

2015

Missing. . . A Story of Ambiguous Loss

Ashley Nicole Adams

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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MISSING. . . A STORY OF AMBIGUOUS LOSS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of Theatre

by
Ashley Nicole Adams
B.A., South Carolina School of the Arts, 2013
May 2015

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To God. I am so thankful for my many blessings and many gifts.

To my family. Thank you for your endless support and for allowing me to use your words.

To the LSU faculty. Thank you for the countless amounts of knowledge and for all of your work in bringing *Missing* to fruition.

To my fellow classmates. Thank you for all of the encouragement and for your honest criticism.

And, of course, to my Aunt Shebby. I feel so much closer to you since going through this process.

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ABSTRACT

There are two forms of ambiguous loss. Type one occurs when there is a physical absence, but a psychological presence, such as the loss one feels towards the grandparent that passed away before their birth. Type two occurs when there is a psychological absence, but a physical presence, such as the loss one feels towards a spouse with Alzheimer's or dementia (Morris). The opportunity to create, direct, and star in my own one-woman show inspired me to explore the form of ambiguous loss my family and I endure each and every day due to the disappearance of my aunt, Sharon "Shebby" Wills. In Chapter one, I will be discussing the research process of developing the script. In Chapter two, I will speak on the creation of the script, the rehearsal process, and the final performance. Chapter three is a reflection on my experience and what it taught me about myself as a theatre artist. I will conclude with what I hope for the future of my piece and what it taught me about writing, directing, and acting.

INTRODUCTION

My Aunt Sharon or Shebby, as my family lovingly calls her, went missing on July 10, 1987. I was born four years later so I never got the opportunity to meet her; however, the impact she had had on my life and upbringing is astonishing. According to testimony taken from my family, the circumstances surrounding Sharon Hart-Wills' disappearance are that she was, at the time, battling a drug addiction, she had recently left rehab, she was in the middle of a divorce, and she had lost custody of her three year old child. The Thursday before her disappearance, some of her last words to my grandmother were those of hope. She had a new outlook on life and her situation. She was going to work hard to get her life together so that she could get custody of her child back. No one ever spoke to her again. They knew something was wrong when she didn't come to her daughter's birthday party that was being held at my grandparent's house. The next day, a search began and, in the span of 27 years, the quest for answers has not stopped.

When I was a child, my Aunt Sharon was like an imaginary friend. Although, I was aware that she was not really there, she was very real to me. I listened to music with her, consulted her for advice, I asked her to come home, and I told her I missed her. I never met her, so she could be whatever I needed her to be. As I became older, her disappearance became more chilling. I began to realize that she had not "disappeared" by the hand of a magician with a magic wand, as my childhood brain had led me to believe. It became more evident to me just how much her disappearance had impacted and continued to impact our family. I would put myself in my mother and aunts' shoes, posing questions to myself like, "What if my sister disappeared?" "What if

the last thing I said to her was, “I wish you would just leave and never come back?” I would put myself in the position of my cousin, Amber, and frighten myself with the question, “What if mom disappeared?” Now, as I’ve reached adulthood, I put myself in the parental role and wonder, from my Aunt Shebby’s standpoint, how difficult losing custody of her child must have been. From my grandparents’ viewpoints, I wonder how awful it must feel to not know where in the world the child you brought into the world is. As I reach the age that my Aunt Shebby was at the time of her disappearance, I wonder, “What if I disappeared?”

As a graduate candidate for an M.F.A. in Acting at Louisiana State University, my final graduate assignment was a thesis performance project. I had complete freedom when it came to the concept of my project. It could be about whatever I wanted! My classmates and I were to develop a piece that would be 30-45 minutes. We would receive feedback from professors and each other about our projects in a class solely devoted to the development of thesis performance. I knew immediately that my piece would surround my Aunt Shebby. I had a story to tell and, more importantly, one that *needed* to be told.

The first major question I had for myself was how I could delve more deeply into and fully take note of my experience on a day-to-day basis, as I deal with the “loss” of a loved one. What is it that I’m dealing with? I never met her, so why does she impact my life so much? The second question I had for myself was how I could successfully shed light on something that, I believe, most people think is an unusual occurrence: the disappearance of a person. How do I facilitate a conversation about the topic so that it seems less foreign to those who have not experienced it? Finally, I wanted to show my

audience what is beyond the missing person's poster: the coping mechanisms of families that have a missing loved one. I chose to write and star in a one-woman show that I eventually called *Missing. . . A Story of Ambiguous Loss*.

