Interviewer's Introduction

The following is the interviewer's retrospective notes, in which he reported the context, his goals and plans, and some thoughts after he conducted the interview.

"This interview was conducted face to face in a teaching assistant's office. My goal was to explore the details of the story in an attempt to look more closely at resilience. After conducting the interview, I realized how I had 'conceptualized' the idea of resilience. My questions were geared towards trying to find sources of support because I believed that resilience cannot happen without a source of strength or support.

"Another idea that I wanted to look at was betrayal. Throughout the story there were people who I thought did not support this participant or who may have appeared as nonsupportive. Since I thought of resilience as a function of support, I thought that that was a relevant topic. Those individuals were friends, doctors, and God.

"I also looked at the areas where resilience occurred. This participant initially had to recover from the news of her urgent surgery. The physical recovery from surgery is involved, and there are the effects that the surgery had on her life as a whole. Because the surgery took away her voice, which was the center of her life, the surgery almost took everything from her life. Hence, she had to recover socially, academically, and in every other aspect of her life.

"The interview gave me insight into the tragedy as well as the participant herself. Along with obviously being smart, the participant showed that she is also strong and courageous. It was an honor to conduct the interview."

Interview Transcript

INTERVIEWER: The first thing that I want to ask is about how, in your story, you didn't make any mention about your father. Do you have a relationship with your father, and, if so, what is it?

PARTICIPANT: That's a very interesting question. I do not have a good relationship with my father. Um . . . my parents are married, and I'd always lived with both of them, but the relationship with my dad is such that we don't get along very well at all. So, in terms of all of this happening, he was probably the furthest from my mind in terms of somebody I would have wanted to go to for support. What's interesting is that, the day before the surgery, when he found out about the surgery, and at that point still didn't know exactly why I was going in, he had a moment of . . . of . . . uncharacteristic emo-

tion. He just came up to me and started crying, and he hugged me . . . and I found that a little odd. Not comforting at all . . . not remotely. Because it was so uncharacteristic. He was never very emotionally demonstrative as a father, and, uh . . . you know . . . as I said, he and I had a rocky dynamic, for as long as I can remember. That's why the occurrence was a little bizarre for me.

INTERVIEWER: You said that he's not demonstrative with his feelings. Is that due, maybe, to the coolness of his character, because he's not the type to demonstrate emotions, maybe one of those typical guys . . . or do you think it's more of a personal thing, due to the relationship that you two have?

PARTICIPANT: Oh, I think it's definitely akin to the fact that he and I don't get along. Um . . . he's actually a very hot-blooded, passionate person. We just don't like each other. And when it comes down to being demonstrative, he's demonstrative, all right, but in other ways, the least of which seemed to be affection. He's always been sort of belligerent towards me . . . it's unfortunate. And I think that, as time has passed, he's gotten older, and I've gotten older, and that animosity has definitely tempered somewhat, which is nice. Besides, he had a heart attack, and ever since that heart attack, he's been sweet as molasses to me . . . I mean, relatively speaking. I've always made more of an effort to get along with him, but . . . he's an interesting guy. He probably qualifies as childish . . . he's very temperamental, has to have his own way . . . in my view if he has to lie or cheat to get it, he'll do it. And that was a little tough for me to grow up with. So yeah, ever since the heart attack, he's been a puppy compared to what he once was.

INTERVIEWER: I don't want to stray too far off the subject, but I have one more question about that. Do you think you might know the source of the bad relationship? Was it just one event that sort of catapulted things and then they just never calmed down, or was it more of "I am who I am, you are who you are, and we just don't mix well"?

PARTICIPANT: I think a lot of it is "I am who I am, you are who you are." What I feel that it really comes down to is the fact that he is of Latin American descent, that he was raised as the one male child in a Venezuelan household. Not to mention, a white man growing up in Venezuela. So he regarded himself very highly, and has always had a very machismo take on male–female relationships. My mother, on the other hand, is very submissive, very "yes, sir, no, sir." I came into the picture, I suppose, as not being a very submissive person, taking more after my father than my mother in that regard, I'm sure. It's not so much that I was looking to pick fights with him . . . it was just a clash of ideals. He thought that, by the time I'd hit the age of 11 or 12, that I should be doing a lot more around the house, when previous to

that, I hadn't done a *thing* around the house. As far as this particular event and our relationship . . . my father has a tendency toward the dramatic . . . which I think, to an extent, I share, only I think I temper it a little better than he does. So for a little while after the surgery, and during my first round of radiation treatments, he was very open, and was lavishing gifts on me . . . buying me lots of things. I got a new TV, I got new furniture . . . I got a new apartment! I mean, I got *stuff*! That's just the way he operates. He wanted to demonstrate his affection and his concern by buying me things, and well . . . a 19-year-old college student is certainly going to take advantage of that, no doubt. And then, after . . . I think after the cancer became old news, you could say . . . it tapered off, and he was back to his old belligerent self again. But, for a little while there . . . for about a month, maybe, it was, you know . . . it was kid-in-a-candy-store time for me.

