Dorothy Allison

Author of Bastard Out of Carolina

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A DUTTON BOOK
"LET ME TELL YOU A STORY," I used to whisper to my sisters, hiding with them behind the red-dirt bean hills and row on row of strawberries. My sisters’ faces were thin and sharp, with high cheekbones and restless eyes, like my mama’s face, my aunt Dot’s, my own. Peasants, that’s what we are and always have been. Call us the lower orders, the great unwashed, the working class, the poor, proletariat, trash, lowlife and scum. I can make a story out of it, out of us. Make it pretty or sad, laughable or haunting. Dress it up with legend and aura and romance.

"Let me tell you a story," I’d begin, and start another one. When we were small, I could catch my sisters the way they caught butterflies, capture their attention and almost make them believe that all I said was true. "Let me tell you about the women who ran away. All those legendary women who ran
away.” I’d tell about the witch queens who cooked their enemies in great open pots, the jewels that grow behind the tongues of water moccasins. After a while the deepest satisfaction was in the story itself, greater even than the terror in my sisters’ faces, the laughter, and, God help us, the hope.

The constant query of my childhood was “Where you been?” The answer, “Nowhere.” Neither my stepfather nor my mother believed me. But no punishment could discover another answer. The truth was that I did go nowhere—nowhere in particular and everywhere imaginable. I walked and told myself stories, walked out of our subdivision and into another, walked all the way to the shopping center and then back. The flush my mama suspected hid an afternoon of shoplifting or vandalism was simple embarrassment, because when I walked, I talked—story-talked, out loud—assuming identities I made up. Sometimes I was myself arguing loudly as I could never do at home. Sometimes I became people I had seen on television or read about in books, went places I’d barely heard of, did things that no one I knew had ever done, particularly things that girls were not supposed to do. In the world as I remade it, nothing was forbidden; everything was possible.

I’ll tell you a story and maybe you’ll believe me.

There’s a laboratory in the basement of the Greenville County General Hospital, I told my sisters. They take the babies down there. If you’re poor—from the wrong family, the wrong color, the wrong side of town—they mess with you, alter your brain. That was what happened. That was it.

You believe me?

I’m a storyteller. I’ll work to make you believe me. Throw in some real stuff, change a few details, add the certainty of outrage. I know the use of fiction in a world of hard truth, the way fiction can be a harder piece of truth. The story of what happened, or what did not happen but should have—that story can become a curtain drawn shut, a piece of insulation, a disguise, a razor, a tool that changes every time it is used and sometimes becomes something other than we intended.

The story becomes the thing needed.

Two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is what it means to have no loved version of your life but the one you make.
LET ME TELL YOU A STORY. If I could convince myself, I can convince you. But you were not there when I began. You were not the one I was convincing. When I began there were just nightmares and need and stubborn determination.

When I began there was only the suspicion that making up the story as you went along was the way to survive. And if I know anything, I know how to survive, how to remake the world in story.

But where am I in the stories I tell? Not the storyteller but the woman in the story, the woman who believes in story. What is the truth about her? She was one of them, one of those legendary women who ran away. A witch queen, a warrior maiden, a mother with a canvas suitcase, a daughter with broken bones. Women run away because they must. I ran because if I had not, I would have died. No one told me that you take your world with you, that running becomes a habit, that the secret to running is to know why you run and where you are going—and to leave behind the reason you run.

My mama did not run away. My aunt Dot and aunt Grace and cousin Billie with her near dozen children—they did not run. They learned resilience and determination and the cost of hard compromises. None of them ever intended to lose their lives or their children’s lives, to be trapped by those hard compromises and ground down until they no longer knew who they were, what they had first intended. But it happened. It happened over and over again.

Aunt Dot was the one who said it. She said, “Lord, girl, there’s only two or three things I know for sure.” She put her head back, grinned, and made a small impatient noise. Her eyes glittered as bright as sun reflecting off the scales of a cottonmouth’s back. She spat once and shrugged. “Only two or three things. That’s right,” she said. “Of course it’s never the same things, and I’m never as sure as I’d like to be.”
Where I was born—Greenville, South Carolina—smelled like nowhere else I've ever been. Cut wet grass, split green apples, baby shit and beer bottles; cheap makeup and motor oil. Everything was ripe, everything was rotting. Hound dogs butted my calves. People shouted in the distance; crickets boomed in my ears. That country was beautiful. I swear to you, the most beautiful place I've ever been. Beautiful and terrible. It is the country of my dreams and the country of my nightmares: a pure pink and blue sky, red dirt, white clay, and all that endless green—willows and dogwood and firs going on for miles.

