knot. The bat was a gift from his father that had caused his heart to swell with joy when he unearthed it from its packaging on the morning of his seventh birthday some months before.

Things were totally different now and he felt like he had been hurtled by some terrible force into another world. Thomas winced in reaction to a sudden sharp light striking his eyes. Was it lightning? No, it was an explosion of rapid flashing red and blue lights on the roof of a police car in the driveway! The lights reflected off the branches twitching outside the window just a few inches from his face. It frightened him even more than he already was to look down at the police car and the action unfolding below. He saw a very large policeman who reminded him of a scary, shiny baldheaded wrestler that he had seen on television pushing his father into the backseat of the squad car. Where was his mother? Where was Mommy? He couldn't see her and his panic kept increasing. It was getting harder and harder to breathe. Half of his mind wanted to go in reverse and try to pick up the shattered pieces of what had happened in the last hour. But the other half of him wanted to run away as far as he could from those events. Thomas felt trapped, frozen in time at the window watching his body shake, watching the lights flashing in the trees like a scream, feeling the bat in his hand and not remembering how it got there. "Sir, you need to stay in the car." "No, listen to me! Why the hell are you listening to her? She's crazy! Look what she made me do! She pushed me too far and this whole thing is her own fucking fault!" "Stay where you are, Sir. I am going to tell you one more time - you need to stay in the car. Is there anyone else in the house besides your wife?" Silence. "Yes. My son. My son is in there."

The images that went along with what had happened in his home were too horrible to bring back and he tried to think about how it used to be. Thomas closed his eyes. In his mind he saw Mommy's face. Her eyes were worried but she looked at him with love as she wiped dirt from his cheek when he came in from playing outside. He saw Daddy's face, more serious; or was he angry again as he concentrated on pitching a ball to Thomas who was holding his new bat on his birthday, tightening his grip, ready to swing, trying as hard as he could? Then what had happened today flashed into focus and he couldn't hold the bad pictures back. He saw his mother's face covered with blood with her eyes dark and wild and his father slamming their bedroom door in a fit of red rage. Then Daddy stood in front of the door like a terrifying giant, blocking the way out. Thomas and Mommy were trapped inside. It felt like they were caught in the middle of a forest fire that was eating them all alive.

OK, no more! Please no more, Thomas thought, pushing the mental pictures away and opening his eyes to his room again. Now he was locked out of the world of adults, a world that had become shocking and incomprehensible to him. He couldn't go to his parents for an answer or for reassurance, or to be held and comforted. They were acting like utter strangers in some unhinged world that

wasn't safe to be in anymore. They acted like he wasn't even there, like he didn't exist, like he wasn't their loving boy who meant everything to them.

Thomas's eyes fell on a dark shape in the branches. It was the birds' nest that he had come to know every piece of, every delicate twig that formed its structure, when it first appeared outside his window back in the springtime. He watched the small brown birds build it slowly over many days, hearing their song when the window was finally opened and the weather became warm. On the morning of Thomas's birthday he noticed tiny babies in the nest appearing like a miracle. He had watched the mama bird feeding the babies as they strained and stretched their delicate necks with their mouths wide open to receive food from her. She seemed so skilled and expert at it and the babies did too. How did they know just what to do and then do it so well? Birds didn't go to school to learn how to do things! Now the nest was empty and lifeless and its perfect little shape was tattered and changed by the rain and wind. The sad remains rattled in the high branches doused in the fire of the police lights.

With a start, Thomas suddenly remembered his turtle. Was his turtle alright? Was he still safe even after all these terrible things had happened? He felt himself back away from the window and he turned to his aquarium on a shelf close by. He flicked on the small light attached to the aquarium's lid. Thomas couldn't see the turtle anywhere in the greenish water. He pressed his face against the glass and peered into the diorama inside, a little world that had always given him a sense of peace and quiet fascination. There, by the rock he had transplanted from the back yard, was Otis, his turtle. He heard himself sigh in relief. Thomas let go of the bat and it slid down onto the floor with a small, pathetic thud. He wrapped his arms around the sides of the aquarium and rested there with his face against the glass watching Otis stare back at him, just the way he always did. Did Otis know how upset he was? Did Otis have any inkling of how the world outside had changed, had turned upside down, had been struck dumb and insane and how nothing now was the way it should be at all? Thomas wished that he could climb into the aquarium, maybe get himself a little boat that he could paddle around in and then land his boat on the mossy shore so he could rest on the rocks lying in the warm water, his head next to Otis with his cheek pressed against the colors and texture of Otis' shell. The shell was so beautiful that Thomas thought it could be in a museum. People would go there to see Otis. They would buy tickets and then they would say things like "Ooo and Ahh" when they saw the painted sculpture of his shell. Maybe Thomas could stay at the museum with Otis. They both could live there and Thomas would take care of him. Maybe the museum was a safe and quiet place for them to stay.

Thomas' wobbly legs would not hold him up anymore. He lowered himself down onto the floor beneath the aquarium moving stiffly as if he were an old man. The bright police lights were still swirling around and around outside and there were all kinds of new strange noises rising up from outside in the driveway. The voices that he heard were sharp and unfamiliar. A woman's voice crackled through a radio somewhere. "A young boy made the 911 call." Then a man's voice, the policeman's voice again. "A kid made the call? Jesus!" The window still vibrated in blues and reds and this night seemed to be going on forever. It sounded like the policeman was talking into the radio or into a phone. "The injured female just left for the hospital with the EMT's. They say the eye doesn't look good. Retina might be detached. I'm going inside now to find the kid." From his place on the floor Thomas watched the waves of light coming through the glass which gave everything around him a spooky, flickering glow. It didn't look or feel like his room anymore. Now it reminded him of how it looked downstairs when Daddy fell asleep with the TV on and all of the lamps had been turned off. The television screen made scary shadows float around the living room and he didn't like being down there at night. Thomas' bed lay several feet away from him across a small expanse of rug. The rug had a picture of a turtle cartoon character on it. He liked to lie on this rug and draw or play

with Legos. He had named his own pet turtle Otis because he thought that was a good name for a turtle. Now Thomas felt a great need to hide somewhere and feel safe again. His bed looked to be about the safest place in the room. He wanted to get away from all the bad things that had happened and that he couldn't stop from happening.

He used to think that he could stop Daddy from hurting Mommy. If he just stayed awake and on alert all the time, if he just said the right words or maybe even if he threatened to hit Daddy with his baseball bat, he could stop the bomb from going off and save Mommy. Now he knew that this wasn't true. He had tried but he had failed and now Mommy was badly hurt and it was his fault. He crawled across the room towards his bed, across the coarse surface of rug. He crawled under his bed into the dark place there. He reached up and pulled down his blanket from on top of the bed. It felt soft and familiar. He curled up on the floor in his makeshift cave wrapping his blanket around him, trying to make it feel like the safe and protective shell of a turtle. This is how it must feel to be Otis he thought. I think that I'll just stay here and never come out. I'm not even afraid of the dark now. I'll stay in my shell for as long as I can and just wait. Thomas listened to his heart beating and it sounded like a drum coming from far away. After a while he felt himself beginning to drift off into sleep. But he couldn't understand why his eyes were staying open.

Her fingers felt for the smooth roundness, the familiar shapes of the beads in the box. With delicacy and concentration she threaded one bead, then another, then another onto the thin wire draped across her lap. Just like the fishing line, she thought to herself, that we used at the lake when I was little and I stayed with Pop-Pop. She remembered the sun and the smell of the water and the way the boat sounded when it rocked gently under them. It felt like such a long time ago. Her eyes kept darting up from her work toward the front door and she had to use all of her mind's strength, what little was left of that, to bring her focus back down to her fingers and the tiny beads. Her eyes grazed past the clock by the door on the way back down to her lap. Three twenty AM. This could be bad, really bad! She felt herself stop breathing for a moment. Breathe, breathe. Remember to keep breathing! But she almost couldn't. Then she felt the familiar wave of fear that she was trying to pull herself away from begin to zero in on her. It kicked in again and her heart began to pound and jump. Then the nausea returned as if that too had been floating by and then had suddenly found her, found the center of her, drawing its dizzying power from some mountain that was erupting off in the distance, its outer rim lit with smoke and fire.

Another bead placed onto the wire, then another. Nice color combination. Ashley will like this one. These are her colors. A small pile of bracelets is accumulating on the coffee table next to her. Will the children get bored with the bracelets? I will make necklaces next. That will be something different for them. Yes, they do now have practically a full jewelry box of bracelets to choose from and I'll be giving them these new ones in the morning. And they are so pretty! When I think of my little girls as I make them, my heart fills up. I am more worried for them than for myself. So many bad things have been happening! The poor little things are constantly frightened now. She jerks herself upright and turns to look behind her at the children's bedroom door. She carefully rests the string of beads on the table, gets up and tip toes across the room. She opens the door and looks in through faint light on the sleeping faces. OK, everybody is OK.

Ashley and Kimberly have so much crazy energy when they are awake and now they look so peaceful, she thinks. When she was a kid she always had lots of energy too, and there were times when she still felt like a windup toy. The frequent trips across the room to check on the girls helped release some of her tension.

On her way back she sees the clock again. 3:30 AM. When it gets this late he will always come through the door in a bad way. He will have been drinking - a lot. Sometimes his head will slump down and rest against the steering wheel of his car after he pulls into the driveway. How could he make it home without crashing? His car radio is always blasting. Oh my God, how could the neighbors sleep through that loud music with the engine thrumming away in the middle of night? How could the children sleep through it? I'm sure that it does wake them but they stay quiet, huddled under their blankets behind the door of their room. Whenever her husband was out there in the driveway passed out in his car she would hiss to herself "Wake up and turn it off, asshole!" Then she would catch herself and pray that he not wake up, that he would remain out there in the dark forever.

She is feeling anger now but it is blocked somewhere in her chest and neck. She feels like she's choking, like the time he almost killed her with his rough hands on her throat. Her own hands come up to her face and her fingers lightly find the fresh swelling on her cheek. She remembers that her eye hurts and it feels out of place in its socket. He's not out there yet, she tells herself. He's not there now. But I have to stay awake, stay alert. I cannot let myself fall asleep. She returns to beading methodically, carefully. I am watching over my children. I will do this every night, every single night until I can figure out what to do.

She had taken up the beading as a way of occupying her mind and her hands during her nightly watch as she waited for her husband to come home. Her hands had taken to shaking all the time as his moods darkened and the violence increased. The beading gave them something to do and helped her hold onto a feeling of love and connection to her children. She had been on guard every night for weeks.

What had started as constant criticism and then an abrupt world-changing slap of pain across the face had evolved, before she could recalibrate and adjust to this new life that made no sense, into brutal beatings and kicks. One time her nose and a rib had been broken. She lied about how it happened and the doctors and nurses looked away with resigned expressions on their faces as they took care of her and did whatever they had to do to piece her back together. She'd lost track of how long this unthinkable distortion of her relationship with her husband had been going on. Had it been months? Could it be years? Everything had become a jumble of terror, hope, imbalance and confusion. But now he was going after the children. He was always picking on them and hunting for fault. He must have known that going after them was the best way of hurting her.

