

# I am from Not Knowing When Her Car will Come Through the Snow

By Kirstin Milks  
Music by The Marshall Cloud

In this audio story featured in the Fall 2019 issue of *Kaleidoscope*, Kirstin Milks traces her strengths as a teacher to an inflection point in her own adolescence.

*Content warning:* This story contains themes of childhood trauma and mental illness. Student names are pseudonyms.

So it's January the winter I am 14. I am standing outside my high school in upstate New York, watching flurries build to heavy snow in the orange glow of the parking lot.

To my left looms the solidness of the drama teacher. We are standing shoulder to shoulder, parka to parka, both gazing silently across the playing fields to where the school's long driveway meets Watervliet Shaker Road almost a quarter-mile away.

My house is 1.1 miles in the opposite direction.

We're quiet together, but inside my head, I'm frantic, I'm longing for my house, I'm tracing the space between it and me, licking it with my thoughts over and over again like it's a wound, you know—following the edge of the woods past the elementary school up the twists of my neighborhood streets, but this mental mapping I'm doing doesn't ever reach the little house on Best Avenue.

No sooner does my brain hit the stop sign at the bottom of Raymond than I'm back again in the cold of the parking lot, forever waiting for my mother to drive a mile.

Now the drama teacher and I are standing here because practice for the school musical ended an hour ago. Students—including me—streamed cheerfully from the auditorium to flood the hallway payphone with quarters and requests for rides.

When cars arrived and then departed, I waited. After all, she'd picked up the phone. Told me she was on her way.

Since then, I've spent my last \$2 on my family's answering machine. Even my friend from Dunsbach Ferry, miles up the road? Tucked into her home on the river by now.

I have a lot of time to think, here in the dark.

And I think: She didn't sound great when she answered, lilting in a way that made me keep her on the line long enough to sing-song the plan back: Pick Kirstin up! Now! At the high school!

I also think: Where the heck is Papa?  
I also think: I hope Julia's warm enough in the back seat. Wherever that is.

What I want, more than anything in this moment, is for things in my life to be reliable.

Here is a partial list of what 14-year-old me considers reliable:

There is pretty much always food at this point. The bus comes most days to take me to high school, where I am trying to win the heart of the kid the next desk over in English class. My current strategy? Smiling a lot but avoiding eye contact.

Oh yeah, and at school I also get to read and write and think all day long without anything other than the occasional dodgeball being thrown at me. This level of physical safety contrasts somewhat with other situations in my life.

A partial list of the things 14-year-old-me considers unreliable:

My mother.

My father, who finds himself out late many nights now. For work.

And our bathtub, which I worry might sink even further and crash through the floor to the basement while I'm standing in the shower some morning.



Look, if I can't have reliability, please just let me have the slow, slippery, private walk home.

Please, one private walk back to the private uncertainty of my house.

But because I have already called home, I was told before the quarters ran out, we have to wait. Together. Frozen here.



I should just tell someone, you know? Like this drama teacher here with the snow in his beard.

But I am young and things are bad and my mother has not yet received an evaluation and I find myself deciding to manifest the reliability I crave in my life. And I'm gonna do that, I further find out, by explaining how this is a totally normal delay for a totally normal, attentive, reliable parent who lives a mile away from this school.

"Happens all the time, her being this late," I open after 45 minutes with a sudden grin, a dismissive wave of my mittened hand that I hope will be particularly convincing. And after that I cannot stop my words from flooding out.

I keep gesturing and talking about my normal, reliable mom, taking care of us and our house and our dog and our cats and starting to look for a teaching position. The drama teacher murmurs, politely.

For 10 or so minutes.

And here's the thing: even as young and as hurt as much of me is at 14, I realize in the moment that this teacher here must smell trouble, that he must be able to hear beyond the words now pouring from me. But he doesn't stop me, so I keep on talking. Acting, an hour past drama practice.

And it turns out I, I don't stop. This first slippery telling of quarter-truths kicks off a decade-long compulsion to lie, again and again, about thousands of normal, everyday, unimportant things.

And I can't stop the lies. I don't know what to do. I just, I keep telling them. And those lies pile up like snow for that whole decade, burying me and freezing others out, until the person who is now my spouse looks me hard in the eyes and tells me I'm done.



So much of the memory I have from my adolescence is fogged; I now know it's been made incomplete by trauma.

But I can rewind the person that is me today—the person who's a high school teacher; a parent; a partner; you know, like, a person—back to this moment in a heartbeat. I can suddenly find myself there and hear the hush of the snow around us, broken only by my own small voice rising and falling.