INTERVIEWER: Let's see . . . you made mention that you told your mother . . . no, you told your voice teacher the news before your mother?

PARTICIPANT: I didn't tell my voice teacher before my mother, but, for whatever reason, it was a lot harder to tell him. Where my father lacked, my voice teacher sort of picked up the slack. He was very supportive, he was about the right age to be my dad . . . he was, um . . . he understood my passion for singing, and believed in it, whereas my father, quite frankly, thought it was a pipe dream, and I ought not give money and time to a university to learn how to sing. To him that was ridiculous. My voice teacher thought it was a noble art form, and I found that really comforting. I told him . . . the day before my surgery, almost the same time I told my mother . . . just after.

INTERVIEWER: So, after you told your mother?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah, but just barely. I mean, I didn't have very much time to disclose this news. I found out I had cancer. I had surgery the next day . . . I had to just tell people. And naturally, he drove up to see me the next day, was at the hospital, held my hand, the whole nine yards. But it was harder for me to even conceive of telling him, because our relationship hinged solely on the fact that I was a singer. My mother would have been there for me. But as far as my voice teacher? If I couldn't sing, I was going to lose this guy. As far as I was concerned, not being able to sing would destroy not only everything that we'd worked toward that past 2½ years, but also our relationship . . . professionally, personally, you name it. And I just couldn't deal with that.

INTERVIEWER: How would you describe your relationship, in general, with your teacher?

PARTICIPANT: What . . . now?

INTERVIEWER: No, then.

PARTICIPANT: Oh, then. I used to spend every possible moment in the voice studio with him. What I had in that teacher was gold. To this day, I swear by him. He has something very special in his technique. That's a very typical thing for a voice student to say about a teacher. Voice people tend to build up this sort of cult mentality about their voice studios, particularly undergrads. But this particular teacher really does have something. And the proof's in the pudding; his students do phenomenal things, and his technique is very scientifically based . . . it's not just this artsy intuition that you see so much in the field. Of course, you need to be an artist, but, if you look beyond that, you have a body and an apparatus, and a means by which it physically operates . . . and that's very important to him. I saw firsthand, so many times, that his studio was the place to be. And I wanted very much to be an opera singer, and do it well, to the best of my ability . . . the only way to do that was to be around this man 24/7. On top of which, he was just a great guy. But I had very monocular vision when it came to my goals in life, which contributed to me being very intimately involved with working in the studio and with my teacher . . . and which is why it was so devastating when all of this happened.

INTERVIEWER: You said your teacher kind of filled in the gaps your father didn't. What were some other areas, other than being supportive of your voice and vocal career . . . in what other ways did he fill in the gaps?

PARTICIPANT: Well, I guess you have to think of it in terms of my being 17 and going off to school, and experiencing the world on my own terms for the first time when I met him. He stood for the beacon of wisdom that I think every kid sort of looks for in situations like that. He had invaluable knowledge of the campus, of the people there, of the politics . . . and in the music school, there are *politics.* In any program, there are politics, but in the music school, you've got a whole different kind of ego that you're dealing with. There are performing faculty, with different studios and factions . . . not to mention, the auditions, the recitals, and all levels of performance. There's this heightened sense of "I need to be part of a team, or I'm going to just float around until I totally lose it!" And that's where he came in, and he provided me with that kind of grounding. He did that for a lot of people. And I don't think that he sought to be anybody's father figure. I don't even think that he'd look fondly on my calling him a father figure, but it can't be helped . . . he was.

INTERVIEWER: When you got the news that the results weren't as good as the previous doctor had said, that it was cancer, and that it had to be out ASAP, you were very, very cool about that. Why was that?

PARTICIPANT: I . . . still don't know. I mean, I . . . I remember thinking that panicking wasn't going to do any good. I remember thinking that the best thing to do at that point was to be just as methodical and professional as he had to be, and sort of remove myself from my physical self, as it were . . . to look at the problem as though I was a cohort of his, trying to analyze the problem . . . trying to take on my own role in this cancer battle we were about to embark on. It was the best possible thing I could do to, for one, maintain my sanity at that moment in time, because that's a little heavy, and two, to just get it done. I mean, it didn't seem . . . I reverted completely to logic at that point. I do that. In moments of stress, or anxiety, or tension, or grief . . . you name it. Um . . . I don't try to avoid the emotion, but I do try to temper it . . . by at least maintaining some degree of practical reasoning and logic as the basis of what I'm thinking and doing, just so I don't go completely off kilter and start looking like a moron. I think that, in part, has a great deal to do with growing up with my father, who doesn't have a lever to control that with. So, um, that's what I think contributed to my oddly cool demeanor upon getting the news.