She lay wide awake one night months ago as he snored out stale alcohol breath that soaked the air in the room and realized with a dull, half buried thud of horror that she would take anything from him at this point, any abuse he carelessly felt like conjuring up out of the twisted contours of his mind. But she also knew that going after her children crossed the line in the sand, a line which had slowly become hazy and then finally disappeared when it came to how he treated her. She thought of the terrified expression on the children's faces, the fear in their eyes which was now always there. Ashley was so smart, so aware; too aware. And Kimberly, always so dangerously quiet and lost in her own little world. Now the doctor has diagnosed Kimberly with Autism, which was something she had suspected all along. She knew that she was the only protection that her daughters had. So every morning she presented her daughters with the colorful bracelets that she had taken to making during the night watches. They would happily pull the bracelets over their little hands and fragile wrists. She had seen bruises on her daughter's arms - big dark thumbprints like the kind she had grown to know so well that increasingly covered her own body. All of them were under siege and she had to stay awake and on guard and do whatever it took to distract or calm him when he finally arrived home. This was becoming almost impossible to do. Every night she felt like she was throwing herself onto the blacktop in the middle of a freeway at rush hour.

Another bead placed on the string, then another one. The beads felt like the rosary she used to hold and knead while sitting in church on Sundays when she was little. These beads, these bracelets, they are my prayer, she thought. I wish that I could pray better. I wish that I could be heard. How does someone talk to God? I've been filling the air with prayer since I was five years old but there was never any answer. It felt like my pleas for help always landed at the feet of a thick wall of silence. How did all of this happen? How did I end up so cut off from support and alone? My cries and my prayers are still floating off into nothingness. Tears are starting to well up from inside of her. The fear and the anger are turning into something else. Some kind of exhaustion mixed with sadness and longing.

Maybe that's a broken heart, she thinks. Maybe that's what having a broken heart feels like. Her mind is back on the childhood lake. She is thinking about the fishing line and Pop-Pop, her grandfather. I guess I felt safe back then. But I've forgotten what safety feels like.

Pop-Pop died suddenly and that time was over. I'm trying to remember his kind face. I could talk to Pop-Pop. He would understand, he could tell me what to do. After Pop-Pop died she could only remember yelling and violence filling her home. Her parents always fought and now there was no escape or refuge. Then one day everything changed for good when her father overturned the kitchen table during one late night argument and destroyed the entire living room, hurling furniture around and smashing the glass coffee table. She and her sisters sat upstairs in their bunk beds, shaking and wide eyed, staring at the closed bedroom door, too frightened to imagine what would happen next. Later they tried to clean up the mess but the chairs were too heavy for them to move. They lay on the living room floor together with the hazy early morning sun coming through the shades mixing with the smell of stale alcohol, the residue of a late night party, trying to glue the splintered shards of wood from a picture frame back together. It was Mommy's favorite painting, a scene of flowers by a lake. They couldn't figure out how to attach the frame to the picture and the glue from school wasn't working. That's what I came from, she thought. That was my childhood. But I told myself that that kind of thing would never happen in my home when I grew up and started a family. My home would be about love. My home would be pretty. I would be happy holding the hands of my children looking out the window for my loving husband to come home from work. When he arrived he would hug and kiss me we'd sit and hold hands and talk about the day. But now here I sit at three-thirty in the morning, a mess of nerves and bruises. There must be something very wrong with me that it has come to this. I'm living in a nightmare that I can't wake up from. I can't find my way out of the dream. I don't know who I hate more now, my husband or myself!

Once she had taken the children to the site of Pop-Pop's lake house to share with them the best part of her childhood. Pop-Pop was long gone and the house was owned by someone else. She remembered carrying them in her arms in the intense heat of a summer afternoon after they sat together by the water. A horde of nasty biting flies was encircling them and trying to land on the children's exposed skin. She instinctively covered the girls with her own body, holding them and making them safe, allowing her own naked back and shoulders to receive the bites of the flies as long as the children remained unharmed under the umbrella of her protection. She had looked into their eyes as she lifted them up and they all laughed together as they fled the dusk and the arrival of the insects. She recalled with a tight smile that after having that experience she had come to the realization that she would always do whatever it took to keep her children safe, even if that meant sacrificing herself.

She thought of the flies and she thought of her nights of watching and waiting. If she had to throw herself in front of her husband and take with her own body whatever toxic rage he could dish out to protect her children, she would do it. I need to figure out a way for us to escape all of this, she thought. But how do I get us out when I cannot see clearly how we got here? I need to find my way back to who I was before.

With another nervous glance at the clock she raised her hand from her work and pushed a strand of her hair back behind her ear. Even this small action made her wince with apprehension because she remembered that her hair was much shorter now following a spontaneous visit to a hair salon. Her hair had always been long and flowing, going down past her shoulders. She had worn her hair long even as a child and the feeling of its bouncing weight was the only sensation that she had ever known. Then she watched as scissors clicked and all of her dark hair fell silently onto the salon floor. This

frightened her at first but she tried to relax and go with it. It was disorienting when she tilted her head and saw herself in the mirror. But in a good way, she realized, like she had become a new person. Like she could be someone different for a while, and her life could start over again and be fresh and new. She looked at her face reflected in the mirror at the salon. She rarely took off her large glasses but she reached up with two hands and slipped them from her face. She saw the pockmarks that were lightly spread across her cheeks. These small scars had always made her feel ugly and self-conscious about her skin. For some reason they were not bothering her at all today. She had never thought of herself as pretty, but yes, maybe she was. I am pretty, she thought. She tried to hold on to that good feeling about herself as she rose from the chair and reached for her purse to pay the girl that had cut her hair.

Ashley and Kimberly, who had gone with her to the beauty salon were excited and happy about Mommy's new look. The three of them returned home carrying bags filled with items from the grocery store and entered the house through the kitchen door. Her husband sat in brooding silence while she and the children unpacked the grocery bags. He frequently scratched at his unshaven face with aggressive irritation. This usually signaled an oncoming assault. Like clockwork, thankfully after the girls went upstairs, he unleashed a truckload of accusations and insults. Most of this was directed at her new hairstyle. She had grown used to his need to control everything she did - how she dressed, where she went, what she put in the shopping cart. Now he informed her that he had wanted her hair to stay long. "That's the way I like it," he spat from his chair. "Why the fuck would you do such a stupid thing without asking me first?" She knew that the blows were right around the corner, coming soon, maybe now maybe tonight, maybe tomorrow. But they would come as sure as this night was long. Feeling increasingly deflated and timid she tried to explain to him why she had cut her hair. "Something happened today when we went shopping," she answered, trying to sound casual and confident. "I got scared. It got in my way when it was windy and I couldn't see the girls. I was afraid that they were going to get hurt." Her reasoning made perfect sense to her but she immediately regretted having honestly attempted to share the truth with him about what had prompted her to enter the salon on that day and have her long hair cut off. This was the story that she haltingly related to her unreceptive husband:

Earlier that day she had taken the children to the supermarket to shop. The wind was blowing so hard that the trees were bending with the force of it. The flags on the poles in the parking lot were flapping with a noise that was frightfully loud. When she stepped out of the car she looked up into the sky to see what could possibly be creating such a racket. When she looked back down she realized that Ashley and Kimberly had started to run across the parking lot towards the entrance to the store. She became frantic as she rushed around the rear of the car calling to them over the wind and the pounding din of the flags. She could hear no engines but she could see cars everywhere pulling in and out of parking slots, seeming not to watch for the heads of small fast moving children. And then it happened and it terrified her. Her long hair had blown across her face and covered her eyes. She clawed at it with her fingers but the hair kept flying everywhere, draping its thickness like a mask, like glue over her face and eyes, completely blinding her. She screamed out loud "Ashley! Kimberly!" with her heart pounding in her chest and throat. Then finally she could see again. She was able to grab a handful of hair in a clump and press it back against her ear. Feeling like she just surfaced from underwater, she darted her eyes in every direction, holding back her hair and gulping for air. Then she spotted them. She ran across the pavement and grabbed a hold of each of their hands. A car swished by behind them going too fast. Her panic was so great that she could barely calm down and recover and make it into the store. She held on tight to her children's hands. She swore to herself that this would never happen again and she decided right then and there to cut her hair. It was much too dangerous to have long hair that could get in her way during a crisis like this one that had just

erupted out of thin air. This was one thing that she could control, that she would now take control of. And nothing was going to stop her from taking any action that would keep her children safe. Never again would she be blinded while Ashley and Kimberly were left dangling out there in an unsafe world amidst all kinds of menacing, moving danger. This all seemed perfectly logical to her and she felt a sense of relief after taking action. But this explanation and viewpoint that she shared with her husband with such openness just fueled his derision and hateful scorn. He responded with a tone of sarcastic cruelty and laughed at her as if she were some truly hapless and pathetic idiot. "That's the most fucked up thing I ever heard!" he said in a loud voice that shook the room. He nodded his head and chuckled with a resigned sneer as if to confirm to himself the fact of her worthlessness and his big fat mistake in marrying her, a sentiment that he never missed an opportunity to remind her of. He went on and on as hours seemed to go by. He said that her decision to cut off her hair "out of the blue" was "just fucking dumb and made no sense." He paused then added "You know that you're not much to look at to begin with." As she moved about the kitchen opening and closing the cupboard and refrigerator doors, going about the tasks of preparing dinner, she shook so badly that she thought that she would come apart in pieces right on the spot. Her husband watched her every move and then summed up the subject with finality. He pronounced that her one small asset, her hair, "the only hot thing about you" was now gone "because it was a windy day today! That's how fucking crazy you are!" Then he rose from his chair. Every muscle in her body tensed and she gripped the edge of the counter top and lowered her head. But instead of coming towards her or continuing to intensify his red-hot laser focus on her face and hair, he lurched toward the door and stormed out of the house. She released her grip on the kitchen counter and started to breathe again.

Another bead placed onto the delicate wire. My fingers must be precise and gentle, she thinks. Life is just like these necklaces, so fragile and complex. I will figure this out. I know now that my marriage cannot be fixed. How could I come to realize this only now, now that we are so isolated, so deeply lost in darkness? Yes, I will figure this out. I have taken action and I will again very soon. I felt a spark of something good for the first time in a long while coming out of an event as small and simple as the act of making my own choice to have my hair cut. I can feel things beginning to change. I can feel me changing, even though I am still deeply scared. In the meantime, tonight I will stand guard. I will not let down my watch. I am beading two beautiful necklaces that are coming out nicely. When the children wake up in the morning I will be here to greet them. I will act as if everything is normal and OK. I'll unveil the necklaces and their eyes will brighten with joy. In the sunlight the beads will sparkle as if they were alive. When Ashley and Kimberly put them on and wear them during the day they will be able to carry me with them wherever they go. She gave another nervous glance toward the clock in the hallway. Then she gently brushed a loose strand of hair away from her eyes and strung another bead onto the silver wire.

