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STEPHANIE FOO

WHAT

MY

BONES

KNOW

A MEMOIR OF HEALING
FROM COMPLEX TRAUMA



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*A Memoir of Healing
from Complex Trauma*

Stephanie Foo



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

For my fellow complex PTSD darlings: I know that trauma books can be triggering and painful to read. I've struggled through a number of them myself. But I felt that it was necessary for me to share my abusive childhood in order for the reader to understand where I'm coming from. Part I of this book might be tough for you, though I ask that you at least give it a shot.

But I won't judge you if, at any point, you need to skip ahead a few pages. And I'd like to promise you this, even if it is a bit of a spoiler:

This book has a happy ending.

PROLOGUE

“Do you want to know your diagnosis?”

I blink and stare at my therapist. She gazes at me from her serene office, where sunshine glows through her gauzy curtains, birdsong bursts through the windows, and one of those little fountains with a giant marble on it burbles, which I guess is supposed to be relaxing. In the back of the room is a framed copy of the poem “Desiderata.” *You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here.*

But I’m not really *here*. My therapist’s warm office is in San Francisco, and I am in my dark, freezing, six-by-six-foot office in New York City, talking to her through a small window on my computer. The reason I know about the poem in her office is the same reason I can’t believe she is only telling me my diagnosis now: I’ve been her client for eight years.

My sessions with my therapist, whom I’ll call Samantha, began when I was twenty-two, when I lived in San Francisco and needed help with a very San Francisco problem: an INTJ tech-nerd boyfriend. I lucked out with Samantha. She was acerbic and clever but loving. She’d always make time for an emergency session after a breakup and even bought me a beautiful leather-bound travel journal before my first solo trip abroad. My sessions with her quickly moved beyond boy talk, and we began discussing my monthslong bouts of depression and my constant anxiety around friendships, work, and family. I loved her so much that I kept seeing her via Skype after I moved across the country to New York when I was twenty-six.

—

Our session today begins with me complaining about my lack of focus. Samantha asks me to do some positive visualizations and suggests I picture myself in a safe space, as a powerful being, full of light. I try half-heartedly, but I always feel corny doing this stuff. Then, as she does every week, she tells me not to be so hard on myself. “I’m sure you’re being more productive than you’re letting on,” she says, ignoring my eye rolls. “I’ve seen you pull yourself out of depressions like this before. I know you can pull yourself up out of this one.”

But that’s exactly the problem. I’m tired of pulling. I don’t want to pull anymore. I want a dumbwaiter, or an escalator, or a floating rainbow drug cloud. Anything to lift me toward emotional stability. To fix me.

—

I’ve suffered from anxiety and depression since I was twelve years old. The pain is a fanged beast that I’ve battled a hundred times throughout the years, and every time I think I’ve cut it down for good, it reanimates and launches itself at my throat again. But in recent years, I’d convinced myself that this battle was completely pedestrian. I mean, twentysomething millennials are all really stressed out, aren’t they? Isn’t depression just shorthand for the human condition? Who *isn’t* anxious here in New York, the capital of neuroticism?

That is, until I turned thirty. One by one, I’d watched my erratic friends hit thirty and quickly become adults. They reported that they had less energy, so they stopped caring as much about what other people thought and settled into themselves. Then they bought beige linen pants and had babies. I’ve waited for that mature, elevated calm, but my thirtieth birthday was months ago, and if anything, I care more than ever. I care about shopping cart placement and plastic in the oceans and being a good listener. I care about how I seem to fuck everything up all the time. I care and I care, and I hate myself for it.

My friends got one thing right, though: I'm so tired now. Thirty years on this earth, and I've been sad at least half that time.

On my subway rides to work, I stare at the supposedly neurotic masses—who are calmly staring at their phones—and think: Maybe I'm different from them? Maybe something is wrong with me? Something big. In the past week, I've been scrolling through various mental illnesses on WebMD, searching for symptoms that sound familiar to find an answer.

Now, near the end of my session with Samantha, after we've exhausted the usual pep talks and affirmations, I gather up my courage to ask about my internet diagnosis. "Do you think I'm bipolar?"

Samantha actually laughs. "You are not bipolar. I am sure of it," she says. And that's when she asks, "Do you want to know your diagnosis?"

I don't yell, "Lady, I've been seeing you for a fucking decade, yes I want to know my goddamn diagnosis," because Samantha taught me about appropriate communication. Thanks, Samantha.