Two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is the way you can both hate and love something you are not sure you understand.
Our teacher fell back on what seemed an utterly safe choice. We were to make our family trees, interviewing relatives and doing posters to show the class.

“You can check family Bibles for the names of previous generations, and if you’ve got pictures, you could glue them on the posters.” She blew hard on a strand of hair that had fallen over her right eye. Teaching was clearly not what she had expected. “Or you can make drawings or even cut pictures out of magazines to represent people—anything you like. This is where you get to be creative. Make something your families are going to want to keep.”

We watched as she rummaged through her skirt pockets until she found a hairpin. She spoke while using both hands to tuck her hair back into a rough bun. “Any questions?”

“She wants you to what?” Mama’s tone was pure exasperation when I came home that afternoon. She’d been talking with Aunt Dot, spreading clothes on the dining room table, getting them all sprinkled and rolled up before settling down to ironing. Now she looked like she was ready to throw something.
"This girl ain't from around here. Is she?"
From the other side of the table Aunt Dot gave Mama a quick grin over the rim of her coffee cup. "I can just see all those children putting down Mama's name, and first daddy's name and second daddy's name. Could get complicated."

"Dot!"

"Well, you know I'm right. That brand-new teacher ain't gonna last out the month. Around here parentage is even more dangerous than politics."

"Why is it so dangerous?"

"Girl, you getting too big to ask silly questions."

"Well, I need to make lists. I need people's names. Where's our family Bible?"

"Our what? Lord, Lord." Aunt Dot waved one hand in the air. "Girl is definitely not from around here."

"We don't have a family Bible?"

"Child, some days we don't even have a family."

"Dot, don't get started." Mama folded the sleeves of a damp shirt in over the button front, and then, gathering from the collar, rolled the whole into a closed tube. "And you just put down what you know."
Two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is just this—if we cannot name our own we are cut off at the root, our hold on our lives as fragile as seed in a wind.
Maybe we *are* related. Among my mama’s photos there was one woman with a face similar to Lucy’s, another handsome woman with a dark cloud of hair, one of my mama’s aunts, I think. But Lucy’s drawl is Barstow, not Greenville. She spent five years in Bakersfield. Now she roasts turkey stuffed with jalapeño peppers, deep-fries artichoke hearts, and loves to make a salad of sliced pineapple and avocado.

“Where’d you learn to cook like this?” I asked her one afternoon.

“Family talent,” she tells me. “Just picked it up as I went along.” And she tries to get me to put a little whiskey in my fruit juice or at least have a beer to keep her company. The stories she tells then take me back three decades and would scare me sober if I let her make me drink.

My mama never told me stories. She might repeat something someone had said at work that day, or something she had said—lessons in how to talk back, stand up for myself, and tell someone off. But behind her blunt account of the day’s conversation was a mystery: the rest of her life.

Mostly my aunts respected Mama’s sense of propriety. They wouldn’t tell stories she didn’t want them to tell, nothing of my father or the husband she had loved and lost. Only my grandmother was shameless.

Mattie Lee Gibson would tell people anything. Sometimes she even told the truth. She was the one told me I had an uncle who killed his wife, but said she didn’t know if she believed his story about it, how he’d walked in on the woman in bed with another man. She was the one told me my mama had been married three times. My mama worked forty years as a waitress, teasing quarters out of truckers, and dimes out of...
hairdressers, pouring extra coffee for a nickel, or
telling an almost true story for half a dollar.

"Get them talking," she told me when she
took me to work with her. "Or just smiling. Get
them to remember who you are. People who recog-
nize you will think twice before walking away and
leaving nothing by the plate."

Mama was never confused about who she
was or what she was offering across that counter.
"It's just a job. People need their lunch served with
a smile and a quick hand. Don't need to know your
business—if you're tired or sick or didn't get any
sleep for worrying. Just smile and get them what
they need."

Three bouts of cancer and half a dozen
other serious illnesses—not to mention three
daughters and four grandchildren who courted
trouble with every turn of the moon—but few of
Mama's customers knew how stubbornly she had
to put on that smile for them. She was an actress
in the theater of true life, so good that no one.
suspected what was hidden behind the artfully ap-
plied makeup and carefully pinned hairnet.