In Chapter One of this document, I will be discussing the research process of developing the script of *Missing*. I will touch on the process of interviewing my family and turning them into characters in a one-woman show, how I developed their own individual voices, and my role as a writer, interviewer, and character. In Chapter Two, I will speak on my use of stream of consciousness, rhyme, and vocal and physical distinction, and how all of this led to a written script that eventually turned into a live performance. Chapter Three will be a reflection of my process, performance, and what it taught me about myself as a person and artist. I will conclude with a reflection on what I hope for the future of my piece and my discoveries about the creative process.

CHAPTER 1

In this chapter, I will address the process of developing my own character's words and interviewing my family members in order to acquire materials to turn into text. This was the first stage in the development of my thesis.

I began the research for my piece with myself. I wrote down all of my thoughts in a stream of consciousness fashion. Somehow, the words began to rhyme. Looking back, the development and ease of the rhyme make sense. Thoughts are connected in that way. For example, how do you get from looking at a cup of water to thinking about your funeral? You see a cup of water, you think about water, you think about where water is, you think about how oceans have water, you think about how you miss the beach, you think about how last time you went to the beach, you were warned about sharks, you think about being attacked by a shark, you think about dying at the hands of a shark, you think about everyone mourning your death after you've been mauled by a shark, you imagine what your funeral would be like.

It was through the recitation of my thoughts, that I realized how I would fit into this story. I would be the weaver. I would take video testimony from my family and allow their words to begin my rhymed thoughts or allow my thoughts to manifest their words. As I continued my research, I came across the term "ambiguous loss" (Morris). This was eye-opening because it gave my experience a name. There are two types of ambiguous loss. Type one is the one that my family experiences. It is a physical loss with a psychological presence. My Aunt Shebby is there, but she is not there. One can even feel ambiguous loss towards a person they never met, such as a grandparent who passed away before their birth, who they feel they know because of how often their

family speaks of them. Ambiguous loss is different from regular loss because there is no real closure, no certainty that the person is dead or that they will return. It's limbo. Ambiguous loss leaves those experiencing it frozen in the grieving process, awaiting closure, and can have extreme effects on how a family functions. How does my family function with this loss?

The step to answering that question was interviewing my family in a documentary fashion. Using the camera on my cell phone, I video recorded interviews with my grandparents, two of my aunts, and my cousin, Amber. I had a specific set of questions ready to ask them, but they really just served as a starting point because my family had much to say, especially in answer to my initial question of, "What were the circumstances surrounding Shebby's disappearance?" Each and every one of them had very different and surprising attitudes regarding talking about it. Here's the thing: gaining factual information was only part of my goal in interviewing them. I really wanted to know how they *felt* about the circumstances surrounding Shebby's disappearance. Throughout the years, Aunt Shebby has been frequently spoken of, but her actual disappearance has not.

Amber, Shebby's daughter, seemed confused by her mother's disappearance. She concluded that her mother must have left to protect her because, all her life, she had been told how much her mother loved her; she could see no other reason that her mother would leave her. My Grandmother seemed to enjoy talking about Aunt Shebby's disappearance. Of my entire family, she is the most hopeful that Shebby will return, even continuing to put money into a life insurance policy for Shebby because she "know[s] she ain't dead." My Aunt Sandy seemed to feel obligated to talk about it,

to give me as much information as possible so as to keep my Aunt Shebby alive or, in some way, manifest her being. One could sense a great deal of guilt from my Aunt Sandy, as her last words to my Aunt Shebby were, "I wish you would just leave and never come back." My Grandfather spoke mostly of his searches and how hard he tried to look for her. One could discern either a peace with having done all he could or a wondering of whether he actually had exhausted all of his options. My Aunt Deborah spoke the least. Other than my Grandmother, who is adamant that Shebby is alive, my Aunt Deborah was the only one who was also adamant about my Aunt Shebby's whereabouts. "Dead. I think she's dead," she said. I found myself pondering whether believing Shebby is dead and out of harm's way was my Aunt Deborah's way of coping with her disappearance.