Thomas wished that he were back in his own room under his bed curled up with his blanket wrapped tight all around him, feeling like a turtle all safe in his shell, because this new place did not seem to be a nice place at all. He sat in the back of the car and looked out. There was a sign hanging between two wooden poles in front of a long, low building. The sign said "MOTEL". The letters of the word were made out of light bulbs, half of which blinked or didn't light up at all. There was a picture of the sun on the sign that was buried in darkness. Along the front of the building he saw a row of identical doors painted red. No, he didn't like this new place. So much had been happening and everything was happening very quickly. Thomas felt disconnected from events taking place around him like he was watching himself in a movie. Before arriving at the motel, he found himself in an endless succession of rooms, offices and waiting areas. The chatter of adult voices constantly floated around him. During some of the time it sounded like the grownups were having regular types of conversations. But then the voices would lower themselves into obvious whispers and take on a tone of urgency. "I hope the poor girl doesn't lose that eye!" And then, "Does the little boy need a doctor? He's not acting right. He's too quiet..."

Did they really think he couldn't hear everything they were saying as he lay on the floor on some gray rug, supposedly in his own little world, occupying himself with Legos or a toy truck? It didn't matter because most of what they were saying he couldn't understand anyway. As if he were a cartoon of himself he felt his body being bounced and buffeted about by a lot of activity while different adult hands took hold of his and an endless succession of strange new faces peered down at him with concern. Most of the faces that he saw appeared to be tired or worried. A lot of plans seemed to be being made. At least most of the people were nice enough and seemed to be trying to make him feel comfortable. This all felt like a confusing dream and as events unfolded around him he stayed mostly inside himself where he could hide under the bed in his mind and stay safe and covered up.

After what felt like a very long time he saw Mommy again. But he couldn't recognize her and this made him feel scared and shaken. She had bandages on her face and her arm was in a sling. He had once worn a sling when he had fallen on his elbow at school so this was a familiar thing and he knew what it was for. But the face wasn't Mommy's. He tried to see her eyes through the bandages. He could recognize a little bit of her in there but now her eyes were glassy and a darker color than the ones he remembered. To his relief, it was definitely Mommy's voice coming from behind the mask. "Thomas, are you okay? You don't look okay!" She put her arms around him as she hugged him and he felt the strange texture of the bandage rub against his cheek mixing with the softness and the smell of her hair which he knew so well. She felt fragile to him though, like she might break in half. She didn't feel like his strong Mommy who used to lift him up and carry him. She would always laugh and say that he was getting way too big to carry around!

Thomas slowly realized as they stood there together that they were in the waiting room of a hospital emergency room. He remembered it from when he had hurt his elbow and Mommy and Daddy had taken him here. There were lots of other people around, even some children like him, sitting in chairs and looking at a television which made no noise. It felt strange that he couldn't remember how he had gotten there but he was beginning to wake up enough from his long dream to understand where he was and who he was with. Nobody was mentioning Daddy. He didn't have a good feeling about that but he was also relieved. He was very scared of Daddy now. He was angry at him too. He and

Mommy went out the big sliding doors of the Emergency room and got into a car that he did not recognize. It smelled a lot newer than their family's car. Thomas asked where their car was. "Our car is back at home, Thomas. Tonight we'll be staying at a motel. You've never stayed in a motel before!" Mommy sounded like she was trying to make it sound like this was something that was going to be fun, but she coughed a little as she spoke and Thomas thought she might be crying. A lady that Thomas had seen earlier was talking to Mommy from the front seat of the car. She was saying something about medicines and a doctor's appointment and the court and a thing called a "restraining order". Then he heard the lady say Daddy's name, something about jail and Daddy getting out and maybe coming to look for them. This was making Thomas feel frightened again. He was even more scared of Daddy now. He felt like he was on a rollercoaster ride, up and down, feeling scared and numb, sleepy and hyper, his body having a mind of its own because Thomas could not control its function or know how to tell it what to do.

After what might have been minutes or hours, he didn't know for sure, the car pulled up in front of the motel. Thomas immediately tensed up when he saw their destination out of the window. It looked dirty and the paint on the side of the building was old and peeling. There was a man sitting in a folding chair outside one of the rooms which had doors facing the parking lot. The man was smoking a cigarette and had reddish eyes. Thomas' legs shook when he saw him. His legs had been shaking on and off since the night that the police man found him under the bed. He didn't know why but he had the feeling right away that this was not a nice man. Mommy was looking out the car window as well. "Is this the only choice we have? Is this the only motel we can stay in?" She sounded worried. The lady in the front seat answered with more confusing words about money and something called Social Services. They got out of the car and the lady lifted a cardboard box out of the trunk and placed it in front of one of the motel room doors. Thomas felt like running away when he realized that the box had been put down in front of a door that was right next to where the scary man was sitting. Then for the first time he noticed with a flicker of recognition that the box was filled with his own belongings. There were some of his books and toys and a few piles of folded clothes and pajamas. Also sticking out of the top of the box was his baseball bat. Seeing the bat made him feel dizzy for a moment because the last time he held it was on that terrible night when everything in this whole scary movie had just begun to explode. But still, he felt a strong urge to hold the bat again. He wanted to feel the familiar wood of it in his hand. He hoped that it would give him a feeling of strength and make him feel safer knowing that he could protect himself if he had to. More importantly, with the bat in his hand, he could protect Mommy. How could a little kid like him have any hope of stopping big adults from doing bad things or hurting people without having some sort of weapon to even the odds? Holding the bat used to make him think of Daddy and playing baseball – things like that- but he was trying hard not to think about Daddy now.

When the lady opened the motel room door with the key and went to pick up the box, Thomas had already taken the bat out and was holding it by his side when he entered the room. "Are you a baseball player, Thomas?" the lady asked him. He turned around quickly and looked for Mommy who he saw was close behind him. He was afraid to look over towards the man sitting in the chair. There was a strong smell of cigarette smoke in the air and somehow it made him think of rough hands and loud noises. Mommy turned on the TV in the room so that Thomas could watch it and then was standing in the doorway talking to the lady. Thomas picked up the remote and started clicking through the different channels which all seemed to show crashing cars, explosions and men yelling at each other shooting guns. A nature program appeared after a series of clicks. It showed a toad hopping across a rock and settling into a small cave under a waterfall. He felt himself relax a little and he leaned against the bed holding the remote and watching the toad. The motel room door closed and then the lady was gone. Mommy disappeared into the bathroom. She was in there a long time.

Thomas watched the toad under the waterfall and then the program showed alligators crawling across a beach and sliding into green swampy water. He crawled onto the bed and stretched out, watching the alligators. He was still holding his bat. He felt far away in his mind and he pretended that he was a scientist, a very important one, camped out on the beach with all of his special scientific equipment, observing the alligators through his binoculars. When a commercial came on he suddenly felt frightened again. He was worried about Mommy. "Mommy?" he called, looking over at the closed bathroom door. "Mommy?" he called out again, louder this time. He began to panic. "I'll be right out Thomas," Mommy answered from behind the door. "Don't worry. Just keep watching your show." Then he heard her voice again but she was practically whispering and her tone was hushed and urgent. The door and the sounds coming from the television could not cover up the intensity of her distress. He realized that she must be talking on her cell phone. Who could she be talking to? It was probably Ann, her friend from down the street. He had heard that tone before and it was usually when she was talking to Ann. She sounded different when she talked to other people on the phone. Thomas lay on the bed and watched the alligators. If I was a scientist I could take care of Mommy, he thought to himself. She could come with me on my expeditions to all kinds of wild places and camp out with me in my tent. She could make me pancakes in the morning on a campfire by the beach. She would be afraid of the alligators but I would protect her and tell her that everything is all right, that we were safe. "They can't hurt us," I'd say to Mommy. "They're way over there in the water. And besides I've got my bat right here and nothing is going to hurt us. Don't worry, Mommy." The picture on the screen was now showing two lizards on a rock and the background was a bright desert scene with cactus and mountains in the distance. Thomas felt drowsy as he watched the TV. He tightened his grip on the baseball bat lying next to him on the bed. There was a man talking on the TV but Thomas wasn't really listening to him. He sounded boring. Besides, he thought to himself. I know more about animals than he does! Thomas thought about Otis, his turtle, and how well he knew that quiet, mysterious animal. He had studied all of Otis' habits and behaviors so that he would be ready when it was time for him to be a scientist. Thomas thought that he was feeling too scared and disturbed to sleep but now he felt himself drifting away as he watched the animals on the screen and heard the droning sound of the man's voice while Mommy's hushed conversation in the background behind the bathroom door leveled off and became more even. I'm so tired, he was thinking, as sleep washed over him and took him far, far away. He was in the desert with the animals and with Otis in his aquarium at the same time. He was groggy with sleep when he felt Mommy pulling his arms gently into his pajama top. "These are your favorite pajamas Thomas," she was saying in Mommy's almost regular voice. "Let's get this on. OK, put your foot into here. That's very good." He felt a blanket covering him and his head sunk into the pillow. When he was almost unconscious he suddenly felt a surge of intense adrenaline. "Where's my bat?" he asked the room, his eyes half open, reaching out into empty air. Terror could be lurking just a few short steps away, waiting to pounce. He was certain of this. "Here it is. Don't worry," said Mommy. She placed the bat close to Thomas on the bed and gently helped him wrap his small fingers around the wood. She tucked the blanket under his chin. "My little boy," she whispered and her voice sounded to him like it had a distant echo blended into it, as if they were deep down in an underground cavern. Mommy was talking to him but it sounded like she was talking to herself. Her voice was soft and dreamy. "You're the hero of the family. You're my brave little boy. You saved your Mommy last night. Where did you ever learn how to call 911?" Thomas didn't feel brave and he had no memory of what had happened last night. But he felt like he could let go for now and allow himself to give in to his exhaustion as long as Mommy was close by. He pulled the bat under the covers and wrapped his arms around it. Somehow he made it back into dreamland with his mother's voice still echoing in his head. "You're the hero of the family," he kept hearing her say as he drifted further and further away.

Wow, talk about losing everything! She had just stepped through the door of a house off of the main road in a part of town that was new to her. She looked down at the floor and the two plastic garbage bags which were lying in front of her in a sad mound. Inside the bags were all of the belongings that she and the girls now possessed. It's mostly the girls' things, she thought to herself. That's what I was thinking about in the end. Just gather up the things that meant the most to them - a few special dolls, their favorite sweaters and pajamas. Oh my God, I had almost forgotten TT, Ashley's pink teddy bear! She never goes anywhere without TT! And then the girls couldn't leave without the bracelets and necklaces that I made for them during all those horrible night watches. "Mommy, don't forget our jewelry!" Kimberly called out to me as I scrambled about the room, trying to think clearly, trying to remember everything. I don't even know what things of mine I shoved in there she thought, looking again at the bags. I didn't even think about makeup or anything, not that I have much of that, or deodorant. Did I even take my toothbrush, a hairbrush? I don't remember. I did grab the girls' toothbrushes and their favorite shampoo. I kept running over to the window to make sure that he had not come back, that his car was not careening into the driveway. I knew that we only had this one chance to get away, one chance to stay alive.