"You should have been in the movies, like
Barbara Stanwyck or Susan Hayward," I told her
once as we looked at those pictures of her as a girl.

She just shook her head. "Life ain't the
movies," she told me.

Mama always said I was tenderhearted, I
trusted too easily and would have to learn things
the hard way. She was right, of course, and the
thing I learned was the thing she knew intuitively:
the use of charm, the art of acting, the way to turn
misery into something people find understandable
or sympathetic. Theater was what Mama knew and
I learned.

Theater is standing up terrified and convinc-
ing people you know what you're doing—eating
oysters with a smile when the only fish you've
known has been canned tuna or catfish fried in
cornmeal. Theater is going to bars with strangers
whose incomes are four times your own; it's wear-
ing denim when everyone around you is in silk, or
silk when they're all wearing leather. Theater is
talking about sex with enormous enthusiasm when
nobody's ever let you in their pants. Theater is pre-
tending you know what you're doing when you
don't know anything for certain and what you do
know seems to be changing all the time.

Six days out of seven I am a creation, some-
one who relies on luck, lust, and determination.
The problem is that I know sometimes luck doesn't
hold. That's when I become my mama—a woman who could charm time out of bill collectors, sympathy out of sheriffs, and love out of a man who had no heart to share.

The tragedy of the men in my family was silence, a silence veiled by boasting and jokes. If you didn't look close you might miss the sharp glint of pain in their eyes, the restless angry way they gave themselves up to fate.

My uncles went to jail like other boys go to high school. They took up girls like other people choose a craft. In my mama's photos they stare out directly, uncompromising, arms crossed or braced on their knees. I thought them beautiful and frightening, as dangerous for those quick endearing grins as for those fast muscled arms, too tall, too angry, and grown up way too soon. I remember my cousins as boys who seemed in a matter of weeks to become hard-faced men. Their eyes pulled in and closed over. Their smiles became sharp, their hands always open and ready to fight. They boasted of girls they'd had and men they'd get, ass they'd kick and trouble they'd make, talked so big and mean it was impossible to know what they meant and what they didn't. They wanted legend and adventure, wanted the stories told about the uncles to be put aside for stories about them.

"Just boys," Mattie Lee said of them. And so they remained all their lives.

Mama always loved the pictures of her mama and the twins, grandsons who towered over Mattie Lee. In one snapshot they were braced elbow to elbow, each cradling a newborn baby girl, and in their outside arms, held as tenderly as the infants, rifles extending up into the sky.

Sitting in a honky-tonk, in a clean white shirt and polished boots, hair slicked back and...
teeth shining white in a dark tanned face, my uncle is the same man who leans on his knee in another photo, bare arms streaked with dirt, and a cloth cap covering his sweat-grimed brow.

"An't he a sexy man?" my cousin Billie teased. "Kind of evil-minded and quick to please. All them girlfriends half his age, and that reputation of his, like no woman ever turned him down. Wouldn't think he'd wind up living in a one-room trailer in his sister's backyard. Where'd they go, all them girlfriends and good times? What happened, you think, to that man everyone wanted to bed or marry?"

I fingered the photo and remembered one night when I was a tiny girl sleeping on the couch with my head pillow on Mama's thigh. I had woken up to her whispering and shifting on that creaky old sofa, the taint of whiskey and tobacco smoke telling me that someone was there, and the hoarse sobs that followed confusing me, for I had never before heard my uncle cry.

"What am I gonna do?" he had said then. "Ruth, I can't stand this. I don't want to live without her. I don't think I can."

She had pulled his head into her neck, hugging him close and whispering, "You'll be all right," she said.

"Yes," he said. "I know, yes. But in the middle of the night, it feels like my heart is coming out of my chest."

She kissed his forehead, said only, "I worry about you." He shook his head hard, making her flinch from his sudden movement.

"You afraid of me?" he demanded, and she shook her head. But for a moment something burned in the cool night air.

"I just worry," she said again.

"Don't worry about me." He ran his hands down his face as if he were not actually wiping away tears, then pushed himself up off the table.

"Hell, I'm a man. I can handle it."

His voice was gravel rough. He was still a handsome man but at that moment he reminded me of a painting in the Sunday school lesson.
LET ME TELL YOU about what I have never been allowed to be. Beautiful and female. Sexed and sexual. I was born trash in a land where the people all believe themselves natural aristocrats. Ask any white Southerner. They'll take you back two generations, say, "Yeah, we had a plantation." The hell we did.