With the permission of my twin sister, April, I made her a character without actually interviewing her. I did not think I would want anyone other than those that were alive to experience the disappearance of my Aunt Shebby in my show; however, a huge part of my show is how it has affected our entire family, whether we knew her or not. Any personal thought that I had that I could not make rhyme or that I felt would better benefit a monologue, I gave to the character, April. April, served as great weaver into my character's past and as a wonderful, buoyant, funny soul within a somewhat dark piece.

I had my ever-evolving thoughts, my family's words and points of view, and a need to share my family's story, to let people know that "the missing person" is not just the blonde teenager you occasionally see on national news. They are so much more real than that. They include Aunt Shebby and, underneath it all, they are families who

are left with a missing piece. The most effective way I could tell my story was to play myself, as well as the family members I interviewed. One of the strongest themes of my piece is family. By portraying each and every one of them and giving them a voice, I was saying, "I am my family and they are me. My Aunt Shebby is me. She is lost and, therefore, so are we. How do we find answers? How do we cope?" I wanted my Aunt Shebby to have as much presence in my piece as she has in my life, despite her absence. There is only one person, which I know of, who has the answers to my family's three decades of unanswered questions. I decided that, from my point of view, I wanted my Aunt Shebby to be my scene partner. I wanted to speak directly to her.

CHAPTER 2

In this chapter, I will discuss how my words and those of my family members' became a written script, how that script was put into the rehearsal process, and my experience with performing my piece for a live audience.

CREATION

After interviewing my family, my character's words continued to evolve. I carried around a small notebook so that if a thought or a rhyme came to my mind I would not forget it. This project was something that I thought about constantly. I began the process of watching the interview videos and manually transcribing my family's words into a document. Following that, I went through the long bits of text and attempted to cut the words of my family into a story that would still make sense. This was somewhat difficult. It being my family and their testimony, I was quite attached to the small nuances and sides stories they told; however, had I kept all of their words, the show would have certainly gone over the allotted time limit (30-45 minutes) we were given by the faculty. I chose to cut and keep certain things based on their pertinence to the story. Many of my family members said some of the exact same things regarding my Aunt Shebby and her disappearance. With six characters, it was not necessary for information to be repeated that many times, but it was important for me to discover whose individual story would benefit by uttering the information.

The grieving process is so complex among families because everyone goes through it differently. In this situation, some lost a daughter, some a sister, one a mother, and some a person they wished they'd had a chance meet. As the "weaver" of

these stories, I needed to make sure everyone's point of view was theatrically strong and that meant manipulating their words for the overall good of the piece.

For example, my Grandmother, aunt, and cousin, in one way or another, stated that they feel my Aunt Shebby is watching them, that they can feel her presence. I decided to have each one of them say those words because it benefited my theme of family and connectedness. Their grief is different, yet the same.

Many of my family members brought up that my Aunt Shebby had been addicted to drugs. I decided to only have that information stated once by my Aunt Sandy because having it repeated more than that would call too much attention to something that I felt would not benefit my goals for the show. I had one faculty member candidly admit to me that hearing that Aunt Shebby was on drugs made him not care about her, as a character, anymore. He thought, "Oh! She did it to herself." That was my biggest fear! I wanted to present a story that would make people think past, "This could never happen to me." I wanted my audience to wake up to this issue. I did not want to offer them another way to be unjustifiably naïve.

What this faculty member's comment said to me, however, was that, as the weaver, I had more work to do. Though I did not wish to call a lot of attention to my Aunt Shebby's drug problem, as a character in the show, myself, I could not ignore it either. I created this bit of text about a week and a half before the show:

You were caught up in drugs
Just couldn't give it up no matter how much the love
Of your family, your daughter just tugged and tugged
At your heart strings
You were a fiend.
I'm gonna be honest. I don't understand that.
Why? Why would you do that?
How? I'm having this horrible thought.