INTERVIEWER: In some ways, does that kind of logic conflict with your artistic personality?

PARTICIPANT: Strangely enough . . . no. Though, at the time, I would have thought so. That was the interesting thing about being in the voice studio I was in. I had never had a voice teacher prior to that. Nobody would want to touch me, because a lot of voice teachers say that, as long as you're doing things here and there that are good, then, by and large, they let you do your own thing technically. At the time, I was pretty damn good, and they just left me alone. And I did sing from my guts, and I was very emotional . . . and of course, being in a very emotional household also contributed to the emotionality of my performance. When I got to college and entered the voice studio, I was told to restrict that emotion and to focus more on the physicality of what I was doing, on releasing tension. When you're emotional, you get physically tense. And when you get physically tense, that kind of messes with what you're doing vocally . . . and that's what was happening to me. So getting away from that emotionality and reminding myself why . . . which, of course, takes logic . . . was actually very instrumental in the long run, not in quashing my emotions . . . I still listen very much to my emotions . . . but understanding that they're just a part of what needs to take place in order to help me function in a given scenario.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember how you felt towards the previous doctors that didn't tell you how serious it was?

PARTICIPANT: After the fact? Or . . .

INTERVIEWER: After, and, maybe, during?

PARTICIPANT: Okay. During the fact, I just sort of thought, "Well, there are better doctors, I guess." I didn't hold it against them personally, I didn't have any animosity toward them. I mean, how could they know? Nobody could possibly know that. And it was so bizarre. I mean, even after they took it out, they kept that thing in pathology for a long time because they couldn't figure it out. It's still one of those cases where everyone just sort of stood back and thought, "Okay . . . well . . . that was weird." After I realized that I'd been . . . um . . . misled . . . a couple of doctors, the first two . . . no grudges whatsoever. I have no problem with either of them. The third doctor, the doctor who treated all the famous people . . . okay. He was flippant. He was arrogant. And I trusted him because he was flippant and arrogant. Our consultation was all of 5 minutes. He looked at it and said, "Ah, it's a goiter." And I believed him . . . how do you not believe something like that? Especially with his credentials . . . I mean, he had pictures of Cher and Bono on the walls of the waiting room, for crying out loud. So, I mean, I didn't think anything of it.

After the fact, almost instantly after I found out, I think most of my animosity was directed toward him. I couldn't even understand the fact that he was allowed to practice because of his flamboyance . . . and, in the end, was entirely wrong. And if he had tried a little bit and gotten it right . . . we could have stopped this thing from growing quite a bit. It had just started spreading to other parts of my neck . . . it was already on my lymphnodic tract . . . that's scary. That happened in the last couple of days. I could have caught that a week previous if that doctor hadn't been such a jerk and hadn't done what he'd done, and maybe looked into it a little more. That really made me mad. To this day, he's a highly esteemed throat specialist for many of my friends who are still singers. I tell them, time and again, "Be careful with this guy." And they don't listen. They say, "Oh, but he's the best. So he messed up with you . . . that was just once." Well, what can you do? Maybe he is good, but what he did to me, I really can't forgive. As for the endocrinologist, the fact that he sort of deceived me and told me the results were inconclusive . . . I think I understand where he was coming from, and I don't have any hard feelings toward him. I don't feel, you know . . . bamboozled by that deceit. It's probably a greater transgression than that of the other doctor, but the fact that the endocrinologist was the one that took the steps that no one else had taken, and since he found the problem and acted on it, I think he's pretty much made up for it. I stayed with him for my treatments and my scans, so yeah, I don't hold it against him. That other doctor, though? Forget it.

INTERVIEWER: Could you talk about the ease . . . maybe . . . or difficulty . . . in the actual physical recovery?