Only then had she looked down and for the first time noticed the web of thick, half dried blood covering one of her hands, a few drops of it still silently hitting the floor. She couldn't understand why she had felt no pain until that moment.

After what felt like many hours and many miles of travel that included a visit to a hospital and a police barracks, she now found herself smiling automatically back at the pleasant face of a woman who was about her own age. The woman was introducing herself and extending her hand in greeting. They had just arrived at this place, a plain looking grey house with a small parking lot in front of it. They stood in the doorway and when she went to shake the woman's hand she found that she could not free herself from the miniature vice grips of the children. They were holding onto her one good hand for dear life. She could somewhat use her injured hand, which was wrapped in new white bandages, but it felt awkward and the pain seemed to be increasing by the minute.

The police car that had transported them was parked outside with its lights flashing and the officer was backing out of the door after depositing the two plastic bags of belongings in the entranceway. She could hardly remember the officer's face or what they had spoken about in the car on the way to their destination. She had stayed mostly focused on Ashley and Kimberly, reassuring them and answering their questions as she watched trees and buildings vaguely float by out of the window. It's like watching a strange movie in black and white, she thought to herself. And I'm in it. But I'm not really in it anymore. I've gone away somewhere.

"Welcome to the Safe House," the woman who had greeted them was saying. "My name is Caitlyn. Come on in!" Ashley and Kimberly were still not loosening the grip on their mother's hand. She moved her feet forward gently pulling them along, side-stepping the bags on the floor. Good Lord, look at their eyes, she thought as she studied their faces for the first time after so many hours of rushed, distracted action. Their eyes are frozen wide open with fear and their hair is tangled. There are stains on their dresses. They look like they have been through a war. We all have. Will they be okay? Will they ever be able to recover from all of this? I love them so much. "It's OK, it's OK," she said

gently and out loud to them, hearing her own voice as if it belonged to someone else. Her eyes were filling up and she felt as if she were about to collapse onto the floor right there on top of the garbage bags. She felt unsteady and leaned into the doorway. Then the woman who had introduced herself took her arm and helped her move forward. She was saying "Hi" now to Ashley and Kimberly. "Come on in girls," she said in a friendly voice. The three of them were led into a small office. There were some desks and computers there and another woman was talking on the phone. Several computer monitors were mounted on the wall showing the views from surveillance cameras positioned all around the building. "We can do a complete intake later," Caitlin said to her as she reached for a stack of neatly folded blankets, sheets and towels. "I'll show you where your room is now. I'm sure you guys could use some rest." "Thank you," she said to Caitlyn. She tried hard to regain her composure. "Come on girls," she said to the children. "Let's go see our room. Now just let go of Mommy's hand for a minute so I can get hold of these bags." She was surprised when Ashley and Nicole actually did let go of their intense grip. But then they reattached themselves to her legs like bark on a Mommy tree. She could still feel the indentations that their fingers had made on the palms of her hand as she stooped to grab hold of the two plastic bags. Her injured hand could still grip objects somewhat. She had even carried the girls out of the house using that hand, not feeling any pain at that point. The pain was masked by the rush of adrenaline that pumped through her bloodstream. Now the bags felt light when she lifted them. Oh my God, she thought to herself! I should have taken more stuff? We hardly have anything that belongs to us now. We've truly lost everything. But I will never go back to that house again, ever! We're lucky we made it out alive. It was confusing though, that she could not stop thinking and worrying about her husband. In spite of all of his cruelty and abuse she could not get his hurt eyes and face out of her mind. His tears and weakness when he would beg her not to leave him on those horrible gray hung-over Sunday mornings, him crawling on top of her while she pulled her battered face away from his stubble. She kept hearing his promises of change repeating in her mind. She had put her whole life and lives of her children, all of their hopes and dreams into his hands, the hands that had turned on them and betrayed them so often. Then she remembered his big hand clutching the serving fork that he brutally plunged into hers as she desperately reached to unlock the door chain and flee from his attack on that last night.

In the early days of their being together she would have done anything for him. She always thought about him. Those thoughts had slowly turned into constant worry about what he was going to do next, constant fretting about the viciousness that he was increasingly capable of, his unpredictability which kept her off balance. Her mind was always occupied with thinking of ways to please him or disarm him. After a while, she couldn't even remember how he was, what kind of man he was and how he acted, when they first started going out together.

He definitely had changed. But who was he before? She saw in her mind the image of how he looked to her in the beginning. How intensely he would bow his head and peer down at the things he liked to fix and tinker with. How she viewed even the premature bald spot on the back of his head with affection. How one of his eyes was out of alignment and how she still thought that he was handsome even though one of his ears was gnarled and looked like putty as a result of a childhood injury. He obviously was in some kind of mental pain now, but how was he capable of forgetting all of the love that he once had for her, as if all of that tender affection had been severed from his heart by a blunt surgical cut? How could he treat her and the children this way, and go on living with himself? Why? Why did he behave that way? What is wrong with him? Was there some ugly darkness sleeping inside of him all along, something she couldn't or wouldn't see?

Then one morning she realized that she was feeling utter hatred for her husband, which surprised her. It was something that she never imagined could happen. So why then, even now in the Safe House, a

place to which they had fled to escape his violent attacks, was she still thinking about him all the time? Why was she imagining him in the empty apartment alone, pacing, raging and crying. Here she was worrying about him again, wondering if he was alright, obsessing over him like he was the only thing that she could ever think about. All of these recent events could not possibly have happened she thought! This feeling of strangeness stayed with her as she and the girls awkwardly followed Caitlyn up a set of narrow stairs that began outside the office door. It was not a graceful climb as she tried to ascend with Kimberly and Ashley's arms wrapped tight around her legs while she grappled with the two shapeless bags containing all that they owned. The clothes and toys inside felt like they were moving around and trying to escape. Her injured hand was pounding with pain. When they reached the top of the mountain of stairs they turned to the right and entered a small room with a low ceiling. She saw a set of bunk beds and a twin size bed and a dresser. "I hope you girls like bunk beds," Caitlyn said as she placed the stack of bedding and towels on one of the beds. Somehow the whole crazy-shaped collage of Mommy, children and garbage bags made it across the room and collapsed onto the bed, unraveling in a tangle of arms, legs and squeaky plastic. Caitlyn started laughing at the comedy of the scene and then everyone was laughing together. The laughter caught her by surprise. The girls had not laughed like this in a long time. Their giggles filled the room. It was so good to see them laugh again, she thought, to see their eyes sparkle with joy for a moment, to see that frightened apprehensive look that seemed to have taken permanent hold of them begin to melt away.

Hours after they made the beds and climbed into them and a goodnight story had been read aloud, the children finally drifted off to sleep. She lay there staring at the ceiling tiles and listening to the cars whizzing by on the road outside. We're in a shelter, she thought, a shelter for battered women. This sure was not what I had planned when I started out in life. They told me downstairs that tomorrow I should call Social Services. They said that I should apply for food stamps and then maybe temporary rental assistance so that I could begin to live on my own. I remember once standing on the supermarket line, watching a girl in front of me struggle to hold her baby while she spread her food stamp coupons out on the checkout counter between containers of milk and loaves of bread and a bag of oranges. Isn't it funny that I would remember exactly what she bought? I felt so bad for her! She seemed so overwhelmed and unable to do everything at once and her baby was screaming, and she seemed terribly embarrassed that she was holding up the line, with people waiting and staring at her while she counted out the food stamps but just couldn't get the right amount added up and the checkout girl had to help her. I wanted to say something, something that might help her like "Don't worry, just take your time Sweetie. Everything is all right, there's nothing to be ashamed about." But now that's going to be me. Everyone will be looking at me and knowing that we're on food stamps and assistance and that my family is in a shelter. I'm already feeling embarrassed and filled with shame. And then what happens next? They told me over the phone when I called the hotline that the shelter was a thirty day program. That's not much time to rebuild our whole lives from scratch. If I get some kind of rental assistance how long will that last? How will I support the three of us? I didn't even finish high school! I never thought I would feel like such a worthless loser!

She had worked at a convenience store before the children were born. The memories of that period started coming up and yes, they felt pretty good. It wasn't much money but she had liked that job. She liked to work and to be busy. She liked talking to people and enjoyed getting to know something about their lives during conversations over the checkout counter. And her boss was nice and thought that she was a good worker. Maybe I could go back there she thought. Maybe they would take me back. But how would I take care of the children at the same time? And what if he finds me? Her mind conjured up an image of her husband walking through the door of the convenience store as she was making change for a customer and she saw herself dropping the money all over the floor in

shaking, reflexive fear. "You stupid bitch!" she could hear him hissing at her. "How could someone as dumb as you ever hold down a job?" Oh, I've got to stop my mind from thinking! I need rest. I need to sleep. She thought of the lake and Pop-Pop and how it was when she was a child. She thought about the boat and the fishing line. Without her noticing it her fingers had started moving automatically and with purpose. She looked down and watched her hands as if they belonged to someone else. She felt her fingers moving with sharp pain beneath the bandages, but they moved intricately and skillfully like the fingers of a classical pianist. They went through the delicate motion of placing invisible beads on an imaginary wire. The hypnotic repetitive activity was beginning to slow her racing mind.

It's going to be OK, she thought. She looked over at the sleeping children in their bunk beds, Kimberly on top, Ashley on the bottom. Everything will work out, she told herself. The beading motion was a familiar friend to her. It always reminded her of praying and now, once again, this activity became a comforting prayer. It became a prayer for continued safety. It became a prayer for peace. And yes, it became a prayer of gratitude. We've made it, she repeated to herself. We are here and we are safe. We are OK! No one can hurt us here. I actually can feel myself breathing again. And she envisioned her prayers filling up the empty space of the small quiet room and then floating out of the window to touch the night sky that was surely filled with stars and then continuing on towards the vast universe beyond. Maybe this time, she thought, the wall wouldn't be there. Maybe this time my voice will be heard.

Thomas was back under the bed. Only this time it was not his own bed at home but the bed at a place called the "Safe House" where he and his mother were staying. They arrived several days ago after a brief but uncomfortable stay at what Mommy called "that filthy motel." Thomas had begun to like living at the Safe House and had felt himself calming down a little though he would still begin to panic if his mother was even momentarily out of his sight. But now here he was hiding under the bed again, afraid to come out. Something had happened suddenly and he was caught off guard. He had run for cover. He curled himself up into a tight ball and tried to get his mind to stop working. The floor under this bed had a thin carpet but it still felt cold and hard on his shoulders and elbows. It smelled different under there from his room at home as well, maybe a little bit like the damp odor he'd breathe in from his aquarium. He really missed Otis and wondered if he was okay with Thomas not being home to feed and care for him. The last thing he remembered was sitting at the top of the Safe House stairs in his pajamas. Thomas liked to watch everything going on in the communal living room from his spot up there; the adults talking, the other children running around playing. This place was filled with kids but he felt really shy and somehow different from them all and he found himself not wanting to join in when they played games together. When the children cavorted on the slides and swings in the small play yard behind the Safe House, Thomas would rather wander off alone to the far fringes of the grounds to explore. In recent days he had already found a salamander and two worms while digging around near the towering fence that enclosed the whole area. You could not see past the fence and Thomas wondered what was out there on the other side. He did not like to be far away from Mommy but he could always see her when the children played out there, sitting with the other mothers up on a balcony that overlooked the yard.