I know this is awful; I know my gra-ma's distraught
And I ought not even think this,
But it's something I've got
To ask. . .
Did you do this to yourself? I kinda blame you
For my family's worst nightmare eventually coming true
You had choices. You made choices.
Choices, choices, choices
Your drug of choice
Choices, choices, choices
Your lifestyle
Choices, choices, choices don't matter, Ashley
You're no saint, you're no martyr
A lot of this is ambiguous, but this one line doesn't blur
You were a person. You are a person.
Mixed up with those narcotics that were coursing through your veins
Is the blood of my family, of every human being.
You are not your choices
You're a mother
You're a daughter
You're a sister
You're a niece
Not a record or a profile or a skin tone
We must cease
These labels
You are a person
You're not the "media's missing person."
You're not a blonde teenager or seemingly perfect
But you're lost
You can't put a cost on a person
So someone should've looked for you
Someone should be looking and working on bringing you home.
And you wanted your baby back
What's so wrong with that?
Drugs doesn't equal no love.
I'm gon get my baby back!
Determination! I like that.
You had goals. You had purpose.
Purpose, purpose, purpose
Did you disappear on purpose?

I feel it was quite effective at addressing the "elephant in the room" while also staying true to my message. As the writer, it is my responsibility to know what message I want to put out and shape my script accordingly. I wanted to open my audience's eyes to

ambiguous loss and make the “missing person” real. Therefore, every word my family uttered in their interview was not needed in my script. The words that would benefit the story theatrically and, ultimately, help meet my goals were those that I chose.

Throughout my script, a word or sequence of words that I utter sends me into thought or manifest itself into a character. For example, I contemplate what “truth” is and I repeat it, saying, “truth, truth, truth” until it turns into “Ruth,” my Grandmother’s middle name and then I turn into my grandmother. Or, I try to go to bed and, after failing to do so, I speak on how the unknown whereabouts of my Aunt Shebby, at times, reveal thoughts that keep me up at night, saying, “Aunt Shebby, you could be dead. When that thought gets going, you can’t just go back to bed, bed, bed.” Eventually, “bed” turns into “dead,” which then turns into “Deb,” and then “Deborah” and I turn into my Aunt Deborah, sitting at her desk where I held her interview. This process of repetition served as a transition into new thoughts and characters, as well as benefitting my narrative of stream of consciousness, giving the audience an opportunity to see how, this girl (me) deals with grief that has no closure. It is constantly on her mind, to the point where the word “purpose,” as in determination, can make her think, “Did my Aunt Shebby disappear on purpose?” Below are the transcribed interviews with my family members. One can see how I omitted myself and created monologues.

TRANSCRIBED INTERVIEWS

FRANCIS HART

FH: Shebby left her. . . You not recordin’ that.

Me: Yes

FH: No.

Me: Yes. I’m not gonna show this to nobody. It’s just for me.

FH: Okay. Shebby was 24 years old. She left her pocketbook, she left her clothes, she left everything, and the police was tellin' us that because she was 24 she ran away and they aint look for her.

Me: And you don't think she ran away.

FH: No!

Me: No!

FH: No! Why would a woman leave her personal stuff?

Me: Yeah.

FH: They aint look for her.

Me: And you don't think she ran away?

FH: No!

Me: No!

FH: No! Why would a woman leave her personal stuff?

ME: Yeah.

FH: You know? She left her pocketbook, she left her driver's license, she left her social security number, she left everything. So. . . Why would she do that?

ME: And what were the circumstances surrounding her disappearance? Like, what was going on around that time?

FH: Ummm. . . her getting a divorce from her husband.

ME: Hmmm hmmm

FH: Hmmm hmmm. And then she called me that night and she. . . No. She called me that Thursday. She was in Graniteville. And, of course, Shebby was on drugs and she say, "Mama, I'm gon get my life straighten out. I'm gon get my life straighten out, and I'm gon get my baby back." And then she say, "Oooh!" and I say, "What, baby?" and she say, "He's here and that's the last time we seen her."

ME: That was the day before?

FH: That was the day before because we start lookin for her that Friday because she was 'spose to umm umm Amber's birthday party because I had her for that weekend and you see. . . (gets up to turn off tea kettle) what her husband did was so awful.

ME: What?

FH: Okay. Sandy told me that they went to a ball game. They went to um Sandy told me. . . they used to love to go to basketball games and football games. Shebby and her

husband would take sandy to keep the baby in the room while they go to the game. And Sandy told me, "Mama. . ." Shebby used to like to drink beer, but she didn't like drugs. She say, "He gave Shebby drugs." And I say, "What?" So. . . When Shebby got hooked on drugs, he caught hisself gettin' off drugs, okay? We sunt Shebby to Columbia to get treated for drugs, but you know what he did? He wdisent to court to use that against her and take her baby.

