

A searingly honest and dark humored memoir exploring how one comes to be, to live in their own skin; exist in their very bones. In 1958 Lisa landed on this earth with a whack and a wail and a highly uncomfortable feeling that she shouldn't be here.

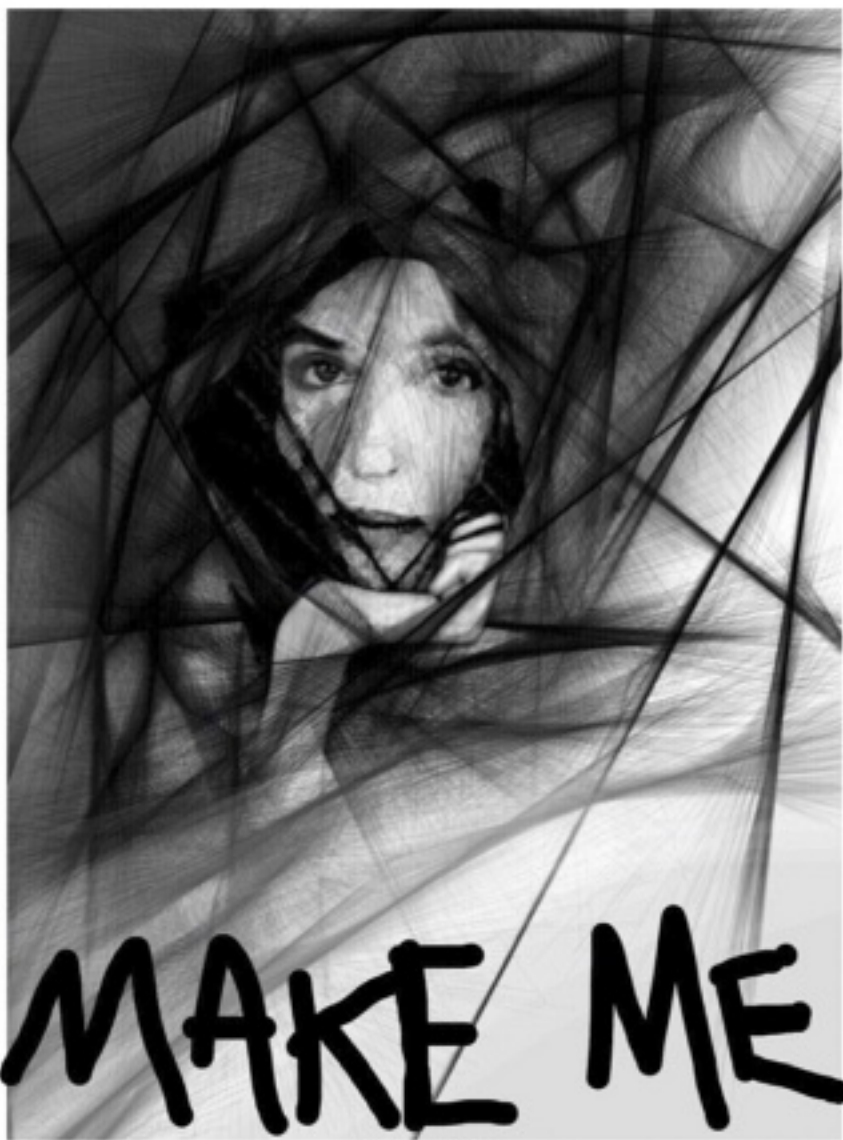
Make Me: a memoir

By Lisa Stathoplos

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Some names in these stories have been changed.

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A Space Oddity

WHACK!

It's a....

Wail!

...girl!

Loud sobbing.

Noise, lights, cold, wet.

Here? Again? In a body?

Soul sob.

Rubbing, stroking, warm hands hold my head and bottom.

Congratulations!

Wail.

Some are like this, Juliette; it will pass in time.

Ow. Wailing.

I don't feel good. I am uncomfortable here!

Wet. Sticky. Pointy pain.