PARTICIPANT: It was horrible. I remember the instant I woke up from the surgery. And the surgery was supposed to take, maybe, 3 hours . . . it ended up taking something like 6, maybe 7 hours, because they didn't expect to find the spreading. I woke up . . . and . . . well, anesthesia has an interesting effect on people. I'd seen people come out of anesthesia before, and it's funny sometimes . . . people just start bawling and talking gibberish. Naturally, I wake up and I just start wailing, crying. But I realize, first thing, that my voice is coming out much better than it had before surgery, so I thought, "Yeah, this is great!" The following weeks, I was in a lot of pain, primarily because of the nature of the surgery. For a thyroidectomy, there's a period of healing, of course, but my surgery was different because they had to go to the side of my neck where the tumor had begun to spread. As a result, I couldn't walk, could barely move. I was in bed for a good 3 weeks. I'm not the sort that can be bedridden easily. So I was miserable, and more unfortunate, I had to stay with my parents. My mother was fine . . . she doted on me a bit too much for my taste, but it was no surprise. But I could have done without my dad being there, and he was there plenty. And my condition didn't mean we didn't argue, which just complicated things with my voice. Following the surgery, there was a notable inability to speak well for about a month, when my phonation was very definitively affected. Slowly, it started coming back here and there, but something had definitely changed. I got everything checked, but no one could tell what changed. It's been theorized that the surgery was responsible for shifting some things around, so things were just going to be different from that point on. That was difficult . . . healing physically and coming to terms with the fact that things would have to be so different from then on. I wasn't even myself anymore after that. My voice was gone, so I was gone, and I'd never been anything but my voice. So, yeah, that was really hard.

INTERVIEWER: Since you did a lot of singing with yours and other churches, how did this affect your relationship with God?

PARTICIPANT: That's an interesting question.

INTERVIEWER: I mean, you worked for the church, and you were no longer able to . . .

PARTICIPANT: Yeah. That's a very interesting question. Well, for as long as I can remember, I've been a Catholic cantor, so I knew the Mass parts backward and forward, and I always had to stand at the front and lead the congregation, and everybody looked at me and thought, "Oh, isn't she a good Catholic," bla bla bla, and that's great. To be honest, if I wasn't singing, I wouldn't

have gone to church. My relationship with God back then was . . . um . . . a casual, conversational one. I mean, it was, "Hi, God, how are you . . . I'm fine . . . that's good . . . how've you been . . ." and it suited me. And I was grateful for things, and I'd offer prayers of thanks. And then when this happened, and I couldn't sing . . . obviously, I was initially grateful . . . grateful to be alive, grateful we'd caught it. Still freaked out, though, because the doctors kept telling me they hadn't gotten it all, that I had to be eradiated and have things burned out, and so forth. And then I couldn't be in the clear because of scans and such, and I would have to be on hormones for ever and ever until I die. So it was hard to be 150% thankful. There was always a bunch of "what if-ing," and it never really went away. With cancer, it doesn't goes away. So you always have to wonder . . . you know, if it's going to come back. Or if it never left. Or if they haven't caught it all. I mean, when you have a bunch of doctors telling you that you have a goiter when it's really a massive tumor growing out of your neck, you start to wonder if any doctor knows anything.

The funny thing is that none of the churches I sang at were actually *my church*. They were paid jobs. I sang at a Catholic church, a Jewish temple, an Episcopal church, and a Baptist church. I tried to go to church after surgery, just to go, but would have to leave during the opening hymn because I couldn't handle it. And then I started asking questions . . . not so much questioning God . . . but questioning religion in general. I got into studying East Asian philosophies, I got into studying all kinds of religious systems and beliefs . . . and I came to the conclusion that my relationship with God, as far as I'd always known it, was very much centered on my voice and being able to sing. And it was very real to me. Singing was my prayer. That was my connection. That was my big gift. I was a fat kid with no friends for as long as I could remember, but I could sing! That was the "in" for me. When I lost that, I lost my connection with God, I lost all my friends, I lost my calling in life, I lost my passion in life, I lost my trump card . . . the thing that was gonna get me out of being that fat kid with the oppressive dad, and whatever . . . that was going to be my ticket out. I lost my ticket! So I lost my connection to God. Gone.

I began to understand things in a very logical, philosophical way, and I took to logic because passion hurt too much. Because music was passion for me. If I had a problem in life . . . seriously . . . I would sing. That's how I fixed it. Always. And I've had problems. Um . . . because I'm lucky like that. But I couldn't sing, even though things would happen. Like, uh, if I was dating a guy . . . and it wasn't like I would just date a guy. I would date a guy who'd beat me up. I was good like that. If I could sing, that would go away for me. Yeah. Couldn't sing. That was bad. Eventually, as my voice started