I have no memories that can be bent so easily. I know where I come from, and it is not that part of the world. My family has a history of death and murder, grief and denial, rage and ugliness—the women of my family most of all.

The women of my family were measured, manlike, sexless, bearers of babies, burdens, and contempt. My family? The women of my family? We are the ones in all those photos taken at mining disasters, floods, fires. We are the ones in the background with our mouths open, in print dresses or drawstring pants and collarless smocks, ugly and old and exhausted. Solid, stolid, wide-hipped baby machines. We were all wide-hipped and predestined. Wide-faced meant stupid. Wide hands marked workhorses with dull hair and tired eyes, thumbing through magazines full of women so different from us they could have been another species.

I remember standing on the porch with my aunt Maudy brushing out my hair; I was feeling loved and safe and happy. My aunt turned me around and smoothed my hair down, looked me in
the eye, smiled, and shook her head. "Lucky you're smart," she said.

Brown-toothed, then toothless, my aunt Dot showed me what I could expect.

"You're like me," she announced when she saw my third-grade school picture. "Got that nothing-gonna-stop-you look about you, girl."

I studied the picture. All I saw was another grinning girl in dark-framed glasses, missing a tooth.

"No, look." She produced a picture I would find later among Mama's treasures. In this one Aunt Dot was a smooth-skinned teenager with a wide jaw and a straightforward glare, sturdy and fearless at fifteen as she would be three decades later.

"I see," I assured her, keeping my head down and away from her demanding eyes.

What I saw was a woman who had never been beautiful and never allowed herself to care. When she found me once, red-faced and tearful, brooding over rude boys who shouted insults and ran away, she told me to wipe my face and pay no attention.

"It never changes," she said in her gravelly voice. "Men and boys, they all the same. Talk about us like we dogs, bitches sprung full-grown on the world, like we were never girls, never little babies in
our daddy’s arms. Turn us into jokes ’cause we get worn down and ugly. Never look at themselves. Never think about what they’re doing to girls they’ve loved, girls they wore out. Their girls.”

“You ugly old woman,” my grandfather called my grandmother.

“You ugly old woman,” all my uncles called all my aunts.

“You ugly bitch,” my cousins called their sisters, and my sisters called me.

“You ugly thing!” I screamed back.

The pretty girls in my high school had good hair, curled or straightened to fit the fashion, had slender hips in tailored skirts, wore virgin pins on the right side or knew enough not to wear such tacky things at all. My cousins and I were never virgins, even when we were. Like the stories told about Janis Joplin in Port Arthur, Texas, there were stories about us in Greenville, South Carolina. The football players behind the bleachers, boys who went on to marry and do well.

“Hell, it wasn’t rape. She never said no. Maybe she said stop, but in that little bitty voice, so you know she wants you to love her, hell, love her for ten minutes or half an hour. Shit, who could love a girl like her?”

Who?

Beauty is a hard thing. Beauty is a mean story. Beauty is slender girls who die young, fine-featured delicate creatures about whom men write poems. Beauty, my first girlfriend said to me, is that inner quality often associated with great amounts of leisure time. And I loved her for that.

We were not beautiful. We were hard and ugly and trying to be proud of it. The poor are plain, virtuous if humble and hardworking, but mostly ugly. Almost always ugly.

“You know Dot’s husband left her,” Cousin Billie told me once. “Came back after a while, then left again. Way she talked you’d think she never noticed. Some days I don’t know whether to be proud of her or ashamed.”

I thought about stories I’d been told, about women whose men left them or stayed to laugh out the sides of their mouths when other men mentioned other women’s names. Behind my aunt Dot was a legion of female cousins and great-aunts, unknown and nameless—snuff-sucking, empty-faced creatures changing spindles at the textile plant, chewing gum while frying potatoes at the truck stop, exhausted, angry, and never loved enough.
The women I loved most in the world horrified me. I did not want to grow up to be them. I made myself proud of their pride, their determination, their stubbornness, but every night I prayed a man’s prayer: Lord, save me from them.

Do not let me become them.

Let me tell you the mean story.

For years and years, I convinced myself that I was unbreakable, an animal with an animal strength or something not human at all. Me, I told people, I take damage like a wall, a brick wall that never falls down, never feels anything, never flinches or remembers. I am one woman but I carry in my body all the stories I have ever been told, women I have known, women who have taken damage until they tell themselves they can feel no pain at all.