The Safe House was not too bad a place at all to stay for a while. In fact he felt a lot better than he had in a long time since arriving here, even better than he felt at home towards the end. And this place was far, far better than that motel which was a nightmare. Thomas wanted to forget the details of that experience but he couldn't help thinking about the motel as he lay under the bed and tried to piece together the missing parts of everything that had happened. He thought back to when they were staying in that scary place. He was so anxious that he had thrown up on the bed while watching TV. Mommy hadn't even come out of the bathroom to help him clean up the mess. She wasn't like herself at all anymore and she had spent most of her time behind the closed door on the phone talking or crying. There was a custodian at school who came to his classroom once to clean up after a girl who had thrown up on her desk. Thomas tried to recall how the custodian performed the task as dabbed and wiped at the smear of vomit on the motel bed. He felt totally alone. He was constantly scared there. But what really pushed his anxiety into high gear was the presence of the man staying in the room next to theirs. It seemed like he was always lurking around just outside their door. Thomas could see him through the thin curtain hanging over their window.

On the morning after they got to the motel Thomas and Mommy had gone out to get something to eat. Thomas was just starting to feel a little hungry again but that feeling was mixed with a general queasiness that never left him. There was a McDonalds across the highway from the motel. You couldn't walk directly across the road to the restaurant because there was always traffic and a concrete partition ran down the middle of it. Thomas remembered that the lady who had brought them to the motel had given them instructions about walking down to a traffic light and then crossing the highway at that point to get over to the McDonalds. When he and Mommy came out of their door on

their way to get breakfast the man bounced up from his chair and approached them. He walked quickly but in a jerky fashion as if his limbs weren't attached properly. Thomas couldn't remember if he walked with a limp but something about the way he moved his body was strangely awkward. When the man spoke to them his voice was hoarse and loud and his clothes gave off a strong odor of cigarette smoke. "How'd you make out last night? You like the place?" the man said to Mommy, coming too close. "Lovely ain't it?" He laughed. "A real palace!" When Thomas lifted his head to look up tentatively toward the voice he saw that the man's reddish eyes were focused intently on him. The way the man was looking at him was different than the way any adult had looked at him before and his mind had no way of putting a label on what it could mean. It was usually easy to read adult looks and facial expressions when they were worn by Mommy or Daddy. Thomas was acutely tuned into anticipating the unpredictable moods of his parents, especially lately. But the way that this man looked at him was new and confusing and made him think of a monster hiding and waiting for him at the end of a long dark tunnel. Thomas instinctively moved closer to Mommy but he bumped into her arm in the sling. "Oh Thomas, please be careful!" she said, wincing, while folding her good arm over the injured arm protectively and turning away. "Sorry Mommy," Thomas blurted out, feeling terrible from having hurt his mother, but he still couldn't hold himself back from reaching for her urgently in an attempt to grasp any piece of her clothing that he could manage to hold onto. The man kept talking to Mommy. "What the hell happened to you?" he asked in his raspy voice using what Thomas had always been told was a bad word, "Car accident?" Mommy raised a hand up to her face and touched her bandage. "Something like that I guess," she answered hesitantly, "I'm recuperating little by little." She sounded like she was trying to be friendly but her voice wobbled like it did when she was anxious. She started to back away toward the road with Thomas clinging to a piece of her jacket while trying not to hurt her again.

The man moved with them as if he had locked himself into their private orbit and it felt like he was rolling over them with his words. He yammered on about his own experience in a car accident. His voice got louder and he laughed and coughed as he told his tale. Thomas didn't want to hear about car accidents and he knew that he and Mommy hadn't even been in one, though maybe a car wreck would have been better than what actually did happen to them. Thomas wished the man would go away and was afraid to look up at him again. "Hey buddy, you like baseball?" Thomas realized that the man was addressing him and his fingers dug into the fabric of his mother's jacket even tighter. He did like baseball a lot but that thought brought so many pictures up into his head that he got dizzy. Thomas was holding on to Mommy's jacket and watching cars fly by on the highway but his memory banks were filling up with images of his father's face and the smell of grass and the feel of the warm sun when Daddy pitched the ball to him. Then the images shifted abruptly like a TV channel being changed and Thomas saw himself trying to hit Daddy with the bat as hard as he could to stop him from hurting Mommy. Then he wished that he had brought his bat with him when they left the motel to go to the McDonalds. He would feel much safer with it in his grip and now he could tell that Mommy was getting more and more uncomfortable because the man would not go away. "Hey buddy, if you like to watch baseball just come over to my place," the man went on, still aiming his attention directly at Thomas. "No, really," he added, but now he was talking to Mommy because his tone changed, "Anytime you need a babysitter, you know, if you need to get some shit done or something," another bad word, Thomas thought to himself, "I'm always around. I ain't going nowhere." This invitation was too disturbing for Thomas to even begin to consider. "Thanks.... that's really nice of you," Mommy answered hesitantly, searching for words, "But we won't be staying long." Then she said in a louder, more firm voice, "Now we have to go. My son and I haven't had anything to eat since yesterday. Bye now!" To Thomas' intense relief he found himself walking with only Mommy down a dirt path that ran alongside the highway. The man had finally taken the hint and was headed back in the direction of his chair.

They reached the traffic light and proceeded to cross over to the other side. While crossing they passed in front of a wall of cars that were stopped at the traffic light. Thomas held onto Mommy's hand like she always told him to as they crossed the busy road. He listened to the engines humming and the radios buzzing in the cars that were idling right next to them. The cars made him think of the race horses he had seen once on TV, snorting and scraping the ground with their hooves while they held themselves back from thundering through the starting gate. It felt like a long walk but they finally made it to the McDonalds. Thomas could see the motel on the other side of the highway. He could see the man sitting in the chair outside his room smoking. Could the man see them as they sat in the restaurant the same way that Thomas could see him? Mommy hardly talked at all while they sat at their table and ate. She left most of her food untouched and just stared out the window. Thomas took a hungry bite of his hamburger but then completely lost his appetite. His and Mommy's food just sat there in small mounds spread across the table growing cold inside the colorful paper wrappers. After a while they packed up the cold food and left the restaurant to return to the motel. When they were back in their room Thomas stood guard by the window. He was afraid to put his face too close to it when he looked out. Now he held his baseball bat by his side at all times. Every few minutes he would reach out and part the flimsy curtains slightly and he could see the man sitting in his chair smoking and drinking a can of soda. He could hear Mommy talking on her cell phone in the bathroom again. He heard fragments of what she was saying. "...really uncomfortable here... we need to be moved as soon as possible... not safe at all..." Her voice was pleading. Thomas felt his legs shaking and going out of control again because he was terrified that the man would come knocking on their door and try to get in. In his fevered imagination every little noise he heard in the room or that came from outside turned into the sound of a fist rapping on the cheap wood of their door. Thomas doubted that the door was strong enough to hold back anyone who wanted to get past it.

It became silent in the room as the day wore on. Thomas couldn't hear the sound of his mother's voice coming from the bathroom anymore. She must have ended her call or was listening to someone speak on the other end. He glanced over at the television. The screen showed a cartoon of a robot in a rocket ship hurtling through space. There was no noise coming from the TV because Thomas had turned the volume all the way down. He turned his head again to keep his eye on the window and there, abruptly, horribly was the man's face pressed up against the glass just inches away. This was not in Thomas' imagination. It was shockingly real. The man was peering intently into their room. His reddish eyes wandered around and then they found Thomas and stopped there. Thomas fell backward onto the floor in abject terror. He lost his hold on the baseball bat and it clattered across the floor and rolled under the bed. Thomas crawled toward the bed and tried to climb under it but he couldn't fit. The man's eyes stayed locked on Thomas and then Thomas saw him smile. It looked like a smile but it did not at all feel like one. Thomas could clearly see his yellow teeth. One of the man's arms moved up and down as if he were rubbing his stomach or his groin. Thomas tried to scream but nothing came out. A door clicked open and it was Mommy emerging from the bathroom. As if he had melted away the man's face disappeared from the window. Thomas pushed himself up off of the floor and ran over to Mommy, crashing into her and throwing his arms around her waist. "What's the matter Thomas?" she asked with surprise. "There, there, calm down. It's alright." Thomas still could not speak. In his mind he kept repeating "The man! The man!"

It seemed to go on forever but finally their stay at the motel came to an end. They received word that they were to be transported to the "Safe House". The lady in the new smelling car returned to take them away. Thomas saw her pull up outside and he called out to Mommy feeling like the cavalry had arrived just in the nick of time. That was the way it happened in movies about cowboys and Indians. He could almost hear the sound of pounding hooves and trumpets blaring in his head. Mommy had been distant and distracted since their arrival. He thought that the presence of another adult that she

could talk to might help bring her out of her deep sadness. Thankfully it appeared that the man was gone. Thomas hadn't seen him again after the window incident but he still never relaxed his guard or let go of his bat. He watched the window all the time, feeling his anxiety slowly give way to complete exhaustion. Toward evening on their last day at the motel, when it was just beginning to get dark, Thomas gazed at the skeletal branches of two spindly trees that stood at the end of the parking lot. The branches shook silently in the wind that was picking up and the few leaves that were left on them fluttered off and were blown under the tires of the cars that were rushing by on the highway. That was when he saw the lady arrive in her car to rescue them and they departed soon after. Thomas breathed in relief even as he realized that he had no idea where they would be going next...

Thomas had felt less anxious after they settled in at the Safe House. Mommy began to feel a little better and was acting a bit more like her old self even though she still cried sometimes. Thomas found it hard to feel close to her because of the bandages that continued to hide her face and the way her dark, watery eyes now always looked like they were staring off at something that was far away. This new and different Mommy was very fragile. Her shoulders stayed hunched over and she seemed to have trouble standing up straight. "Stand up straight, shoulders back!" he remembered Daddy saying to him in the stern voice that he would sometimes use as if they were army men on the march. When Daddy spoke in that voice to Thomas it made him feel small and timid and certainly not big or strong enough to be a real soldier. Thomas still worried all the time that Mommy would go away or some other bad thing would happen to her and then he would be left all alone. If Mommy got up to go into the kitchen for a moment while Thomas was lying on the Safe House playroom floor drawing or working on a puzzle, he would go into a panic. He'd call out after her at the empty doorway and jump up and run after her. "It's okay Thomas. It's okay. I'm not going anywhere." He couldn't bear to have his mother out of his sight.