trying to come back, I realized . . . I wasn't angry at God . . . I just really didn't think there was a God working on things for me out there. I don't have any animosity toward religion, nor do I have any judgments on people who have religious beliefs. I respect spirituality, I believe myself to be spiritual . . . yet I can't say that I now adhere to any one given faith. Qualifiedly agnostic, you could say. I'm open . . . if the deity of choice wants to zap me and give me a moment of epiphany, I'm fine with that. But as of yet, it hasn't occurred, to my knowledge. I'm waiting for whatever. In the meantime, I'll keep reading my Lao Tsu, and my Baghavad Gita, and my Koran, and my Book of Mormon. I've got an interesting collection at home. But I keep myself abreast of the thoughts out there, and I think about it a lot. I do feel that spirituality is a big part of what I do, like in my writing, my music now . . . yeah. A huge part of it. I'd rather think of how I live and how much I live, though, rather than whether or not there's a greater being. Is there a God I'm giving it all up to? No, I don't feel that way. I feel that, honestly, if there's a God, and I end up in heaven, the first thing I'd like to hear is "Okay, you were wrong . . . I exist. But it's okay." I think that, if there is a God, he'll totally understand where I'm coming from. I think he'd be okay with it.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned your friends not being able to stand being around you because they knew how much pain you were in. Describe how that manifested itself, in terms of their actions or their relationships with you.

PARTICIPANT: They disappeared from my life. And I think that was on both our parts; we're talking about dear, dear friends, of which I've retained one . . . I think we were so close that nothing was going to drive a stake through that. But you have to remember that we're dealing with a voice studio and a voice school where everything is very competitive, and everybody knows who's who and what they're capable of, and voice parts having their different animosities between themselves . . . there's always a queen bee. I was the freak *wunderkind* mezzo-soprano at the music school that got the auditions, got the solos, got the favoritism from directors. I didn't really want things like that, because it sucked. By default, people started hating me. I had graduate students come up to me in the halls and threaten me . . . it was weird. But it was my calling . . . it was me, it was what I had to do. To hell with the grad students. It was me, who I was . . . and everyone just kind of knew I was going to be something someday. So when this happened to *me*, it scared the crap out of everybody . . . scared the *crap* out of everybody. And I even had a couple of them tell me how tragic it was . . . like I was dead, and they were telling me about it. It was weird. But essentially, I *was* dead. To them. I mean, if I wasn't a viable musical threat, then what was the point of knowing about me, knowing of me at all . . . knowing *me* . . . because the only reason I was an entity in their lives was because I was a dominant

singer. When I was out of the picture, I think they put it out of their minds, because for that to happen to someone where I was . . . was just scary. I think I put myself in their place a lot . . . I didn't hold it against them. I think if that had happened to someone else, and I'd watched it happen, I would have probably done the same thing.

INTERVIEWER: Why?

PARTICIPANT: It's scary!

INTERVIEWER: Why is it scary?

PARTICIPANT: Because singers tend to be kind of insecure. Because I'm not the only one walking around, thinking, as a singer, "That's my voice, and without my voice I have nothing." It's a huge step for a singer to say, "Eh . . . maybe I'll try *this* career change." That's huge. It's almost as big as religion. It may be bigger. Because for musicians to devote themselves that completely to their art and to even consider the thought of straying from that path, even for a moment . . . that moment is very pivotal for a singer. Whenever you hear about people who have degrees in music and do completely different things . . . there was a big choice that took place there. In my case, it was forced on me. But if I were confronted with that situation, and there was someone I knew to be particularly talented with high hopes, then suddenly felled by a disease and not being able to sing anymore . . . I don't think I'd be able to carry on being around them too much. Not only that, but they'd feel uncomfortable talking about what was going on at school, in the field . . . because that's all we talked about! And I couldn't do it anymore, so what would they talk to me about? That had to have been difficult for them. I mean, it was difficult for me, but it was easy for me to put myself in their place.

INTERVIEWER: I guess the next logical question would be, looking back now, would you consider these people to be real friends?

PARTICIPANT: No . . . but, then again, a lot of friends in college aren't *friends*, but you don't know that at the time. They're people that you know from the department, people that you hang out with by default, people with similar interests . . . and that helps to segue into social circles forming. But, for the most part, in times of crisis, those aren't always the people you run to. Still, they're what I had. So I showed up on the first day of the next semester looking like I'd been in a crazy knife fight . . . and word travels fast. And especially since I'd been cast in an opera . . . they had to recast it. I had to reschedule my recital, because at the time, I was still in the music school and was going to try to get my voice back. Which didn't happen.

INTERVIEWER: Did you actually try to get back on track?

PARTICIPANT: Oh, yeah . . . oh, yeah. For a whole semester.

INTERVIEWER: How did that go?