ME: Mmmm. And then he had custody?

FH:Mmmhmmm. And then from there, she, ya know? But, that Thursday, she call me and she say she was gonna get her life straighten out and she was talkin' so good. She say, "Mama, I love you. I'm gon get my life straighten out and I'm gon get my baby back." And I say, "Baby, you can do that." Right? We ain't hear from her since and that was 1987. Whatchu be doin? Recordin that?

ME: Yep. So. . . how was Aunt Shebby after the custody hearing?

FH:She was a mess. She loved her baby. She was a mess and for him to be that dirty. Her husband got that ole despicable man and paid him all that money and he got up there (mocking the lawyer), "She aint no good. She a drug addict. She dis and she dat." And he was just sittin up there. Her husband was actin like he just fell from Heaven and that's why God gon mmmmmhmmmm

ME: I mean, God already has.

FH: Yeah. I know it.

ME: He has issues. Amber told me the other day that she thinks he's an alcoholic because of that. Cuz sometimes he gets drunk and says, "I loved your mom. I loved your mom."

FH: I think he did, but he had so much influence from his mother and grandmother, especially his grandmamma. They had so much influence over. . .

ME: They didn't like her?

FH: No. No. And that was big part of her life because she just couldn't seem to come back.

ME: So. . . she would get good for a little while and then fall back again.

FH: Yeah. Yeah. I think he was responsible for that. Because we talk to the policeman. I think he work in Langley and the cops told us, "Do you want us to plant something in his car?" and we told him, "No."

ME: Why?!

FH: They believed us.

ME: Why didn't you wanna plant something?

FH: They believed that he had something to do with Sharon's missing.

ME: So . . . why didn't they plant something?

FH: Because we told them not to.

ME: Why?

FH: Because you don't do evil for that. That would've been wrong. Just like he went to court and used her going to rehab. You don't do that.

ME: Yeah.

FH: But the police say they would pull him over. They went to his job. They interviewed him.

ME: And he said he didn't know anything?

FH: (mocking) "I don't know nothin'. I don't know nothing'." But I know he did!

ME: Because he was the last person that saw her probably.

FH: He was! Because she told me and she was talkin' just like my Shebby. She say, "He's here." I said, "who's there?" She say, "(my husband) is here." Why would he be in Graniteville? If he was off drugs, why would he be in Graniteville? Why would he be looking for her?

ME: And that was the last time you talk to her?

FH: The last time. And then ummm that Friday when she didn't come to. . . I think it was that Friday. . . Because we used to have visitation rights with the baby. We could pick her up and bring her over here. We couldn't find her. And then we went to the policeman and they didn't do nothing. I got her social security number, I got her pocketbook, I got her clothes, I got everything and it was like she vanished without a trace.

ME: Mmmhmmmm

FH: It's unbelievable and then she still on this website in Arizona.

ME: Yeah! I saw it.

FH: Mmmhmmmm. She still up there, but ain't nothing.

ME: So . . . how did it affect you over time?

FH: It crush me baby. That's my baby.

ME: What did you think over time?

FH: Huh?

ME: What did you think the first few days?

FH: I thought that Shebby had . . . I knowed Shebby wasn't gon run away. . . I thought Shebby had gotten mixed up in something that was too big for her, ya know? Because me and Sandy and Deborah. . . we used to go to filler station or we be in town sometime and we feel like somebody watchin us but when we turn around aint nobody was there, ya know? It was just that weird feeling. So we don't know. We don't know whether she got involved in something she wasn't spose to and they would threaten us. . . She wouldn't let them threaten us, ya know? So. . . I don't know. (abruptly) That's enough.

ME: You done?

FH: That's enough.

ME: Can I ask you one more question?

FH: Yeah.

ME: Or. . . Can I ask you two more questions?

FH: Yeah.

ME: At this point in your life, where do you think Aunt Shebby is?

FH: Let me tell you bout this guy on my job. He was a weird guy. He was real religious. He drive a forklift. And I wouldn't tell nobody on my job because people don't care about you. All they wanna know is the facts so they can spread gossip around. So I told him that my daughter was missing and he listened to me and he got back on his forklift and he drove off and when he came back he say, "She know everything yall doin'." And it just, it just, ya know? And it all came back where I felt the presence of her.