Instead, I say, "Yes. Of course."

Something in her jaw becomes determined, and her gaze is direct. "You have complex PTSD from your childhood, and it manifests as persistent depression and anxiety. There's no way someone with your background couldn't have it," she says.

"Oh. Yeah, PTSD." Post-traumatic stress disorder. I had a crappy childhood, so I kinda figured that.

"Not just PTSD. Complex PTSD. The difference between regular PTSD and complex PTSD is that traditional PTSD is often associated with a moment of trauma. Sufferers of complex PTSD have undergone continual abuse—trauma that has occurred over a long period of time, over the course of years. Child abuse is a common cause of complex PTSD," she says. Then her eyes drift to the corner of the screen. "Oh—we're out of time! Let's continue this next week."

The first thing I do after our Skype window closes is bring up Google. I've never heard of complex PTSD. Surprisingly, there aren't that many results. I go from Wikipedia to a government page about C-PTSD as it relates to veterans. I read the list of symptoms. It is very long. And it is not so much

a medical document as it is a biography of my life: The difficulty regulating my emotions. The tendency to overshare and trust the wrong people. The dismal self-loathing. The trouble I have maintaining relationships. The unhealthy relationship with my abuser. The tendency to be aggressive but unable to tolerate aggression from others. It's all true. It's all me.

The more I read, the more every aspect of my personhood is reduced to deep diagnostic flaws. I hadn't understood how far the disease had spread. How complete its takeover of my identity was. The things I want. The things I love. The way I speak. My passions, my fears, my zits, my eating habits, the amount of whiskey I drink, the way I listen, and the things I see. Everything—everything, all of it—is infected. My trauma is literally pumping through my blood, driving every decision in my brain.

It is this totality that leaves me frantic with grief. For years I've labored to build myself a new life, something very different from how I was raised. But now, all of a sudden, every conflict I've encountered, every loss, every failure and foible in my life, can be traced back to its root: me. I am far from normal. I am the common denominator in the tragedies of my life. I am a textbook case of mental illness.

Well, this explains it all, I think. Of course I've been having trouble concentrating on my work. Of course so many people I've loved have left. Of course I was wrong to think I could walk into fancy institutions full of well-bred, well-educated people and succeed. Because the person with C-PTSD, the person who is painted here on the internet, is broken.

The orange walls of my office close in on me. I don't belong here. I don't belong anywhere. I try to stay another couple of hours at my desk in a desperate attempt to prove to myself that I am capable of a full workday, but I can't see my computer screen. My co-workers, laughing outside my door, sound like jackals. I grab my coat and rush out of the building, into the cold air, but even outside, I haven't escaped. With every step, one word echoes in my head: Broken. Broken. Broken.

For ten years I thought I could outrun my past. But today I realize that running isn't working. I need to do something else.

I need to fix this. Fix myself. To revisit my story, one that has until now relied on lies of omission, perfectionism, and false happy endings. I need to stop being an unreliable narrator. I need to look at myself, my behaviors, and my desires with an unflinching, meticulous eye. I need to tease apart the careful life I have crafted for myself, the one that is threatening to unravel at any minute.

And I know where I have to begin.

Every villain's redemption arc begins with their origin story.

PART I

CHAPTER 1

There are only four family movies that haven't been thrown away. I keep the tapes in the highest, farthest corner of my closet. I can't watch them—who even has a VCR anymore? Still, I keep them as the last surviving relics of my childhood, and at last, they have a purpose.

I've always known that I carry my past with me, but it exists in moods and flashes. A raised hand, a bitten tongue, a moment of terror. After my diagnosis, I find myself in need of the specifics. So I borrow a VCR and struggle with the puzzle of plugs and cords, then push one tape in.

The tape starts with Christmas. I see a four-year-old girl in a velvet dress, her little neck swallowed by an enormous white lace collar. She has thick, straight-across bangs and braided pigtails. She is me, but I barely recognize her. Her nose looks much wider than mine, her face rounder. And she seems happy—impossibly so. But I do remember the toys she opens, every one of them. Oh, I loved that blue magnifying glass, that Magic School Bus book, that shell-shaped turquoise Polly Pocket—whatever did I do with that? Where did all of it go?

The tape skips. Now she is kneeling on the floor of our living room with a packet filled with collaged pictures of vegetables. She is presenting a preschool project on the food pyramid, and I am surprised to find that I had a British accent. “Oranges have VITT-amin C,” the little girl announces with a smile, showing off two adorable dimples. I don't have those anymore, either.