PARTICIPANT: That was painful . . . painful. Having been called in by every single professor and conductor in the music school, to sit down and have a moment with me in their offices . . . just to reflect on life, and how tragic it is for this 19-year-old kid with so much promise to be taken out by cancer. I mean . . . again, being spoken to as though I was already dead. And these were professors who I thought never really liked me. Some would even tell me, "Yeah, I've got this lump over here," and I'd want to say, "Um . . . I don't care!" It was so strange and morbid . . . everybody kept looking at me like I was already death warmed over. Even now, people find out about my medical history, and I still get those looks. But in the music school at the time, with a big gash in my neck? That was priceless! Not only that . . . of course, my voice teacher would just openly cry in front of me. I just couldn't handle that, you know? I mean, I really cared about this guy, and I was just bringing him way down. And then one day, I was leaning on the piano in the studio, and he was sitting at the keyboard, and we were having this sad lesson . . . and he just looked at me and said, "Why don't you just stop coming?" And I said, "You're right." And that's the last time I went to the studio. It was like that. It was like that. Plus, I was in every top choir in the school . . . and this was a school with a pretty hard-core choral program . . . recordings, international tours, the works. I was a member of the elite chamber choir, the youngest member, so it was a big deal. This thing was like lightning when it hit. So I became like this weird kind of ghost, like a pariah . . . the untouchable one that everybody talked about.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have any resentment for your teacher?

PARTICIPANT: No . . . well, a little bit, a little bit. Because, even though I expected us to drift apart because of this, I harbored this secret hope that there was more to it than just the singing . . . that we could find common ground as people. I thought we did. Or maybe we did, but it was just too painful, and we couldn't get past the pain. And I understand that now. I mean, he had a full studio, and a lot to deal with, and people were talking about me a lot when I wasn't in the studio, which he had to deal with. And since then we've talked . . . he's very supportive of what I do now. He actually just retired, and all of his old students got together for a big party. Then people saw me and were, like, "_____, _____, what are you up to now?" And I'd tell them, "Um . . . I'm starting work on my PhD in psychology." "Oh, my God, you're smart? We didn't know!" I was like, "I know! I didn't either!" Which is true . . . I didn't know I was smart. How could I have? I was an intelligent singer, sure, but you don't have to be intelligent to be a good singer,

really. Look around sometime at a few singers . . . a lot of jokes go around about sopranos, but we won't go there. My point is that I didn't have an opportunity as a vocal performance major to explore that area of myself. As soon as the voice was gone, I had to find something or I was going to die. I really felt that I was going to have to die, or kill myself . . . or hold my breath until it ended. Anything but feel like that. It was miserable and painful, and terrible. I can't explain in words how awful it was. I guess I know a little of how the Katrina people feel, in my own way. They lost everything. I lost my identity. I lost myself. And now I didn't have a leg to stand on, like, with my dad, because I'd always fought him on being a good enough singer to make a living. Well, now he had me. So that was horrible.

It took me . . . wow . . . it took me. I think, even now, I struggle with it a lot. But I fight it . . . I fight it tooth and nail. Because I'm still a singer, damn it. You're not gonna stop me. I have a sick passion to fight odds . . . I take pride in it, because . . . I don't know why. I don't know that I'm a prideful person. But I'm proud of what I've done, kind of, in an American way. Not in, like, an arrogant bastard kind of way. Feeling like, "Okay, for a cancer patient, I'm kind of doing okay." I'm doing stuff. And as soon as I get started on that, I gotta go do more stuff. I gotta go be a fencer, go rock climbing, get a PhD. I have to keep going, like I'm obsessed with it. There's a spare moment? I could be studying . . . I could be working on a song. I need to just keep doing. Because what if this thing comes back? I won't have done anything important if it were to come back today. I better get on with it. Yeah, it took a long time to come to terms with not being an opera singer . . . Maybe 2 years of straight misery. Then, in my senior year of undergrad, my voice started coming back. And that was terrible. Because I used to say, "I'd give anything to have my voice back," when it first happened. And I meant it. I'd have killed somebody, I think. But then it came back, and I was like, "Oh . . . great." And I was on the verge of finishing my psych degree, and I thought, "Ugh . . . you gotta be kidding me." I was mad, at nobody . . . just pissed. I mean, you gotta be kidding me. What are the odds?

I went in and talked to my voice teacher, and he let me in on the secret that I didn't need a voice degree to sing. That's when I started doing auditions, doing the professional opera chorus gigs . . . and still, I realized I had kind of gotten used to the idea of not being an opera singer . . . and it wasn't that bad. And I *was* kinda smart . . . and my friends who weren't musicians were a little less vapid. I mean, not that all musicians are vapid, but a good many are. And I still had a couple, like my friend who tried to be there for me throughout . . . we're still very close. I don't know what I'd have done without him. Oh, and by that point, I'd already gotten married, and this guy didn't know me as a singer. He met me a week before I found

out about the cancer, so my voice was already headed downhill. So he never really heard me sing. But he did see me perform eventually . . . and he was a part of my starting to fence. He was a big-time academic . . . still is. I mean, he must be one of the smartest people I know. So he only knows me in a certain respect. Becoming a musician again, in a new way . . . that was a ride in itself.