ME: Mmmmmhmmmm

FH: And I believe him. He say, "She is watching over you. She know everything yall doin'." And the sad part about this is she don't know mike mike, sandy's children, ya know? She don't know you and April. One more.

ME: If you could say something to her right now, what would you say?

FH: Come home. We will deal with it. Come. Home. Ya know? And I say this all the time. If Shebby were to come to the door, when wouldn't know whether to hug her or slap her. I'm serious. I wouldn't know which reaction, but I would want her to come home. Cuz we'll deal with that.

ME: Thank you, Gramommmmy. I love you and I appreciate you taking the time.

CASSANDRA CANALES

ME: This is Cassandra Canales. Hello.

CC: Hi.

ME: So. . . first I just wanted to ask you what do you remember about Aunt Shebby and what was life like growing up with her and things like that?

CC: Your Aunt Sharon. Well, the interesting thing is Amber has grown up to be almost exactly like her.

ME: Really?

CC: So, if you are around Amber you know your Aunt Shebby. Except for she had a sensitive side that she couldn't hide as well as amber appears to hide. So. . .she was very sensitive. Things hurt her very deeply. And you knew that because she would curse you out. She was the one person that I knew that could bright up the room no matter what. She would walk into the room and it didn't matter if it was a KKK meeting. Everyone would be in awe of her. And then she, I was actually telling Amber this this weekend. . . She was the smallest one in the family. Like, 5'4", 120 pounds; but, she could wear all of our clothes and make them look better on her. She would tie em up and all kind of stuff and I would be like, "That's my shoes" and your grandma would be like, "That's my jacket." She would always look very dapper because she could do that, ya know? She never really had a lot for herself, but she could make everyone's outfits look better. . . on her! Not on me. I couldn't do the same thing she could do. I do realize. . . Ya know, I was fourteen when she disappeared. We had an interesting relationship like we were the two siblings that fought all the time.

ME: Gotcha

CC: So. . . I remember ya know, making fun of her when her and Cathy would be out there with their boyfriends and I would pull their tubetops down or throw koolaid in their face. I was this crazy brat. So for whatever reason, we just didn't get along. I knew she loved me. She knew I loved her, but yeah. . . I think the one thing that affects me most about her disappearance is that. . . ya know, we say no regrets, and the last time I talked to her I said I wished I never saw her again and

ME: Wow

CC: Obviously I didn't. That's almost 27 years of I never saw her again. That affects me because I have a hard time with confrontation. Whereas before, I didn't. Even at that 14. Throughout my teenage years and young adult years It's become hard for me to leave a conversation unanswered. It became hard for me to tell people exactly what I wanted to tell them because I just didn't want to go through that ever again, so. . .

ME: Yeah.

CC: That really is the biggest impact I know I've had and I don't know if a lot of people know that because, obviously, I never wanted that to happen.

ME: Exactly. What can you say about her relationship with Amber?

CC: Oh my gosh. She absolutely loved Amber. She was the light of her light. She strategically named her Amber because of what it meant: Amber, golden bronze.

ME: Awwww

CC: She did all this ridiculous stuff. Like, she ate raw liver because they said it would make the baby healthy. She would do everything. What a lot of people don't know is that Sharon and her husband had a horrible back and forth relationship. Her husband didn't want Amber and she literally hid her pregnancy for 6 months so no one knew she was pregnant until then. That just shows you what she'd go through. I mean, told absolutely no one. I remember I was at camp when Amber was born and the very first thing I wanted to do was hold Amber and Sharon made me scrub down like I was going into surgery, wash my hands, use handsantizer, wipe with wipes and then she told me I couldn't hold her, but I could touch her. I was like, "Really?!" She made me do all of that! I just remember the times with them together and their like two little mini mes. She loved her child. It flabbergasts me what could take her from Amber. I don't think it was something that Sharon could take lightly. She could leave us. She could leave her husband. She would absolutely not have left her child unless she had to to protect her.

ME: So. . . What were the circumstances surrounding Aunt Shebby's disappearance?