Help me! HELP ME!!!

Mom rocks me. Dad walks me.

No, that's not it!

I'm on my stomach now. Warm hand rubbing my back.

Mom sings.

Too ra loo ra loo ra.

I sleep. For a minute.

I wake up.

I'm still HERE?

Wail.

I am a few months old.

Stop being so moody. Stop rocking. Don't be so emotional. Stop kicking your leg. Don't sulk.

I guess sulking is not smiling. Or is it scowling? I scowl.

I sulk all the time; I am good at it. Why would anyone do anything else? I don't know why the world feels uncomfortable.

Uncle Lionel: Hey, Lizza Pizza, smile!

Uncle Joel: She's gonna rock that chair right over!

Aunt Florice: Talk to me, why won't you talk to me?

Stop telling me to "come over here". Why won't you all leave me ALONE?!

Kind loving people like my parents demand I be something I am not. Feel something I cannot: ease.

They are happy and fine. Very loving. Everything was great when it was just the three of them. My big sister, Karen, Mom and Dad. They bonded.

What on earth is wrong with this child?

I want to crawl out of this human skin.

I discover rocking helps. Rocking while humming in a monotone really helps.

Make Me

Stop doing that!

Mom goes wild when I do this. She thinks I am literally retarded.

Stop doing what?

I know what.

I kick my leg instead. I kick when sitting and I really need to kick myself to sleep. Mom thinks this will cause my eventual death by exhaustion. She lifts my leg into bed and hushes me goodnight.

An eternity passes and the patience of Job pales in comparison before she reaches my bedroom door and pulls it to not quite shut.

Goodnight, Lisa.

Awwwww.....finally!

Flooding relief. My leg does what it needs to do.

I see what they see in pictures of myself. The Easter family photo in the hallway of my Yaya and Papou's house in Manchester where I am glowering at the floor standing next to my sister in our predictably matching hot pink dresses with the pale pink bows, my Beatle's bob a bit mussed. I hate dresses. I hate cameras. Drag out your little brick-colored Kodak Brownie and I would just as soon bite you.

Stop telling me to smile.

lisa stathoplos

I can't wait until I am old enough to swear. The F word is gonna be my best friend.

This world. What a fucking nightmare.





Losing My Religion

The Catholic church is a big help.

Midnight Mass in St. Patrick's Cathedral, Bellows Falls, Vermont, my birthplace, just over the New Hampshire state line from Walpole, N.H. where we live. Vatican II has finally been passed by a bunch of grown men who think it's normal to all wear the same scarlet robes and weird hats and no girls allowed in over there at Vatican City. As kids we have no idea what the hell Vatican II is but, clearly, it is a big freakin' deal! So, they did something behind all those walls and the rote Latin my sister and I, little brother and Mom have droned our learned responses to for like, ten years in my case, is in English. The whole damn mass is in English.

Whoa. THIS is what the old man in the pulpit with the interchangeable green, purple, blue or red robes - I guess expressing his various fashion whims each Sunday - has been pounding into us for years?! The metallic purple is my favorite.

We sit in our usual pew order: Mark on Mom's right, Karen to her left and me beside Karen. Dad lucks out. No church for him. Contract agreed upon with Mom before marriage. He's Greek Orthodox. Mom is French Catholic. However, they are ALWAYS a United Front.

In the middle of a stretch of Lord Have Mercys and Christ Have Mercys, I casually rip off the top of my right thumbnail just down to the point of not bleeding. We have been kneeling for like another eternity. I lean toward my

sister and extend my newly denuded thumb right under her chin. She glances down.

Baldy.

I whisper with glee.

We stop breathing, we bite our cheeks and shake so hard with repressed gales of giggles and the desire to screech out loud, the kneeler and the entire pew is quaking. We are dying inside at the hilarity of it all, stupid and silly as it is. Tears roll down my face and Karen's is completely scrunched up and bright red.

The priest booms on.

I AM THE WORM!