INTERVIEWER: I have a couple more. Describe your mom throughout the whole process.

PARTICIPANT: Wow. My mom was a wreck. She's a worrier by nature. She's always been very timid and skittish. I think that my dad being such a tyrant made her very nervous all the time. I remember her getting in trouble all the time for doing things wrong. Like the coffee was too hot or too cold . . . ridiculous things like that. So I always saw her as this cowering person, despite the fact that she really is a very strong individual . . . but I saw her throughout my childhood as cowering under the shadow of this overbearing presence of my dad. She's always attributed this attitude to her ethnic background, being Filipino, and being raised in a very dogmatic, Catholic understanding of wifely duties to one's husband . . . being a good, subservient wife. And that the wife's duty is to the husband first, and to the children second . . . and she told me that, a lot. So, needless to say, that didn't do good things in terms of my animosity toward my dad, nor did it help things in terms of my religiosity. That's probably my biggest thing with the Catholic Church . . . the position of women. And I've tried to talk to monsignors and cardinals about this. That's another thing that's changed . . . now I don't care who I talk to . . . no shame. But my mother's role in the situation . . . she became even more nervous, and more worried, and more concerned. And that was dreadful. When I told her, we were driving from the office, after I had just found out. It was about an hour drive, and it wasn't until right before we got home. I didn't want to tell her.

INTERVIEWER: And you felt you knew how she was going to take it, how it was going to go?

PARTICIPANT: I knew *exactly* how it was going to go down! I knew this woman was going to freak out. She was going to pull over, start crying, get worried, call a bunch of people, make them worry too. I thought, "Crap . . . why don't I just go through the surgery and not tell her?" And, in a sense, I did. I told her some things . . . not everything. I didn't tell her what kind of cancer it was . . . she's a med tech, so she knows things. I told her they might have to do a full thyroidectomy, and that the lump . . . I basically pulled the same game that the other doctor did . . . that the lump was *probably* cancer. That they didn't know exactly what it was. I left it at that, but

that was enough . . . she lost it. She was so nervous, and so freaked out. I understood, but I waited until after the surgery before I gave them all the details. I felt like, since I was going into surgery, that I couldn't exactly deal with all of that just then. I care . . . I mean, she's a saint, and I prize her above all human beings on the planet . . . but I made the executive decision to moderate her amount of knowledge at that point. She did not do well. But she did go into overdrive as soon as it was time for me to recover. She was in charge of getting me to treatments, getting my medications, my creams, my food, my blood work, my insurance, my scans, my weird schedules and appointments. She was the master hub. In that regard, I think she and I share that need to pop things into logical overdrive and do what needs to be done, rather than succumb to the prospect of becoming completely pathetic under the weight of your emotions. And she functioned, and that helped me get through. But, you could see it. She was falling apart.

Even now, there are the questions that come with every phone call. "Are you taking your meds? Do you have enough meds? Have you taken your meds today? Are you sure you're taking your meds? Are you taking care of yourself? Take care of yourself. Have you taken your meds?" I guess she has good reasons. I've had trouble ever since the diagnosis. I end up in the hospital for one thing or another. The last year of my undergrad, they found another tumor, and this time it was a pituitary tumor . . . this time, it was a freakin' brain tumor. And it was inoperable, so we just sit around and watch it. It doesn't do any tricks . . . it just kind of sits there. I mean, it grows, and it shrinks, but it's not doing anything amazing. But what can you do? So that sucked. "Here we go again," is what that was. It was a little scarier, because of it being in the brain, but whatever. What can you do? Me, I turned to logic. So I ended up doing my undergrad thesis on the psychological side effects of pituitary tumors. I figured that, if I had to have this thing, I may as well get something out of it.

INTERVIEWER: Describe the role of your fiancé, now husband. Describe his role, I guess, in your healing, during that 2-year-period.

PARTICIPANT: Interesting role. We got engaged, got married, moved to California for a year, then moved back to Texas, when I finished my undergrad. In that 2 years . . . anyone who's been married will tell you that the first year is a doozie, no matter who you are. But that, on top of having to go through radiation . . . and the therapy I was undergoing has nothing on chemo, thankfully, but it still sucked. I only lost a little patch of hair about that big . . . I could cover it up with the rest of my hair. But I think it was all a little too much for him to handle. I mean, we've talked about it since. But this man's got as much ADHD as 10 little kids that are high on pixie sticks.

The cancer stuff is not something a guy like that needs to have to deal with in his first year of marriage, I think.