CC: She, unfortunately, with her relationship with her husband, she and her husband were addicted to drugs. I think she was always an alcohol drinker and when she got with him she started experimenting with drugs and it got worse. It got to the point where he would send her out for drugs with no money. I mean, how do you do that? He reduced her to the lowest low she could ever be. His mother treated her horrible. As a married woman, if she went to her house, she had to sleep on the floor. They treated her like just nothing. It was because they were jealous of her. Finally, she decided she was going to leave and there was a custody battle and it got really ugly. She didn't have a lot of money. He got an ex- family court judge as his attorney so it was real hard ball. They painted her as an unfit mother and there were things that she wasn't happy about. At that point, your grandparents felt the need to protect Amber because, really, she didn't need to be with either one of them and your aunt Shebby, in her state, felt that we were trying to take the only thing she ever loved away from her when actually we weren't. She was gonna be around. So, you've got that. Ya know, the custody battle. The last conversation she had with your grandmother, she said, "I have something on him. I'm gonna take him to court." So. . . could he have done something to her? He could have. She also was involved with a lot of bad people and she was the type that if you wronged her, she had to wrong you back. So she did call the cops on a known drug dealer and stuff like that and I'm sure people were mad. She was around so many bad people, we don't know if she pissed somebody off, if she owed somebody.

ME: Yall just knew something bad was bound to happen at some point.

CC: Yeah. Ya know, if she stayed in that lifestyle. Your grandparents had a hard time with that because they issued tough love and I'm sure they feel they turned their back on her, but we really needed her to admit she had a problem. I mean, we would fight her. Take her to drug rehab and she would sign herself out. I mean, it just was always really bad and there was nothing we could legally do because she was an adult. So, there's all kinds of stories. They say she was a mule and helped drug dealers run drugs. She could've gotten in some mess there. She could be in witness protection.

ME: Yeah. That was another question I was gonna ask you because I'm sure over the years, your ideas have changed because I remember talking to mom and some days, she thought she was alive, but the last time I talked to her about it. . . Because, ya know, whenever July came around, mom had a hard time.

CC: Right.

ME: She was like, "I know she's dead." That's what she said. What do you think?

CC: To be honest, if I. . . I would start with your dad. If anybody knows, it's him. He has access to the information because there's just a lot of craziness that occurred. I remember being so frustrated! I just wanted answers. When I got old enough, I hired a private investigator and a few days later, your mother called me in hysterics saying, "I can't believe you hired a private investigator." I couldn't believe that she knew, but not only that, that she knew I hired him. Your mom just told me to stay out of it, that these were dangerous people who would kill my family and that was enough to scare the heck out of me. I don't blame anybody. I just think everyone was doing the best they could to protect the family.

ME: If you could say something to her right now, what would you say?

CC: To Sharon?

ME: Yeah.

CC: I would say, "come home. We'll work it out. You're missing so much here. We have a great family. It has always been your grandparent's dying wish to see her again. We always, always, always, work everything out. And, obviously, I didn't mean it when I said that I never wanted to see you again. On the contrary, I would probably never leave your side if you walked through that door.

ME: Thank you!

CC: You're welcome.

ME: Do you have anything else to say?

CC: No.

ME: Thank you.

CC: You welcome, baby.

DEBORAH HART

ME: Deborah Hart. So. . . first, could you tell me a few things about your sister, Sharon? Who was she?

DH: Sharon was very. . . What was Sharon? Sharon was very tight with her money like Amber. Sharon would borrow money from you and when it was time to pay, she would get upset. She would cause an argument so she didn't have to pay you back. She was sweet, loving, a good mother, she would give you anything, except when she borrowed money.

ME: What can you say about her relationship with Amber?

DH: She loved Amber, just adored Amber to death.

ME: What were the circumstances surrounding her disappearance. Like, what was going on around that time?

DH: Her and her husband were separated. They were in a legal battle for Amber. They had not gone to court yet so they were fighting over physical custody. They were just snatching Amber back and forth and then Sharon could not take the pressure and so she started drinking and hanging out and he got custody of Amber.

ME: Okay. So, how did that affect Aunt Shebby?

DH: It destroyed her. Sharon disappeared the day after Amber's birthday. But, the day of Amber's birthday, Sharon tried to kidnap her. She asked if she could take her for a ride and I wouldn't let her so she was upset with me.

ME: After you first didn't hear from her, what did you think?