That’s the mean story. That’s the lie I told myself for years, and not until I began to fashion stories on the page did I sort it all out, see where the lie ended and a broken life remained. But that is not how I am supposed to tell it. I’m only supposed to tell one story at a time, one story. Every writing course I ever heard of said the same thing. Take one story, follow it through, beginning, middle, end. I don’t do that. I never do.

Behind the story I tell is the one I don’t.

Behind the story you hear is the one I wish I could make you hear.

Behind my carefully buttoned collar is my nakedness, the struggle to find clean clothes, food, meaning, and money. Behind sex is rage, behind anger is love, behind this moment is silence, years of silence.
pected to join the class at all. I showed up because I had been told there were no women allowed and my newfound feminist convictions insisted someone had to do something about that. Along with my friend Flo, I dressed in loose clothes and hitched a ride out to the university gardens very early one Monday morning.

On a rutted dirt lane a small group of peevish-looking young males were climbing out of rusty old cars and pulling off shoes.

“Where’s the sense?” I demanded of one of those boys. He stared at me blankly. I stared right back and repeated my question.

That boy just stood there, looking from me to Flo to his friends. Then somebody laughed. Flo and I glared fiercely. One of the boys stepped forward and gave me a nod.

“Down there,” he said. “A quarter mile down that path. The class is out there where the teacher’s waiting.” Then he nodded again and took off in an easy lope. The other boys stepped around us and followed.

I watched their bare feet pick up fine dust and kick it into the cool, moist grass along the path. Without thought, Flo and I fell in behind them. It was a long, winding run down into a hollow and then up around a wide grassy hill. My thighs and calves started to ache in the first thirty feet. Only stubbornness kept me moving, following those boys, who would occasionally look back and snicker. Later I would be grateful for their laughter. Without it, I would never have managed the full quarter mile, especially not the last curving uphill grade to where a soft-featured, blond young man was doing some kind of stylized kicking exercise.
The sensei stopped to watch us stagger up the hill. The boys were ahead of us, and I couldn't hear what they told him, but his first words were as precise as his motions.

"You want to join the class, you'll have to do better than that."

"We will," I announced emphatically, trying not to gasp for air. The sensei just nodded and started the class, putting Flo and me at the back as if suddenly adding two women to his all-male domain were something he had hoped to do all along—which it was, though we knew nothing of that.

The first weeks we kept coming just to hear the sensei tell us we could not come back. But every day he welcomed us as he welcomed the boys, requiring that we first complete that run, then stand silent, breathing as he breathed, deep and slow, trying to feel each muscle in hips and shoulders and neck. I barely heard him. For me those weeks were grim agony. I was making demands on muscles I had ignored most of my life, and only because I expected the ordeal to be over soon.

The boys helped. Every time they laughed, I would make myself stand taller or move faster. Every time they looked back over their shoulders at my stumbling attempts at running, I would grit my teeth and force my legs to pump higher. So long as they laughed, I would not quit. So long as they watched for tears, I would not let myself cry, though some days to cry was what I wanted most to do—to lie down in the damp grass and weep at the inept female body in which I was imprisoned.

Two, three, four weeks, we kept going. The laughter eased off, but not my desire to cry. Was it in the fourth week or the fifth that the teacher brought his wife to class? A ballet dancer with long, long legs, she easily outdistanced all of us on tight-muscled calves. Nothing daunted that woman, not the run or the kicking or even lifting one of those big pink-faced boys to her shoulders and showing us how to step in a gracefully wide stance while holding him easily. I watched her in confusion, understanding completely what was intended, the example of that astonishingly perfected female body taking over the class and showing us all what a woman could do. I watched the sensei watching her and understood that not only would he not ask us to leave his class but that the passion in his glance was something rare and unknown to me: love that yearned as much for the spirit as for the body.

I looked at her then as he looked at her, and
someday she became a story in my head, a memory of a woman I had seen once dancing on the balls of her feet, arms moving like scythes, face stern, eyes alive. Naked and powerful, deadly and utterly at peace with herself. She had a body that had never forgotten itself, and I knew at once that what I was seeing was magic. Watching, I fell in love—not with her but with the body itself, the hope of movement, the power of jumping and thrusting and being the creature that is not afraid to fall down but somehow doesn’t anyway.