But on this day he had been quite relaxed when he was sitting at the top of the stairs taking in the daily goings on down in the living room. Mommy was there sitting on the couch quietly reading a magazine. One of the other mothers staying in the Safe House rushed into the room below and scooped up a toddler who had escaped from the communal kitchen and was stumbling across the carpet. The toddler was just starting to learn to walk. "Oh, no you don't," called out the mom, a large, talkative woman with a high voice like a little girl who was always very sweet to Thomas. This woman had bandages on her face too but not as many as Mommy. "Time for your bath, little man," she said, clapping her hands together. The toddler screeched with glee and took another couple of small, awkward steps in an attempt to outrun his mother's reach. The office door was open and Thomas could hear voices in there. The women that worked at the Safe House were called "advocates" and the office was where the advocates spent most of their time. They worked on computers or talked on the phone. Sometimes the kids went into the office especially if the advocate whose name was Caitlyn was there. She was really nice and the littlest kids would go in there and sit on her lap if she wasn't on a "hotline" call. The hotline was a special phone number that those who had been hurt, like Thomas's mother, could use to call for help. They would ask the advocate if there was room for them to come and stay at the Safe House. Thomas hoped that there would always be room because he didn't want anyone else to have to be sent to that horrible motel that he and Mommy had been forced to stay in. Thomas knew from having been in the office that television screens were mounted on the walls in there. They didn't show cartoons or nature programs though. The screens showed what cameras were seeing all around the outside of the Safe House. They showed the parking lot and the stairwell and the play yard surrounded by the tall fence. The advocates would look up at the screens when the door buzzer announced that someone was outside and they would not let anyone into the Safe House that they did not know. This made Thomas feel safe and it made the rest of the mothers and children feel safe because they knew that no one who wanted to hurt them could get past the door and come in

after them. He was relieved that he no longer had to stand guard every moment prepared to use his baseball bat as a weapon to protect Mommy and him from scary red eyed men or even Daddy. All of the advocates at the Safe House were women and this was fine with Thomas. He was not feeling too comfortable around men these days. No men ever came into the Safe House except for the one the children called the "Music Man". Thomas had decided after careful consideration that he felt safe with this man and had come to enjoy spending time with him.

The Music Man, whose name was Mr. Macheis, came every week to visit and play fun music for everybody. The entire house seemed to feel peaceful and safe when he was around. Usually all the children would rush over to the office window and jump up and down with excitement when they saw the Music Man appear outside climbing up the stairway with his guitar which he always had with him. But when Thomas first heard the children and advocates talk about Mr. Macheis he was instantly frightened. First of all, Mr. Macheis was a man. Secondly, he misunderstood what they were saying when he first heard the children pronounce the Music Man's name. The name that Thomas thought he heard was "Mr. Cheese." Then Thomas could not stop his agitated imagination from conjuring up images of a bizarre and possibly dangerous man dressed in a suit made of smelly cheese coming through the doorway directly into their protected inner sanctum. He was hugely relieved when the Music Man arrived one evening shortly after he and Mommy had come from the motel and he was not wearing any weird and crazy cheese suit. The routine at the Safe House was predictable and peaceful and Thomas decided that he liked it there.

But now here he was under the bed again. It was like the dreadful fear had never left him and he could hear his teeth chattering in his head. He drew his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around his legs, squeezing with all his might to try to stop the shaking. Now Thomas slowly began to remember why he had rushed into his and Mommy's room from his place at the top of the stairs to find a place to hide. The clutter in his mind was beginning to clear and he was able to piece together the events that brought him back under the bed, curled up inside his protective shell.

Thomas remembered that he was sitting at the top of the stairs when he heard the door buzzer go off in the office. His first thought was that it might be the Music Man arriving for his evening visit. He recalled watching Caitlyn emerge from the office and turn the lock on the door to open it. Thomas remained relaxed because he knew that she would not let anyone in who wasn't first identified on the TV screens. But it was not the Music Man standing on the other side of the door tonight when Caitlyn pulled it open. The whole door frame was suddenly filled up by the blue uniform, massive arms and bulging gun of a bald headed policeman. Reflections of jumping red and blue lights came pouring like distant explosions from behind the policeman's tall frame causing him to appear lit up like a torch. The nose of his squad car was pulled up close to the entrance of the Safe House and the bright beams from the headlights shot up the stairs like a lightning bolt, hitting Thomas in the eyes and blinding him. He heard himself scream.

Thomas jumped up and ran into his and Mommy's upstairs room. He found himself hitting the floor then frantically crawling on his hands and knees under the bed like a frightened animal. This time he did fit under it. The night of blood when Daddy hurt Mommy and the world changed forever was happening all over again in his mind. The bright colored lights spinning around, the policeman, the shock and terror – it all came back in a rush and Thomas couldn't stop it. He had no way of telling if it was really happening all over again or if this was his memory churning up a surge of frightful pictures. A long time went by while he lay there curled up in a ball, trying to feel safe and make sense out of what was happening. Or maybe it was just a single minute. He couldn't stop himself from shaking. Then Thomas realized that there were other people in the room with him. He looked out at

worried faces peering in under the bed at him. One of the faces was Mommy's and her voice was trying to assure him that everything was alright. "You're OK, Sweetie," she repeated several times. Another face belonged to one of the advocates. Thomas couldn't remember her name but he remembered that she was not as nice as Caitlyn. This advocate didn't seem too comfortable around children. Her voice sounded impatient as she motioned with her hands near the bed in an attempt to coax him out. She said that if he came out right away she would give him some ice cream. She went on to say that there were two new children, two little girls, who had just been brought to the Safe House by the nice policeman. This new family would be staying in the room next door to his. "Isn't it fun that you'll have new friends to play with?" she remarked enthusiastically. There was no way that Thomas was ready to be around other children right now. He was shy to begin with and now he was feeling embarrassed on top of that for screaming and stirring everything up and attracting all of this unwanted attention. Even having Mommy close by in the room failed to offer him any relief or comfort. Thomas wasn't going anywhere. He would stay right there for as long as it took for all of the bad things that had happened to go away. Mommy and the advocate finally gave up and left the room. They spoke in whispers and Thomas heard their voices get further and further away, drifting up the stairwell as they descended.

He lay there for a long time in the dark. He knew that a long time had gone by because the muscles in his arms and legs were beginning to ache and feel stiff. Thomas stretched himself out and that feeling went away a little. It helped if he thought about animals – Otis, his turtle or salamanders and frogs. Then he sensed that there was another presence in the room and his body tensed up again. He watched a pair of adult shoes approach the bed. Thomas recognized them and his mind connected the shoes to Mr. Macheis, the Music Man. Mr. Macheis sat down on the floor close to the bed. Thomas saw that he had his guitar with him but he wasn't playing it. He laid it gently on the floor next to him. Thomas looked at the different color woods that the guitar was made from in the dim light from the lamp and he remembered the sound of the music that came out of it. "Hi Thomas," Mr. Macheis said to him in a gentle voice. Thomas was relieved that the Music Man didn't seem to be in any big hurry like the others had been to get him to come out from under the bed. He wasn't pushing a lot of words at him or promises of ice cream. Thomas thought that it felt nice just to have the Music Man sitting close by, staying with him and not pressuring him. "I know that it's hard right now," Mr. Macheis said after a while, "but it will get better. If it's OK with you I'll just stay close by until you feel better. You don't have to do anything you're not ready for." Thomas couldn't see the Music Man's face but his voice was soothing to him and a small wave of peace washed some of his fear away. Quiet settled over the room.

Thomas thought about animals and gradually he began to feel like he had come back into his body which wasn't shaking anymore. He almost felt sleepy as slow minutes passed by. It felt like he had come through a lifetime of changes in only a few days and it entered his mind that nothing would ever again be the same, nothing would ever be the way that it was before. He was now a million miles from home and the life that he knew. He tried not to think about what it was like when he and Mommy were back at home in the kitchen or doing things together around the yard. Thomas took a deep breath and tentatively began to prepare himself to come out from under the bed. Was he ready? He wasn't sure. First though, he had to overcome the challenge of how to unwrap himself from the physical position that he found himself in. His body was scrunched up like he had been compressed inside somebody's fist. He wiggled his arms and legs to try to get some feeling back into them. Then he tried inching his way toward where the darkness ended and light from the lamp on the dresser spread out across the floor. The room and the world outside were getting closer now. He stopped and waited. He wasn't sure if he could go on. After a while he heard a voice that seemed to come from inside of him, speaking to him without words, maybe from his own heart. He didn't know what to

call this voice but it seemed to be sprinkling tiny drops of courage all around him. Maybe that would be enough to urge him forward but he realized that he could not do this alone. He looked out to where the light began.

Something told him that it was safe to trust the Music Man. It was just the two of them together in that quiet room. Thomas began his reemergence by first very slowly extending his small hand out from under the bed into the light. He looked at it resting there on the carpet like it was not connected to the rest of him. Then he saw Mr. Macheis' hand reaching toward his, coming closer and closer. He felt his own hand lift up off of the floor to take hold of the much larger hand that was offered. Thomas gave in to the feeling of being taken care of and protected once again. He had almost forgotten what that feeling was like. Then very carefully, as if he were a fragile baby animal being born into the world, struggling with all of the strength that its little body can muster to leave the familiar and safe waters of its mother's womb, Thomas held on tight to the Music Man's hand and climbed out from his hiding place under the bed.

I pull off the main road and drive my car down the small access driveway into the parking lot. I park my car in its usual place near the dumpster. I park in that spot for a specific reason. From the main road, a busy thoroughfare, my car is clearly visible as it sits there in its slot. You can easily see it with a quick glance out of your car window if you happened to be whizzing by up there. I reach for the key to turn off the engine and look into my rear view mirror. All that I see behind my car is a white wall. This barricade-like structure is a high fence that is tall enough to brush up against the bottom branches of the trees that grow along the edge of the property and stand in a row like group of quiet sentinels. The fence and the trees prevent the rest of the parking lot from being seen from the road. All of the cars belonging to our Safe House clients are parked in a small cluster behind this fence. To people driving by the client's cars are invisible. If you were an angry abuser, a husband or boyfriend who happened to be on the hunt to track down the woman who has finally found the strength to flee from violence and take shelter here, you would be unable to spot her car. The location of the Safe House is always kept a secret. If you were that man driving by, all you could see out your windshield would be my lone car parked by the dumpster next to a grey, plain looking house. I always leave the parking spots behind the fence for the cars of our residents. Actually, most of our residents do not have cars. Most arrive at the Safe House in a police car accompanied by an officer with nothing in their possession other than a few plastic garbage bags containing handfuls of belongings that were gathered hastily as they fled from their home. Most arrive with children. They always have the same frightened, distant look in their eyes, the eyes of refugees who have just escaped from some terrible war zone. I've driven my car down that access driveway and into this same parking lot every Thursday night for eighteen years. I don't remember the details of the first time I came to the Safe House, but now, sitting here, I can see in my mind so many faces, so many stories and precious moments that now live inside of me and have settled deeply into my very being. These memories rest like a vast forest of seedlings that have taken up permanent residence in the arc of my own story and they live on and prosper quietly in the background like a musical score that never ends or goes away. These days it seems like I am always remembering, always thinking back on those experiences.