And I can do this now, as a grown up, because this moment is a significant inflection point for me.

It's a freeze-frame of truth that I then interpret disastrously for a decade.

And that truth, the truth I know in that moment, is that people don't necessarily want to hear the truth.



I don't actually stand at the high school forever with the drama teacher, right? My mother must have come eventually, my kid sibling bundled into the back seat of the Buick.

And the drama teacher is my classroom English teacher two years later; it's during the horrible year when my

mother is removed from our home {breath} and doesn't return. By then I've quit the plays. Instead, I run the spotlights from high above the crowd, again shoulder to shoulder with the drama teacher.  
We never, ever talk about the hour in the snow.

And I don't think I talk about it with anybody. Not with my sibling, not with the kid from English class whose heart I win. Not even with my mother, when we're finally able to talk.

Until it's 15 years later and I am a high school teacher myself and I'm walking Clayton to the social worker, and Clayton is sobbing so hard he starts to gag in the hallway.

And it's three months after that when Lila's telling me a story about her family and I get this flash of insight that it might be just that—it might be a story, a set of falsehoods like the set of falsehoods I told the drama teacher, and now I'm the teacher, and I need to decide what to do.

I find myself at school with Clayton and Lila and other kids, and I start telling tiny pieces of the story of this night in the snow. It's like I'm chipping off just enough of my story to draw out their stories.

And also to show an example of a time that things have been okay, that things can be okay, that we can actually get help, that we can grow out of the things that are difficult. Especially when we get help.

You know, I'm a high school science teacher; it's a job I anticipated to be about lab reports and nerdy puns. But it is an unexpected and enormous and delightful part of my job to listen, carefully, to my emerging adults when they share stories about their lives. And it's my responsibility to help them use their stories to build their future selves, as learners and as people.



Now I don't blame the drama teacher, and I want to be clear about this with you.

I know from experience that this was one of the countless uncertainties and exhaustions that come with teaching. And, you know, maybe he did start a conversation with a guidance counselor, or call my father to check in.

But now I wish, so much, that he had started that conversation with me, that he had checked in with me, there, in the snow.

I'm not saying I think all my shame about my family, all the fallout I've experienced from lack of proper parenting,

our family's food insecurity, my own mental health, I'm not saying that all of that would have been fixed.

But it might have been a start.



I am grateful, for so many reasons, to have found and married the person I am proud to call my spouse.

But I am perhaps most grateful that he gave me a start, that he gave me the startle of not leaving, of instead telling me it was time to change and grow. He called me in, called to me from beyond my snowbank of unloveable falsehoods.

It's still not always easy. So when I experience stress—despair, or anger or uncertainty—I still feel falsehoods icing up under my words and thoughts.

But Frank saw me, and he loved me enough to help me feel the traction, the power, of talking about the truth.

He's helped me explore my own, true stories—including ones I am still learning to tell about experiencing childhood trauma. And these stories, my true stories, are part of how my students and I work together and how we talk together, and how I can be there for them.

For some of my students, it changes their lives. This year, I have been the first person that some students have told about the hunger they're facing, the abuse in their home. I have been the person several students first tell about their desire and their plans to take their own lives.

And I am so grateful every time a kid lets me help them get help. {breath} Every time.



Now Frank wisely warns there is a danger in me telling you this story. Because a teacher waking up and deciding "today I'm going to listen"? It might not be enough, right?

Being enough in this way as a teacher means you have to be able to understand what stories might be out there in the world, so that you can recognize the underlying stories of the people—of the students—who come your way.

And I think the best way to gain that understanding is to read, and listen, broadly. To seek out storytelling from all sorts of people who aren't like you and don't live in places where you are. You have to know about the

lives others have lived as a teacher. Otherwise, I think you risk what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie describes as “the danger of a single story,” cutting off possibilities in framing the world and the people in it for yourself and for your students.

I think of what I’m learning through seeking out many voices as a collection of possibilities for my students’ experiences. And this knowledge I’ve built, this map of probability space, is what makes me able to ask the next question, make the next move, to be a trustworthy adult.



I want to start conversations with kids—both within the context of the content I teach and beyond—and I want to listen, really listen to what they have to say. I think, at my core, that’s what I’m about as a teacher.

And I want to be someone who fact-checks a kid as a way to say, “I see you, I notice you, I love you.” That feels really important.

I want to be a person who wants to hear the truth, who knows the power of truth in helping create inflection points in our lives.

And I want my students, as grown-ups, to be open to exploring their own stories and to walk with others and their stories—as a start.



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