Now it is Easter, and she is hunting for plastic eggs, crawling around the couch and filling up her little basket. The house I grew up in looks unfamiliar, too—it is sparse, nothing on the walls; our living room furniture is awkwardly small. I count backward and realize that at this point we had been in the United States for less than two years. We hadn't yet filled our rooms with painted Chinese screens and tchotchkes from Country Clutter, framed batik prints, and an upright piano. All we had was the rattan furniture we'd shipped from Malaysia, covered in floral cushions too thin to hide an egg underneath.

The scene changes for the final time, and the camera turns to my mother and the girl. They are on our front lawn near our rose bushes, which are in full pink and yellow bloom. My mother is pretty in an oversize button-down shirt, jeans, and bare feet. She looks so calm and confident, and she is blowing bubbles. The girl chases the bubbles, giggling breathlessly, running in unsteady circles in the grass. Finally she yells, "I want to try, I want to try," and my mother ignores her for a bit.

My adult self is fully prepared to judge my mother in this video. To hate her. *She won't let me. She thinks I can't do it.* But then she does lower the wand to my lips. I blow too hard and the soap splatters. She dips the wand again, lovingly coaxing me to try until I get it right, and a single bubble floats into the sky. The scene feels like too much and not enough. Wait—who is this woman? What is this carefree life? This isn't how it was. This isn't the full story. Show me more. But the tape cuts out, and that's it. Just fuzzy static.

—

My family didn't come to America to escape. We came to thrive.

I was two and a half when we left Malaysia and settled in California. My father worked in tech, and his company gave us a down payment for a home in Silicon Valley as part of our relocation package. For my father, it was a return.

Growing up, my father was the smartest kid in the small tin-mining town of Ipoh. His family was poor, and what little money they had, my grandfather often gambled away. My father didn't take after him. He had brains and grit. He solved all the problems in his math and English textbooks, then went to the library, checked out all of *their* textbooks, and solved the problems in those, too. And he wasn't just an obsessive brain. He tumbled with other brown-skinned boys on the rugby field. He was both well-liked and brilliant: a promising young man.

But when he wrote to American colleges asking about scholarship options, they told him not to waste his time—they didn't offer scholarships for international undergraduates.

Then my father got a perfect 1600 on the SATs. Back then, this score signaled academic virtuosity. That 1600 was his ticket out of poverty and out of Malaysia. His older sister, who'd married well, loaned him the money to apply to colleges in the United States. He got into every single school, and every college offered him a full ride.

My father, who had spent his lifetime immersed in tropical heat, was intimidated by the brochures the Ivy League sent him, filled with images of students swaddled in scarves and coats amid frosted old buildings or auburn leaves. In contrast, the image on the brochure for one prestigious Californian school featured students wearing tank tops and shorts, playing Frisbee on a green lawn. That's why he chose it.

"You could have been an East Coast girl in another world," he often said. "You are only a California girl because of that damn Frisbee."

After graduation, my father's job took him around the world for several years before he returned to Malaysia to settle down. He met my mother at the bank; she was the teller. She was pretty and charming, and he was twenty-six—ancient, really. His mother kept telling him he needed to find someone. They dated for all of two months before they got married.

Then I was born. That year, Malaysia's king clubbed a caddie to death for laughing at a bad putt and suffered no consequences. That violence and corruption scared my father. We are ethnically Chinese—one of the ethnic and religious minority groups that face discrimination in Malaysia. When my

father was a kid, his uncle, mother, and eldest sister were living in Kuala Lumpur when a race riot broke out, and hundreds of Chinese people were massacred. His sister left her office barely in time to find a safe house in a Chinese neighborhood, where the family hid for days—a friend with connections with the police had to bring them food so they wouldn't go hungry. Outside, children on school buses were slaughtered on their way to class.

My father knew America's freedoms and luxuries. And he knew that my future was constrained in Malaysia. He knew my job and education prospects would eventually be limited if we stayed—that I'd likely have to go abroad in order to follow in his ambitious footsteps. Why not now?

And so we moved into a beautiful home in San Jose with a deck and a pool, near good schools (though we lied about our address so I could attend the best). My father bought us a Ford station wagon; my mother purchased matching Talbots sweater sets. My parents decorated our new house with our old Malaysian furniture, but they bought me a wrought-iron, American queen bed. It was fitting for a girl they named *Stephanie*, wasn't it? They chose the name because it means "the one who wears the crown."

