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An Excerpt from the Script *Loving Crazy*

Theresa Carilli

A few years ago, I became intrigued with the notion of oral memoir or what I call “performative memoir.” Memoir has become a popular literary genre for celebrities and artists to tell the tales of their lives. Unlike traditional memoir that focuses on describing the unique stories and experiences of an individual’s life, performative memoir shares stories mostly about the individual’s relationships with others, using language that is orally engaging so as to bring the audience into her world.

To date, I have worked on three performative memoirs. While working on these performative memoirs, I observed several specific characteristics. When attempting to create a visceral experience for the audience, the performative memoirist uses nostalgic language, language that stirs the senses and evokes an experience that is understood through the body, not just through the mind. Sometimes this means writing short sentences, repeating phrases, and creating scenes by embodying characters who hold an opinion about the circumstances at hand. Sometimes this means straightforward narrative which demonstrates some type of struggle with one’s identity—whether that be ethnicity, race, sexuality, or class.

I would like to illustrate performative memoir through the introduction of my piece, “*Loving Crazy*,” a performance text that delves into the story of my relationship with my musician and composer sister who was diagnosed with schizophrenia.

Loving Crazy

I learned to “love crazy.” Loving crazy means that you accept a willingness to love without boundaries. The individuals you love operate in their own worlds of madness. That madness becomes your sense of reality. When you are born into this world, understanding madness is akin to learning how to walk or feed yourself. You become a casualty to a world that makes no sense to others, and you give yourself to it, willingly because that is all you know. You love them. You hope they love you. And the space in between their worlds and yours narrows as you

begin to understand the effects such relationships have on you. I learned to love crazy. I don't know any other way. To me, madness is the highest form of feeling.

VOICES:

ANNE: Creative genius thrives when raised in an environment of neurosis and violence.

FATHER: I just wish she would die. I wish she would die.

MOTHER: I never knew what it meant to raise someone so gifted.

ME: Creative genius thrives when raised in an environment of neurosis and violence.

May 19, 2013. Sunday morning. My sister Angela calls to tell me that my oldest sister Anne has died. I sit in a chair for twenty minutes and try not to think about it. I am sad and relieved and ecstatic and sick and terrified. This is my grandmother's birthday. I never met my grandmother Angelina. She was my mother's mother. She died at the age of 37 from a stroke. Instead of Anne, all I can think about is my grandmother—her life, her struggles, her pain. An immigrant woman, she worked at home as a seamstress while raising her four children during the depression. My mother was her second daughter and nothing to be proud of, for only sons mattered in her Italian family. My mother told me countless stories about her mother. She was stately and admired and funny and kind. She was in an arranged marriage, having left her home and her true love in Sicily. When I visited her birthplace, I learned that her father just didn't want to support her and sent her to America. She had no say in this decision. She had no voice. She had to accept the hand she was dealt. My mother was part of that hand. She was not her mother's favorite. She was whiny and plump, and she adored animals. She wasn't intellectual but was often followed home by schoolboys who would stand outside and attempt to woo her. She told me two stories about her childhood and youth that I loved. When she was very young, her aunt took in a couple of sickly birds from the street. Her aunt told her not to go into the basement and to leave the birds alone, but as soon as she left for the store, my mother hopped downstairs and crushed one of the birds accidentally. She couldn't breathe, and she was overcome with grief. Her aunt, she claimed, was not angry with her because the sorrow she expressed was lesson enough.

My sister died today, and all I can think about is the grandmother I never knew, the woman I wanted to love, not my sister whom I did

love, a person I knew, a person who shredded the interior of my spirit—the kind of pain you feel when you realize that life will continue. The person who hurt me the most in my life. The person whom I felt I could never live without and then learned to live without. My sister died today, and I have to go grocery shopping or clean the car or work on an assignment. I cannot face it. I fear that I will never be able to face it.