First time not in Latin.

I AM THE WORM!

I buckle forward grabbing my sister's thigh; she convulses and a small shriek escapes her lips. Our faces are contorted beyond recognition; we are going to explode.

He won't stop. Echoing through the vaulted ceiling:

There will be retribution, Agnes Dei, holy, holy, holy, Lamb of God, take away the sins of the world and all of you have inherited original sin!

Make Me

I tell a pretty good combo of original sins every week - mostly venial, so forgivable, that get me the hell out of the claustrophobic confessional. But I flirt with tossing in a mortal one every now and then just to keep the priest on his toes. This week I'm gonna try out "coveting my neighbor's wife". I have no idea what that means but it oughta jolt Father Kelly out of his confessional daze.

Yes!

Five Hail Marys and six Acts of Contrition are my Get Out of Jail Free cards this week. Hallafuckinglujjah.

My sister and I continue to shake uncontrollably. Mom shoots one dark look to her left followed by a sharp, quick pain in my wrist where her pinch mark is left.

At last, the best signal Mass is about to end: Communion time! I skulk back from the altar to our pew and force down the tasteless, disgusting wafer. Great. It's stuck halfway down my throat. At least it's predictable. I stifle a small smile at Karen. Laughing in church is endlessly entertaining. Church is the best place to laugh because the rule is, you can't. Ain't nothing funny about Catholic church.

Jesus Christ.

We trudge through the parking lot in the snow and get into the old grey Chevy station wagon. Mom's jaw is set. I'm a dead man walking. It was still worth it.

Catholic Church has me well-trained in defiance. In a picture of my First Communion I look completely dorky in my puffy white dress with the stupid headband crown and veil. At least I'm smiling. Good lord, why?

The CC loves weird rites of passage; I'm guessing those guys in the red robes dream them up while they fantasize about being the next pope. I'm thirteen. It's time for Confirmation. Have they been unaware of me?

It's a magical time for me and Mom. We cannot be alone in the same room together for more than five minutes before I storm off. We don't yell at each other; we freeze each other out. Ours is an epic Cold War happening right on Webhannet Drive, Wells Beach, Maine. She's adamant, though. I WILL be confirmed.

God.

I'm not sure if Mom really buys all this Catholic stuff or if it is just so rotely ingrained in her French upbringing that she doesn't want to upset the apple cart - or take any bad apples. Every woman on earth knows Eve was framed.

We're packed like sardines with legs in the wooden pews of the raised choir section of St. Mary's church in Wells Beach. Sister Anne is in charge of our big transition and leads us through the requirements for Confirmation in weekly class. I confirm my abject contempt.

You must choose a new name- a saint's name.

Make Me

You've gotta be kidding? I don't know any saints. Pretty sure beatification isn't in my future either - wait five years for your day in eternity? prove two miracles? document heroic acts?! Too many hoops, man.

Sister Anne drills a hole in me with her eyes.

Okay, okay. The big star saints get listed during mass every Sunday. Sister Anne frowns deeply at me.

Umm..... Ignatius!

I always liked that name.

You will be Marie.

What the hell?! Why can't I be Ignatius?! I hate this woman. What a control freak! I found out years later that Ignatius was a male saint. Who knew? Ignatius is a kick ass girl's name. I wasn't even trying to piss that nun off but, in my ignorance, did anyway. Good job.

There's a picture of Mom and me from this day standing in front of the church. I'm in my long white robe with the red collar, my sun streaked blonde and untrimmed hair painfully tamed at last - I haven't brushed it for, like, ten years - blowing slightly in the breeze. Looking at the camera I positively glower. Mom looks like she's on death row. Like I said, it was magical.