Running the quarter mile back from that class, I started to cry. I made no sound, no gesture, just kept moving and letting the tears roll down my face. Everyone was way ahead of me. My hands were curled into fists, pumping at my sides. The tears became sobs, heartbroken and angry, and I stumbled, almost falling down before I caught my footing in a different gait. My hips shifted. Something in the bottom of my spine let go. Something disconnected from the coccyx that was shattered when I was a girl. Something loosened from the old bruised and torn flesh. Some piece of shame pulled free, some shame so ancient I had never known myself without it. I felt it lift, and with it my thighs lifted, suddenly loose and strong, pumping steadily beneath me as if nothing could hold me down.

I picked up speed and closed in on the boys ahead of me, Flo there among them like a female gazelle. I saw her head turn and discover me running just behind her. She ignored my wet face and produced a welcoming grin, then stepped aside so that we were running together, elbow to elbow, her legs setting a pace for mine. I breathed deep and felt the muscles in my neck open, something strong getting stronger. If there was love in the world, I thought, then there was no reason I should not have it in my life. I matched Flo’s pace and kept running.

I fell in love with karate though I remained a white belt, year after year of white belts—a legendary white belt, in fact. I was so bad, people would come to watch. Inflexible, nearsighted, without talent or aptitude, falling down, sweaty and miserable—sometimes I would even pass out halfway through the class. I learned to take a glass of bouillon like medicine before I put on my gi. But I kept going back, careless of injury or laughter. What I wanted from karate was some echo of love for my body and the spirit it houses—meat and bone and the liquid song of my own gasps, the
liquor stink of stubborn sweat, the sweet burn of sinew, muscle, and lust.

I studied karate for eight years, going from school to school, city to city, always starting over. My first sensei was the best I ever found. That moment of perfect physical consciousness was more often memory than reality. I did not become suddenly coordinated, develop perfect vision in my near-blind right eye, or turn jock and take up half a dozen sports. All I gained was a sense of what I might do, could do if I worked at it, a sense of my body as my own. And that was miracle enough.
Two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is how long it takes to learn to love yourself. How long it took me, how much love I need now.
got away with it because he pretended that what he was doing was giving me a birthday spanking, a tradition in our family as in so many others. But two of my girlfriends were standing there, and even they could see he was hitting me harder than any birthday ritual could justify. I saw their faces go pink with embarrassment. I knew mine was hot with shame, but I could not stop him or pull free of him. The moment stretched out while his hand crashed down, counting off each year of my life. At sixteen, I jumped free and turned to face him.

“You can’t break me,” I told him. “And you’re never going to touch me again.”

It was a story to tell myself, a promise. Saying out loud, “You’re never going to touch me again”—that was a piece of magic, magic in the belly, the domed kingdom of sex, the terror place inside where rage and power live. Whiskey rush without whiskey, bravado and determination, this place where for the first time I knew no confusion, only outrage and pride. In the worst moments of my life, I have told myself that story, the story about a girl who stood up to a monster. Doing that, I make a piece of magic inside myself, magic to use against the meanness in the world.

I know. I am supposed to have shrunk down
What is the story I will not tell? The story I do not tell is the only one that is a lie. It is the story of the life I do not lead, without complication, mystery, courage, or the transfiguration of the flesh. Yes, somewhere inside me there is a child always eleven years old, a girlchild who holds the world responsible for all the things that terrify and call to me. But inside me too is the teenager who armed herself and fought back, the dyke who did what she had to, the woman who learned to love without giving in to fear. The stories other people would tell about my life, my mother’s life, my sisters’, uncles’, cousins’, and lost girlfriends’—those are the stories that could destroy me, erase me, mock and deny me. I tell my stories louder all the
time: mean and ugly stories; funny, almost bitter stories; passionate, desperate stories—all of them have to be told in order not to tell the one the world wants, the story of us broken, the story of us never laughing out loud, never learning to enjoy sex, never being able to love or trust love again, the story in which all that survives is the flesh. That is not my story. I tell all the others so as not to have to tell that one.

Two or three things I know, two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is that to go on living I have to tell stories, that stories are the one sure way I know to touch the heart and change the world.
These days I go to strange places, cities I've never been, stand up in public, in front of strangers, assume the position, open my mouth, and tell stories.

It is not an act of war.

Two or three things I know for sure and one of them is that telling the story all the way through is an act of love.