Sometimes, at the end of a long night I will stand quietly by myself in the dark empty Safe House playroom. Music session is over. The children have all gone upstairs with their mothers to get ready for bed. The bathing, crying and other bedtime noises floating down from above have all slowly trickled away into the hum of silence. I patiently wait for the echoes of laughter, conversation and bouncing music that filled up this room all evening to fade out and disappear. It takes a while for this to happen. I can still feel the residue of emotional electricity that is left clinging to the atmosphere. I open the blinds and look out the big windows onto the deserted play yard down below. It is dark out there but the swings and slides are drenched in vivid silver from the moonlight. Earlier this evening a woman told me that her ancestors called the moon "the lamp of the poor". We laughed together when she said that it must have been the "lamp of the poor" that moved her without any warning to drop all of her protective walls. Maybe it was the moon, she said, that made her "cry her eyes out and tell her whole life's story to a man with a guitar whom she had just met," she who for good reason had come to distrust all men. Through the glass the moon is bright in the sky and almost full.

It probably was the first night that I came into this room that the Child Advocate told me about the windows. I remember her closing the blinds and instructing me to do this when the sun went down. When night falls, she explained, and the lights are turned on in the playroom, the children are visible

through the windows. They can be seen from the outside as they cavort and dance around with innocent abandon to the music. “The blinds must always be drawn at night for their protection,” she explained. At first I didn’t grasp the point that she was trying to convey to me. Then a picture came into my mind: It was the image of a faceless shadow that materialized out of the disorienting wizardry of the night into the form of a man deranged by anger who could be watching us through the window. Our activities could actually be observed from the cover of the inky invisibility of the dark fields that surrounded the Safe House. This was an unnerving possibility that shook me up and woke me up at the same time. Then I remembered noticing upon entering the Safe House on that first night that there was an orange colored warning sign attached to the office door. It read “We are on HIGH ALERT– Level 7”. I wondered what Level 7 was. It was explained to me later that this meant that there had recently been a threat made against a client or that information had surfaced that indicated that an abuser might have discovered the location of the Safe House. I was informed that these men were entirely capable of carrying out acts of violence against their families and that their rage might also be directed at advocates or others that supported their escape. Sometimes these individuals, I was told, who out in public might have reputations as pillars of the community, possessed firearms. Those who abuse are extremely adept at carrying out violence in secret behind closed doors where no one outside of the home can witness their behavior. Statistically the absolutely most dangerous time for a woman who is living in an abusive relationship is when she finally actually attempts to flee. The possibility of her escape is what really ups the ante. That is when the abuser’s power and control is most threatened. Serious injury or death is not an uncommon outcome in the trajectory of domestic violence and it is not at all unusual for the Safe House to be on “High Alert”.

So today upon arrival I’ve parked my car in the space near the dumpster as usual. I step out onto the pavement and stretch my limbs a little after the long drive. My day has been spent providing therapeutic music groups inside a women’s prison and that is where I’ve just travelled from. I’ll tell you more about the prison, which has its own story, later on, but I will mention now that after being in that place all day my shirt feels like it has been glued onto my body with sticky sweat. In the summertime the room in the prison where my groups take place is unbearably hot. I feel fortunate because I can walk out of there at the end of the day and breathe in the comparatively cool freshness of a steaming summer afternoon. People are always shocked to learn that there is no air conditioning in many of the prison housing units. Over the years I’ve learned to adapt to that environment. It’s just the nature of the place – freezing in the winter and baking in the summer. I always carry a couple of extra shirts with me to change into so I can feel slightly refreshed before going on to the next location that I visit. Thursdays are particularly long days for me though all my days are long. I begin my first group at the prison at 9:00 AM and usually finish up at the Safe House well after 10:00 in the evening.

I reach into the back of the car and lift my guitar out from its resting place on the back seat. The battered case looks like it has been around the world a hundred times and I feel like it has. That old case has done a stellar job protecting the instrument that rests inside, a beautiful though extremely worn, custom made guitar that I’ve had for over 30 years. I have other guitars, some fancier or even more valuable, but this one is my favorite and the one I usually take out with me every day. “Why bring that precious guitar into all those kinds of places that you go into?” people ask me on occasion. “Won’t it get affected from the heat and cold and rain or from all those little kid’s dirty hands touching it all the time?” I laugh and look down at the dark, sweat stained grooves that cover the German Spruce face of the guitar, an indelible explosion of tiny veins and rivers etched into the wood. That aged outer shell is like a map of where it has been and Oh, what a story it could tell! It is obvious that the surface of the guitar’s body will never be pristine again. I’m never quite sure how to answer the question, though. What I usually say is “The older and more beat up it gets, the better it

sounds and I love the way it feels when I play it.” But the larger, more expansive response to the query would go something like this: My old guitar, which was made for me with love, has become a part of me, a piece of my soul, an extension of my innermost being. It truly is my partner. We’ve been through a lot together. All those twists and turns in life’s ever changing directions, all of those decades of experiences, all of those songs that were written. Emotion is fashioned into song through some mysterious artistic alchemy and this instrument has helped me in ways that are beyond telling in accomplishing this. This old guitar has soaked up the vibes, the actual molecular atmosphere of a thousand venues from large concert stages to homeless shelters and prisons. I’ve played this instrument almost every day of my life for over three decades. When you take the creative energy exchange going on between me and my favorite guitar and mix it with the emotional fingerprints of the countless children who have touched its wood, reaching for the magic of the music that it makes, you will most definitely wind up with what musicians call strong “mojo” residing in the fibers of that instrument. When I pick it up it just feels right in my hands.

Speaking of children, there they are. I look up and can see them gathered at the office window as I cross the Safe House parking lot. They always wait for me up there on the days when I come. I can see their faces all lit up with bright smiles and they wave to me and jump up and down with excitement. I smile and wave back at them. It is now time to adjust the dial and turn on the inner “juice”. What is that, you ask? Well, it means that I always prepare myself before stepping over the threshold and entering through that door. My interior state of being now coalesces into a sophisticated but simple and subtle combination of essentials like empathy, compassion and love. I stay undistracted and tuned into the emotional nuances of my interactions from here on in. Reverie has ended. The subject of the radio program that I was listening to in the car on the way over that was still reverberating around inside my head evaporates as I become focused. I release the weight of the prison atmosphere, which one can’t help but absorb, and let go of any thoughts about events that transpired there over the course of the day. I’ve turned the switch to the “on” position but if you happened to see me walking across the parking lot carrying my guitar and waving up to the children in the window, you’d simply see a relaxed and friendly figure arriving to play some uplifting music for everyone on a warm summer evening. It is difficult to talk about all of this in any technically descriptive fashion because so much of my work is intuitive and has been fashioned out of ingredients that evolved naturally over many years. I approach each professional interaction creatively and do not use any predetermined lesson chart or agenda. My style is free form and unimposing. My intention is to help people relax and feel safe so that they can begin to open their hearts to trust and then, ultimately, become more open to deeply loving and accepting themselves. I like to think that there is an exquisitely rendered design to what I do but when I am with clients, the children or the women who reside here, our work together feels as uncharted and uncomplicated as wandering along a quiet stretch of beach in search of shells that twinkle in the sand like diamonds.

I see and feel things from an artistic and empathic perspective. In much the same way that I learned to “step out of the way” and let the mystery speak when I compose music and poetry, I now nurture an environment in which healing and empowerment can blossom naturally in these hidden worlds that I have come to know so well. These worlds are invisible to most of us and they exist off to the side of the main roads that are more heavily traveled. The work that I do in them feels to me like the composing of a song. What is the inchoate song, a newly forming story, trying to reveal to me? Where does it need to go to fulfill its dream and its promise? Much of the music I create now comes out of people’s lives and emotions. When I am creating a song out of a person’s life I always say to them “If we listen closely to ourselves inside, the song will tell us where it needs to go.” I suppose that this process might be compared to jazz improvisation. When improvising, jazz musicians have a conversation on their instruments and create spontaneously. You must have your “chops” (technical

abilities) together to be able to instantaneously conceive and express musical ideas on your instrument as you “jam” with other artists. The language that musicians use when they interact in this way consists of musical notes and harmonies. In the Safe House our language of communication is emotion and our search is for inner strength and healing.

A therapist once walked up to me after I concluded a workshop that I was facilitating in a shelter with a group of teens. She said that she was fascinated by what she had just observed. The kids in the shelter all came from very difficult backgrounds and were notoriously hard to work with but the workshop went really well and the kids were happy and enthusiastic at the end. “How is it that you always seem to say just the right words at just the right moment when interacting with kids in these volatile settings?” she asked me. The only response that I could come up with was to say, “I listen, I feel, and when I speak I try to hit the right notes.” These are fragile environments. You cannot go in heavy footed, especially if you are a man. You can never allow yourself to be careless and stumble into the smallest insensitivity or be oblivious for even a moment to what is going on around you. You can never fall into the trap of being turned off by some outward behavior or appearance that is actually disguising a damaged heart for you will miss what is buried under the surface of things. You have to give up your sense of self and surrender to communication on a deeper and ultimately more truthful level. These hidden worlds are populated with individuals living with acute emotional pain and confusion and recovering from complex trauma. Here at the Safe House the advocates who work in the office are there to help clients with the physical aspects of starting a new life, like laying the groundwork for getting a job or finding an apartment. The legal advocate might help with getting a protective restraining order. My job is to help the healing process to begin.

How did I wind up coming here? How did it happen that I have spent most of my life for the last two decades in what I call the “hidden worlds”? I did not go to school to study for this. I did not plan or set out to do this work. I don’t have credentials or letters listed after my name that would claim any legitimacy nor do I have a normal job title and description like the regular staff who work in these places. I’m usually just called the “Music Man”. If I am asked how all this came about I usually give a fairly straightforward answer which more or less sums up the linear progression of events. It goes something like this:

“I am and have always been a musician, writing, touring and recording. In my mid-career I released collections of original songs for children that I had written for my son and daughter. I was surprised when I became known for those songs and then for the concerts that I started performing for children and families. Simultaneously I composed and recorded a series of contemplative instrumental guitar records that were released worldwide and embraced by fans of “New Age” music. Those song meditations were said by many to augment “emotional healing”. As my reputation grew, I was asked if I would come to visit a domestic violence safe house. I answered ‘OK’ even though I did not know what a safe house was. Soon after that I was invited to visit a shelter for the homeless, then an orphanage, then a teen shelter, then a women’s prison and so on. You get the idea. The children, women and families residing in these types of venues were called ‘under-served populations’. I don’t recall ever actively seeking any of this work. All I did was answer ‘Yes’ when asked. Then I packed my guitar and I went. Then I never stopped going. Then it became my life.”

When I tell this abbreviated story I do not talk about my own personal background. I did grow up with domestic violence and alcoholism in my family. It may sound out of touch, but the truth is that for a long time I hardly thought at all about my own early experiences with violence and trauma as having anything to do with my motivation to continue doing this work. But how could it not impact my choices? I do know that I did not consciously seek an avenue toward my own healing here in the

hidden worlds. But I did so much need to heal. Fortunately I had done a great deal of my own inner work before offering myself to others professionally. I never looked to clients for solace or reward. But I do believe that we all need to heal and the act of bringing love and healing into the world is the most important work that we can do while we walk this Earth. It doesn't matter where you happen to be or what circumstances you find yourself in, we are always presented with an opportunity to heal and reach deeper levels of love.

