Anne was born early in a violent act of surgical intervention—blood, tissue, and fluids spilling out of the fertile cavity, sucked away by surgical probes and gauze sponges. Two pounds, nine ounces of screaming beginning. Dark hair, dark, wise eyes. Long fingers puckered from seven months of floating in the warm amniotic swimming pool of her birth mother’s womb.

The first time I saw my adopted daughter she was six weeks old—still less than three pounds in weight. Before we could meet, I was required to undergo ritualistic cleansing, sanctified by antibiotic soap and clothed in sterile robes, with my feet sheathed to prevent contamination of her sacred space. I bowed my head to peer into the protective isolette, trembling fingers tracing a pattern on the clear Plexiglas. Tiny and perfect, she seemed unimpressed by me. But when I spoke, she turned her head toward my voice and opened her eyes. And, in their depth I found my home.

For the first ten years of her life, she lived with a burning passion. She burst through childhood with uncontained joy for life, reluctant to sleep for fear of missing even a moment, and resentful of the exhaustion that tugged at her tiny body and dragged her into unconsciousness. She embraced everything and everyone, tasted everything around her from air to puppy fur to dirt. Fascinated with tiny things, gently embracing potato bugs, nurturing worms, exploring her body, her toes, her elbows. The air around her was carbonated with life.

Had I been paying attention, I would have seen the first leak of life in sixth grade.

It was then that she stepped back from the edge for the first time since her birth. She struggled with math, complained of persistent stomachaches. School spiraled downward. Daily illness kept her from participating, yet doctors couldn’t find anything wrong. A litany of medical tests and exams showed nothing but a normal kid. But still she slipped away, depression stealing her light.

We tried a different school—her pain escalated. The wilderness of her soul dissolved, an angry mist obscuring the space we once shared. For her, the anger was a protective storm, keeping out prying eyes and softening her landscape with a blanket of dark clouds. For me, it was isolation. Alienation. Excommunication.

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In exasperation, I bent over to pick up (again) the mess that had become the floor of Anne-Marie’s bedroom. I grabbed one of several crumpled up pieces of paper, and unwadded it just to be sure it wasn’t another missed school assignment before lofting it to the garbage bag at my feet. I recognized the loopy handwriting as hers, even though the words were foreign. They spoke of rivers of blood, of “writing pain” with the slice of a razor, of draining her body of pain as the blood traced a path to freedom.


I put my arms around the wildness that had become my daughter—an ecosystem no longer familiar. Together we trekked the pain carved into her forearms, her thighs, her shins. Some cuts were still raw and fresh, others aged to gossamer lines. Geometric designs. Concentric lines that spoke a language beyond my comprehension. I looked to her eyes, seeking to meet her in the sacred ground that had always been our commons. But I was not permitted in, barred by her shame.

II. EXCAVATION – ANNE AT FOURTEEN

Anne-Marie tried to kill herself today. Not just for show, or to elicit the “respect” of peers who found kinship in darkness and depression. She did it for real.

She carefully found her brachial pulse, and marked it with an “X,” a treasure map of sorts. She loaded a new razor blade into the box cutter, and like a pirate with a key, tried over and over to open the artery and let the richness of her life escape. I found her sobbing on her bed, frustration seething in her inability to control this one act, to make her pain stop.


I was alone. She was alone. I did not have the tools to bridge the river that flowed between my precious daughter and the rest of the world. She was barely visible now, alone on that far shore. My heart slowed.

For ten weeks, she remained physically and emotionally separate from me, as a resident of an inpatient rehabilitation program. But over time the angry run-off slowed, and I was finally able to bring her out of rehab, and into the open space of the rest of her life. We paused just outside the locking gate, arms around each other, tears in my eyes, sparkles in hers. “It’s so good to be happy,” she exclaimed. Indeed.
She has learned to control her own demons with a deliberateness and awareness that far exceed her fourteen years of life. The scars on her body are healed now, although when the light is right, you can still see them like pale luminescent ghosts.

She smiles. And the river that isolated her seeps into the ground, drying up like a creek bed after a flash flood. Sometimes, we can almost reach each other. Soon, I’ll be home again.