My mother used to tell me another story, one that was about her first job. She was a secretary at a prestigious organization where she worked for the top boss. She was just out of high school and pretended to be more experienced than she was. Of course, she was let go for her lack of experience, which to her was very humiliating. She didn't have a mother to console her and to help her understand her mistake—she had to learn on her own—her mother had died when she was 15 years old. She had to wear black for one solid year and hated it. Her grief never truly subsided. Meanwhile, she met my father and six years later they got married. She encouraged my father to attend law school in spite of his history as a felon bootlegger. With his bad record, it would be difficult for him to become a lawyer, but maybe he could work at some other law-related profession. My mother was supporting him when she became pregnant. During that time, she gave birth to my sister Anna Sebastiana, named after my father's mother, but everyone called her Anne. When Anne was a small child, my mother had to have a neighbor woman look after her so that she could keep on working. One day as my mother was getting Anne ready to take her to the neighbor, Anne pleaded, "Please Mommy... please no. I don't want to go." In time, my mother learned that the daycare worker had left my sister sitting on a cold stoop all day long. My mother tried to do the best by her family in spite of my father's infidelities and her frustration with his inability to hold down a job.

Every time my sister Anne was being obnoxious, my mother would make up a story as to why she thought Anne had problems. Having had little guidance, my mother's grief and anxiety overwhelmed her. Raising Anne became so difficult for her that one day at a family function, when six-year-old Anne started behaving in an unbearable manner, my mother smeared a piece of pizza all over her face in front of friends and relatives. Anne's difficult behavior had become too much for her to cope with.

Were these scary and bizarre experiences the instrument that molded my sister, made her into who she had become, a mentally ill musician, an old spirit with a tremendous amount of clairvoyance, an

individual on the dole, someone who revels in others' suffering? Was this a result of *smear*ed pizza or a *cold stoop*? What made her the kind of person you can take so easily into your heart only to have her pull apart your every ventricle, every artery, until you feel as though you do not have any ability to love anyone again? What made her that person whom you spent every waking moment thinking about, worrying about, caring about, feeling like you didn't do enough for, like you did too much, like you have a wound that will never heal and that will grow into a gaping hole that you will fall into someday?

When my mother passed away, Anne, who was a big breasted woman, appeared at the funeral looking flat chested on one side, as though she'd had a uni-lateral mastectomy and was proud of it. "I'm dying," she told my sisters. Anne told so many lies throughout her life that we could never separate reality from her fiction. As an attention seeker, she would do anything. So, when my sister called me to tell me that Anne was in hospice, I was surprised, shocked, and bewildered.

VOICES:

ME: Bullshit you're dying. How did you work that out? Do they just take anyone into a hospice these days? Bullshit you're dying.

ANNE: I only have two years to live, five years to live, ten years to live.

ME: You've been dying your whole life. What makes you think I would believe you now?

ANNE: Because I'm really dying.

ME: Like hell you are, you would do anything for attention. You would do anything to get me back into your life so I could take care of you, be your servant, agree with everything you say. Yes, you're a genius. Yes, I don't matter. Yes, you do.

For the next two months, I spoke with my youngest sister about going to visit Anne in hospice. I wanted to say goodbye if she truly was in hospice, but I didn't want her abuse anymore. I didn't want to hear about my negligence and selfishness. Back and forth, my youngest sister and I talked. All the conversations we had were about Anne's reality. Was she or wasn't she crazy?

On May 19, 2013, my grandmother's birthday, my sister called to tell me that Anne had died. I didn't know how to feel. My mother

always said that Sinatra's "My Way" was Anne's theme song. She did it her way and suffered for it. She had many people throughout her life who cared for her. She had a unique ability to make me laugh. Her wisdom included the beliefs that negative energy appears very strongly when you are just about to transition into something wonderful and that creativity was a gift bestowed upon the truly chosen. I spent my life in fear of becoming crazy, that craziness would take hold of me one day, and I would be helpless. Instead, I worked. I worked and worked so that I would never be called crazy. I cannot stop working. I fear that if I stop working, crazy will take over me and I will become my sister Anne.