These are words that I often say to clients who express their loss after finding themselves homeless or seeking safety from abuse. I also tell them that the hidden worlds are often the very places where healing can happen on the most intense, profound and accelerated level, not that I'd ever wish a sojourn in any of these places on anybody. It wasn't until I was years into carrying out this work that I realized that what I was telling clients was true for me as well - my own healing was being accelerated and deepened as I spent time in the hidden worlds and my life and my spirit were being moved into directions I never could have planned for myself. Things certainly did not turn out the way that I had originally planned and for this gift I am truly grateful.

So, as I cross the parking lot I hoist my guitar and ascend the steps outside the Safe House that lead to the front door. The window where the children are gathered is right above me. I can hear them all tap-tapping with their small hands on the glass but when I look up from this angle all that I can see is the side of the building towering over me which ends at the roof slanting off under a darkening sky. When I reach the door I ring the buzzer. The Safe House looks pretty much like any normal house you might see along the road but it does have a bit of an institutional aura about it. The outside surroundings do not have any of the meticulous warm and fuzzy types of features you would associate with a homeowners affectionate tinkering about the premises. "They should get some volunteers in here to plant some pretty flowers outside or something," I think to myself as I wait near the entrance. Inside the office I know that they are looking up at the security monitors and it won't take long because certainly the image of my standing out here with my guitar on the stoop awaiting entry has become a familiar sight. The door swings open and I am greeted by a smiling young advocate who is immediately bowled over by the swarm of kids who had been clustered together at the office window. They rush at me like a tumbleweed of limbs and wrap their arms around my legs, the guitar case, anything that they can reach up and get ahold of. Across the room I see the faces of their mothers who are poking their heads in from the doorway that leads to the kitchen. Dinner must be cooking in there and it smells awfully good, which reminds me that I haven't eaten for a while. I see the mother's faces, some still carrying multi-colored bruises or stark white bandages, and all the varied skin colors and body shapes and sizes and types of hair. And they are all smiling broadly and our eyes lock in a wordless connection of warmth. I know them all so well and so deeply. I know that there is a damaged heart beating inside each and every one of them but all that I see now is light glowing in their eyes, light that whispers about the strength and resilience of their amazing souls. "Hello, Hello, Hello," I now say to the pile of kids that have stopped me in my tracks at the doorway. "I am so happy to see you!" I bend down and curl myself around them cradling the whole mass of them in my arms as best I can as the messy bouncing ball of us moves inside the building and the door is secured and locked behind us.

I will say a few words here about this kind of intimacy. I am an adult male entering an emergency residential facility where all who reside here have been deeply impacted by violence at the hands of men. I'm the only man who ever comes into the Safe House except for the occasional repair person. Every approach that I make and every interaction that I carry out in this delicate environment is done with extreme care and as I said earlier, with consciousness and clear intent. For example, my demeanor is never loud or joking, overly familiar in any artificial or, worse yet, overpowering way. And I am

never the one who reaches out and initiates hugs with the children or naturally the women. But as hurt hearts are opened I have found that hugs are inevitable, along with tears and also laughter. Kids are climbing all over me constantly. Often the little ones climb up onto my lap if I am sitting at a desk at the end of the night and they bury their heads in my chest. Sometimes they fall asleep there. Often I find myself talking with a woman at the kitchen table while her children curl up and nestle in my arms. It is a fortunate thing that I am comfortable with all of this. I held my own children close to me and I know what this feels like. If a client, whether it be a woman or a child, reaches their arms out to me because they feel emotion – it could be joy or gratitude or sadness about exiting this place where pain has been transcended, where deep growth has been experienced - I believe strongly that it would be wrong and harmful if I were to throw up my arms, position them as a barrier, a wall between them and me, and make some comment that explains what is “appropriate professional contact and what is not”.

I was invited once to attend a training given by a large agency during which the presenter, who was a Social Work clinical supervisor, used those exact words when instructing the attendees on how an advocate or social worker was to respond if a child ever tried to hug them. “If a child ever tries to get too close or attempts to hug you or have physical contact with you in any way... that’s a big No-No. Uh-uh, people. You tell them no way! You put your arms up and explain boundaries to them.” At the time I had thought of Caitlyn, a skilled Child Advocate at the Safe House, who I would often see working at the computer in the office with one of the toddlers settled onto her lap. Little ones know who they can trust. Of course that trust can be betrayed. I have taught children for decades to always trust their feelings. I’ve taught that everyone always has the absolute right to speak up for themselves and seek help if anyone, no matter who it is, touches them in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable or scared, even if that someone is a person they know or thought that they trusted. I am all for healthy boundaries. Professional boundaries are extremely important and I hear stories on occasion about how some therapist or psychologist acted in a dysfunctional manner and crossed lines, verbally or physically, putting a client at risk. But I couldn’t help but wonder if the presenter at that agency training had ever experienced a child’s fragile heart opening in a delicate moment that might not come around again if an opportunity for healing is missed or brushed away by words read off some list of instructions about “appropriate boundaries”.

If someone reaches out to me for a hug in one of these settings, which often happens, I would never think of rejecting them because that might hurt them. But the physical contact cannot be awkward or made without complete consciousness. That simple brief hug must always transmit a handful of feelings clearly and have nothing confusing added into the mix. It has to give the person on the receiving end a feeling of safety, compassion, protection and love. It might sound strange but I can sort of psychically adjust myself to become smaller or larger inside depending on what is needed in a given situation. For example I can become small inside when meeting a new child who has just arrived and is frightened and confused. And I might become larger again when I am interacting with the male police officer who is dropping off a new client. This all involves subtle exchanges of energy between people that we are mostly unaware of on a conscious level.

A final word on hugs: Remember that before we digressed, children were hanging all over me in the entranceway of the Safe House, an image that may seem incongruous in a place where so many vulnerable lives have been ripped apart by domestic violence and sexual assault perpetrated by men. The role that I model as I carry out this work has been described as part healer, part guide, part father, part nurturing friend. I never consciously designed this persona but it has evolved naturally and become “me”. Just about every woman or child who is about to leave the Safe House after their stay and is about to reenter the big world outside reaches out to me for a farewell hug as we stand in the

exit way on their last day - a hug for strength, a hug to express gratitude, a hug to remind herself that she only deserves love and care. It is always a powerful and emotional moment. As I said earlier, I don't initiate hugs, but I am always there to return a hug when one is needed, modeling quiet strength and compassion. And our clients, as they continue their journey into a new and more empowered life, can take away with them the memory of a gentle, safe, but powerful male figure, one who cared deeply about them and recognized the beauty and light inside them.

Now the advocates are shoos the children, who seem to keep multiplying, out of the office. "Let Mr. Macheis take care of something in here for a minute and then he'll be right out," they say as they gently guide them out. I see the children's brightly animated faces recede through the crack of the door as it slowly closes very carefully so as to not entrap any small, reaching moving hands. "Just be patient, music session will begin soon," they call after them. The advocates want to fill me in on a new client who has just arrived. The advocate named Caitlyn hands me the intake folder which I peruse as they speak. I hear the noise machine whirring on the other side of the office door. It is a small round box that sounds like a steady ocean wave and prevents anyone outside the room from hearing our confidential briefings. I always like to know what I am going to be walking into when I go out onto the floor each night that I am here. It's good to have information and updates so I am never caught off guard regarding developments, positive or negative, in client's lives. It is also important that I know something about the trauma that a new client and her children have experienced. I am informed that the new client's name is Denise and she has two little girls, Ashley and Kimberly. I read in the intake that Denise has a badly injured hand that has been treated at the hospital and is wrapped in surgical bandages. There is a long history of emotional, physical and sexual abuse in Denise's background. I learn that her husband stabbed her in the hand with a serving fork when she reached for the door and tried to unlock it to escape his attack. Her two little girls witnessed the beating, stabbing and everything else that happened. Denise's husband had stormed out of the house briefly at some point and Denise seized that brief window of opportunity to escape to a neighbor's house about half a mile away. Despite her severely injured hand, she somehow managed to carry both girls and several garbage bags of their frantically gathered belongings all the way over to the neighbor's house. From there she called the police. The advocates smile when the subject of Denise's daughters comes up. They tell me that the children arrived at the Safe House wearing beautiful little beaded bracelets and necklaces that their mother had made for them. "Those girls are so cute," said Caitlyn. Apparently Denise had fashioned the jewelry while staying up all night on many anxious occasions. She felt that she had to stay awake and guard the children from her husband's abuse. He would arrive home drunk frequently and the middle of the night became his favorite time to terrorize his family. The advocates and I finish up our updates about Denise and the other clients residing in the house.

"Oh, and exciting news!" Caitlyn says with a surge of animation, as if she were relieved to conclude our discussion with something positive and uplifting. It is hard to constantly take in and hold inside of us all these painful histories, one right after the other, day in and day out. "Sarah and Thomas were just approved for Transitional House. They'll be moving out tomorrow. We're so happy for them!" Thomas was a boy that I had spent a good deal of time with at the Safe House. He and his mother Sarah had come a long way. They had just concluded their thirty day stay here and would now live at Transitional House which is a two year program designed to give families more time and support while they continue to rebuild their lives and eventually become completely independent. Not all families meet the requirements or are considered suitable for the Transitional House program so it was good news indeed that Sarah and Thomas had been accepted into it. I visit that facility every week also and I will tell you more about it later. I recall vividly how little Thomas, when he first arrived at the Safe House, had been so traumatized by violence that he had hidden under the bed in

his and Sarah's room and would not come out. He constantly clutched a baseball bat. It went everywhere with him. He felt that he needed it to protect his mother and him from harm. Thankfully he was starting to do a lot better than he was in those shaky, early days. "Ah, that's great news!" I say in response to Caitlyn's enthusiastic report while thinking at the same time to myself about the long healing journey that lay ahead for the two of them. "Thanks everyone, for the updates."

Now I lift my guitar from its case and strap it on. I give it a quick tune. The guitar's tuning always needs to be tweaked after the wood and steel strings adjust to the transition from the boiling heat and humidity of the prison into the air conditioning of the Safe House. I realize that I haven't had a moment to change my shirt that was sweat soaked when I left the prison but it is mostly dried now from the air conditioning. "OK, good to go!" I say to the advocates and take a deep breath. I always say a brief prayer in my mind before entering any of these sensitive environments. It's usually something like "Use me for your purposes," or the perhaps the beginning of the St Francis prayer, the part that goes "Make me an instrument of your peace." I know that I am not that skilled that I can always make the right moves and say just the right things without some kind of spiritual help and guidance coming from the unseen oneness that connects all of us. I always strive to make myself as receptive as I can. This helps me to become a malleable vehicle which can be used to make magic happen and foster an environment of benefit for all. Caitlyn turns the knob and opens the office door. I wave to the advocates and then go out into the house with my guitar to see the families and begin tonight's music session.