It’s important to say the hardest things first, but it’s also important to gain trust and then do it. When I chose my first sponsor, Bea, I was still in Al-Anon, which I attended once a week for a year before going to my first official closed AA meeting, and it took a while for me to work my way up to telling her things. This is called a fifth step and it isn’t as bad as it sounds. It comes after the fourth, a thorough housecleaning, an inventory of your former life. It hopefully will keep you from drinking again if you’re an alcoholic and from trying to either save or murder an alcoholic if you’re married to one. It’s like confession, but without the penance, and without the word sin.

You’re as sick as your secrets, my sponsor used to say.

My most embarrassing secret at the time was that I’d masturbated—just once—right after Clio was born. Harper caught
me and got incredibly jealous and pissed off. He said I’d cheated on him. (I can’t believe I bought that one.)

I had another secret about the two of us being drunk after his brother’s wedding and I didn’t want to have sex but I let him do it anyway after I’d told him no emphatically and he was too altered to listen. I hate to say it, but that was it for me in the sex department for a long time. I was twenty-one. We’d been married nine months. I never enjoyed sex with Harper again.

When I was telling Bea these things we were in her kitchen in Croton-on-Hudson, and her husband kept coming in and rooting through the drawers. I think he was fixing something outside, maybe his lawn mower. I thought she would ask him to give us privacy, but she just said: Oh, don’t mind him, and after a while, I didn’t.

I’ve done much worse things since that first fourth and fifth step, and I’ve done them dry. The year I was trying desperately not to drink for Harper’s sake, going to maybe one open AA meeting a week with him in addition to my own Al-Anon meeting, I scared the hell out of myself and five-year-old Clio on several occasions. I’d replaced my daily bottle(s) of wine with a half-gallon of Breyer’s Vanilla Fudge. That’s a lot of sugar, if you do the math. But it wasn’t enough to keep the crazies I’d experience at cocktail hour at bay. It may have even caused a few crazies, that sugar, since I found out later I had a hefty intolerance for the sweet stuff as well as for the wet stuff.

I’d get this physical sensation like someone had pushed me onto a roller coaster. My brain was suddenly sitting in a car on the Wild Mouse, and it ripped me around and around until the end of the ride, when I’d land at the bottom, regain consciousness, and stand in horror at the damage I’d done or almost done.

One time I told Clio to take Sophie upstairs, and I demolished the little rocking chair my mother had given her, throwing it around the room until it smashed on the floor. Mostly, though, I yelled. My
nerves had no coating left. They were shot and I knew it. I was an explosive confection.

I’d sit in our den at night and think about Clio. I could hurt her by accident, I thought, and no one would believe how much I loved her. What was going to stop me from driving us all into the river?

A few years later, after the divorce, my parish priest Father Damien counseled me that I should learn how to swear for therapeutic reasons. (Even after the effects of the Wild Mouse dissipated, I couldn’t find within me, much less express, what Damien called appropriate anger.) We practiced saying hell and damn in his office, firsts for me. When I heard a priest say fuck I couldn’t believe we weren’t struck down on the spot. And when I accomplished it myself with my hands over my head for protection, my dead lace-curtain relatives sat up in their graves tsk tsking.

Eventually I accepted the value of profanity. I taught my daughters that an aptly expressed four-letter word might save a life. I laughed when people used words like friggin’ to replace the real thing.

Profanity sounded better and better to me as the years went by. After the divorce Clio and Sophie were the only kids on the block with a single parent, and the only ones who were allowed profanity at home, which was Father Damien’s bright idea. I decided when and how it was appropriate, and when it might hurt. We didn’t use it lightly. We savored it when we used it, congratulating one another on a metaphor well placed. I wanted my girls to grow up without a mouse in their brains that would uncurl someday and morph into the rodent version of Dr. Hyde.

Clio, Sophie, and I loved the song “Mockingbird” by Carly Simon and James Taylor. We’d dance around the living room, bumping butts and holding fake mics. One day Sophie, who was three then, said, Play Fuckingbird, Mama!

Clio and I laughed so hard we thought we’d fucking die.