I do have a spiritual life. Kind of. I mean, I feel like there is something like love that is the one true thing and we all just become one with the universe when we die or at least that would be nice. Sometimes I get a lump in my throat when

I think about the concept of infinity; it drives me near madness if I dwell on it. I try not to dwell on it. But an old white guy who lives up in the sky who was dreamed up by a whole buncha white guys who tell us this Big Old White Guy will welcome us into his Forever Hippie Garden as long as we don't act like assholes and make sure to say He's The One? Oh, and, plus, he sent his only son - not a daughter, they don't count in the CC - to die for us (I always wondered why? Why that? I don't get it.) so we can lounge in his gated community ever after? Hard for me to swallow. Sometimes when the world seems so dark and mean and full of horrors, I lie awake and think this thing:

I could be a better God than you.

I get so mad at a God who would create a world with so much pain for all living creatures that I want to scream. Or, if we are supposed to come here to learn some crazy eternal lesson that we contracted to learn before we got here and then He/She/It makes it so we don't remember the contract and are just set up for failure? That sucks, too.

I call FOUL!!!! I can make up a better world than this!

I get it. It's got all this beauty and whatnot but only with unimaginable pain and suffering guaranteed. And, at the end? You get to DIE!

Are you SERIOUSLY SERIOUS?!!!! What kind of twisted plan is this?!!!!!!
Hello? God????!! God.

Pretty sure whenever I think this I am damned to hell for all eternity; they're already at work on another circle. I see myself sliding reluctantly down an imagined steel silo, the neon "Abandon All Hope" sign blinking its caution at

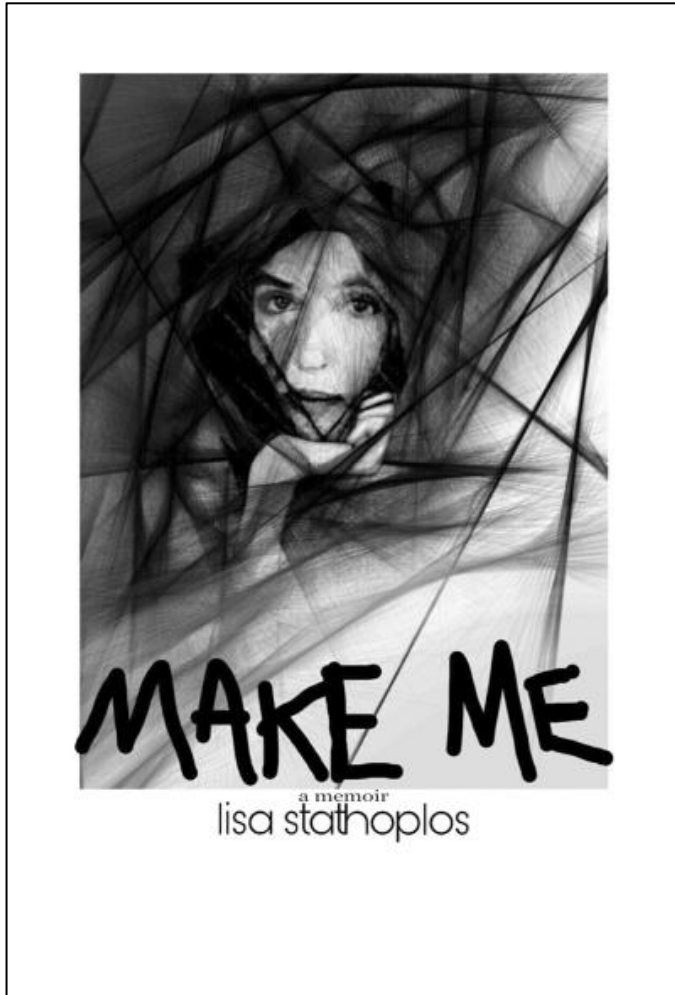
Make Me

the bottom, with my arms and legs splayed and skidding, squeaking against the sleek sides while looking up the whole time screaming:

And ANOTHER thing!!!

I can also see the bolt of lightning shooting out of a cloud killing me instantly when I think this. Guess the fact that hasn't happened yet is a freakin' miracle.

If I'm wrong, God? Just hand me a couple more Our Fathers and we'll call it good, okay?



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