—

On Saturdays, my parents took advantage of our comfortable suburban neighborhood. They took me to The Tech Museum of Innovation or the Children's Discovery Museum or Happy Hollow Park; my mother spent lots of time interrogating the other PTA moms, researching the most educational activities in our area. When we'd exhausted our options, we'd host a barbecue by the pool in our backyard for our fellow Malaysian expat friends and their children. My mother made honey-grilled chicken and always saved the drumsticks for me.

Saturdays were for fun. Sundays were for penance.

On Sundays, we went to church. My father wore a tie, my mother and I wore matching floral dresses with giant globular shoulder puffs, and we sang "Shout to the Lord" with our all-white congregation. Then we went to New

Tung Kee, the Chinese-Vietnamese equivalent of a diner, and I'd order No. 1: combination rice stick noodle soup. Once we got home, my mother would sit me down in front of a yellow spiral-bound notebook with my handwriting on the front: *Diary (GERNAL)*. One Sunday, she wrote this prompt:

Please write about your time at the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk. What did you do? What did you see? Make your journal as interesting as possible, starting from the morning and ending in the evening. Write neatly!

It took me more than an hour to complete my assignment, even though I only needed to fill one page. I was six years old and kept getting distracted—playing with our beaded place mats, poking the little felt llamas and tomatoes on the Peruvian arpillera on our wall, drawing elaborate comics on the opposite page. But eventually I dragged my attention to the prompt.

Hiya, folks! I wrote. This was a departure. Usually I started each entry with *Dear Diary*, but today I was feeling voicey.

On Saturday I went to the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk. First, we had to get in line so we could get some tickets. First we went on the Cave Train ride. It was not so scary. We were going through a time machine when we saw cave men dancing, fishing, washing and fighting bears. Then I went on a Ferris Wheel. It was quite tall so my mom had to go with me on it.

Hmm, I thought. I'd better add some excitement. Something to show Mommy how much I loved the adventure she went through all the trouble to take me on.

Then I played two frog games. I finished one frog and got a prize! Then I went on a thing called trampoline thing. I did a flip on it! Then I did it again! The lady there said I did it very good. Well I had quite a fun time!

To cap it all off, I thought I should draw attention to my saucy little address. I noted: *Hey! Did ya know the beginning here is different? I just did that for fun. Love, Stephanie.*

I looked over everything, and it seemed pretty good. I called my mother over. She sat in her chair and placed the notebook in front of her, holding a red pen. I assumed my proper place—standing at attention to her left, hands folded in front of me—and watched as she began the edit. She dotted my work with fierce red X's, circles, and strikethroughs. Each progressive pen

mark was a punch to the chest, until I was barely breathing. *Oh no. I'm so dumb. Oh no.*

At the end of the entry, my mother sighed. She wrote an assessment at the bottom of the page:

There can only be one "first." You are still writing too much "Then." Then I went on a ferris wheel. Then I played two frog games. Try to use other words. And I did it well. Very well. Not good!

Then she slapped a large grade at the top: *C-minus*. She turned to me. "The last two entries, I already told you to write *then* less. I told you to be more interesting. Are you slow? And what are you talking about here at the end, about whatever you did for fun? I don't get it."

"I'm sorry," I said, but she was already reaching into her drawer, so I stuck out my hand. She raised the plastic ruler above her head and brought it down on my open palm: *thwack*. I didn't cry. If she saw any tears, she'd call me pathetic and do it again. She closed the notebook. "You'll redo this entry tomorrow."

The point of this journal was to improve my writing skills, but it was also to preserve my well-curated childhood. She hoped that as an adult, I would flip through this notebook fondly, letting it fill me with sentimental memories. But as I read through it now, it appears her mission miscarried. I have no recollection of the Santa Cruz trip, or this lion dance, or that trip to the beach in Mendocino. The only thing I remember vividly is that clear plastic ruler on my palm.

—

The theme of the trip was "Growing Up," which, we would soon learn, meant "Puberty."

Our Girl Scout troop had never done anything like it before; we'd never taken our mothers on a cabin trip. But this was a special time, a time for firsts. We were eleven, and a lot of things were changing.

Our whole troop drove up to the cabin on Saturday afternoon, and after dinner, we spent the evening playing games. All of us played Pictionary