Our relationship has been very egalitarian . . . he and I are both firm believers in an equal partnership in our relationship. The thing is that he's always been really committed to considering me an equal in every sense, which I love. That only becomes a problem when I get sick. I mean, we have our differences, but they're differences that we have equally. He's a nondenominational Christian, I'm agnostic, and we talk about it and have some good conversations . . . that's an example. But with cancer and my radiation . . . there was no parallel for him. And I think that he tried very hard to see me as strong . . . I wanted to be seen as strong. But whenever I was falling all over myself because of the radiation, he didn't know how to deal with it. He would just kind of look at me and say, "Come on, get up." And I couldn't get up. So then he thought that I was trying to milk this whole thing for attention. He didn't think it was that bad, I guess, because I tended to downplay things. It hasn't been till recently that he's started to realize that, despite my strengths, which are relatively okay, given the nature of things, my weaknesses tend to be pretty bad. And whenever I'm sick, I'm sick with a vengeance. But now, I think he gets it. And we've been married almost 7 years now, so it took him, what, 6 years? So that's been a long process. Those 2 years? He was kinda worthless then. But we sure grew from it. I mean, strength through adversity? Absolutely. And I think it comes with age . . . age and experience. We've both grown a lot. Besides, when you go through something like that, it's very lonely, very isolating, no matter what you do. I mean, even other cancer patients didn't know what it was like, because the cancer I had was so weird. Anaplastic carcinoma is a weirdo cancer that can kill you in a couple of weeks. And then the thing in my brain . . . well, that's just a lot for a new spouse to handle. So I certainly don't hold it against him . . . he was definitely standoffish. But then his mother passed this summer, of colon cancer. And that's when I think it clicked. Because he saw me kind of connecting with her, and she opened up to me. I wrote her a song, and she really opened up to it and liked it. Then, our discourse began from there. I think he saw that, and then saw where I could have ended up. He watched her die, and it was pretty gruesome the way she suffered in those last days. I think he finally realized that the same thing could have happened to me . . . that it might still happen to me. And I think it may have helped him take stock of how severe things can get, even though I try to play things off like there's nothing wrong.

INTERVIEWER: And what exactly is a goiter?

PARTICIPANT: A goiter is an inflamed thyroid gland. One of the lobes, maybe both lobes of the gland, will have gotten big and scary. Typically, they're due to a

deficiency of iodine, which is why it's so flippin' rare for a young American female to get a goiter in this day and age. I mean, we get plenty of iodine. Salt is iodized, for chrissakes. We don't have a lack of iodine in our diets anymore. This mass was sticking out about an inch or so from my neck, but you really had to really look to see that things were bigger on one side. And it was rock hard. I mean, it was weird. But hey . . . what else could it be, right? The weird cancer wasn't even on the list of possibilities. That's what's so scary. Matter of fact, my thyroids were working perfectly well . . . one lobe just had a big, fat tumor sitting on top of it.

INTERVIEWER: So, did they come to a conclusion that it really did inflame that quickly, or was it slower but didn't show up as big at first?

PARTICIPANT: There are different kinds of thyroid cancer. What I have is a faster type. If you're going to have a cancer, make sure it's thyroid cancer. It's great, because you can get rid of it . . . the survival rate is best . . . well, Renquist didn't do so well, but whatever. The thing about my type, anaplastic carcinoma, is that it's an extremely fast-growing type. The cells are so advanced that it can grow overnight . . . my tumor *did* grow overnight, and the spreading took place in less than a week. It's the fastest growing of all the thyroid cancers, and there's something like a 15%, maybe 20% survival rate in the first couple of months. It seems like most everybody who gets this thing dies from it. My case was very different for several reasons. First of all, I'm not dead. Second, I was 19 . . . that sort of cancer typically doesn't hit people until their late 40s, early 50s. Third, the cell structure was a little weird . . . not to mention, I have no history of cancer on either side of my family. I mean, there's one distant relative with hypothyroidism, so she's a little overweight, but that's not even close to cancer. But, yeah, this thing grew overnight, while I was sleeping. Boom . . . tumor. Just like that.

INTERVIEWER: There's no chance that maybe you were really busy the day before, or you just didn't see it . . .

PARTICIPANT: Nope . . . we were in dress rehearsals for a show, so I was in the mirror for makeup every day. I would have seen it. Besides, it was *Nunsense*, which meant we had to wear nuns' habits, including a neckpiece. I would have definitely seen it, felt it. But, yeah, just like that. It can happen to anybody, at any time. I think they wrote me down, the weirdo case of the girl with the weirdo tumor. The whole thing took less than two weeks to go that far . . . creepy.