DH: I thought she had gotten herself into something she couldn't get herself out of. I know she was supposed to testify against someone and she didn't want to so I thought maybe she got scared and ran away.

ME: After a few months?

DH: Around that same time 8 girls disappeared and the police thought they may have been abducted and put into sex trafficking. They were all young, light complexioned, petite, and small like Sharon.

ME: Kidnapped in the same area?

DH: All in Aiken. Daddy went out and did his own investigation. That's how he had his aneurysm. He worked all day long, went looking in the street all night long, was spending all kind of money, almost went bankrupt trying to find Sharon. He didn't want to tell Mama what he was finding out and that's how he had his stroke. He held it all in.

ME: How did her disappearance affect you?

DH: Mama and them were always terrified. We had to stay in constant contact with them. I had to watch my parents buy all of these presents for Christmas and birthdays and they would pile up. Just waiting for her to come home.

ME: How does it affect you today?

DH: I feel close to my own kids and family and I try to solve all problems. If you can't solve it, at least discuss it.

ME: At this point, if you had to say where you think Aunt Shebby was, what would you say?

DH: Dead.

ME: Really?

DH: Yes.

ME: And if you could say something to her, what would you say?

DH: I miss you and I love you.

ME: Do you have anything else to say?

DH: No, Ashley.

ME: Thank you so much, Aunt Deborah.

William Hart

ME: This is William Hart. I'm not gonna show this to anyone. It's just for me.

WH: Okay.

ME: What was it that you were thinking right after you hadn't heard from her in a while?

WH: We knew she wouldn't have missed Amber's birthday. That was the first thing.

ME: Hmmhmmm

WH: I tried to tell you grandma the stuff that your mom and Shebby were caught up in, but she didn't wanna hear it. There was nothing I could say. Your gram-ma didn't want nobody sayin nothing about her children.

ME: Did you look for Aunt Shebby?

WH: I went all over looking for her. I went all over Aiken and to Augusta. I drove all up and down the highways. I just couldn't find her. Sometimes I'd be out 2 or 3 days just looking. I finally realized I couldn't run her down so I just stopped.

ME: I see.

WH: I aint never gave up, I just hoped she'd come to me.

ME: Yeah.

WH: I believe I saw her one day in Augusta. I thought I heard her yell, "Daddy. Daddy." I tried to run her down, but couldn't catch her. I tried everything. I just couldn't run her down.

ME: Thank you, Granddaddy. Anything else?

WH: Nah. Love ya.

AMBER WILLS

ME: Amber Wills

AW: Heyyyyy.

ME :So , tell me about your mother and what you know of her disappearance. I know you don't have a lot of time. ..

AW: Oh that's okay. Ummmm. . . My mom went missing in July because Gra-ma said she knew something was wrong when she didn't come to my birthday party. She went missing when I was 3 and I'm about to be 30 so 27 years. I know it's weird because I was so young, but I remember the last time I saw her. I could hear her fussin with grendeddy and I heard gra-ma say, "No, Shebby, don't leave, don't leave." And she came, gave me a kiss, said she loved me, and then she left. And that was the last time I saw her.

ME: How has her disappearance affected you?

AW: Well, I have a son and I never intended on having kids because I didn't ever want them to go through what I went through, to grow up without a mom, but since I do have a child, I am very protective. I don't like to leave him for long periods of time because I don't know if that's going to be the last time I see him; but, when I do leave him, I make sure to kiss him and say I love him so that, if something happens, that will be his last memory.

ME: At this point in your life, where do you think she is?

AW: I would like to say that she's still alive and that she's under protection from circumstances and people that she was involved with at the time. I constantly feel like someone is watching me, but it's always a comforting feeling, like someone is looking out for me. I think she's watching our family.

ME: What would you say to her if she were here?

AW: If she were here, I would say, "I'm not angry with her. (begins to cry)

ME: It's okay.

AW: "I've always been told that she loved me so much and I feel like the reason she left was to protect me and I love her."

ME: Thank you, Amber. I love you. I'm sorry.

REHEARSAL

The hardest part about the rehearsal process was simply getting it started. It is very difficult to let go of a script that is your own, but with the help of deadlines and designated rehearsal time, I was able to finally take off my playwriting hat and become the actor. Once the script was written, it was time to get it on its feet. A schedule was created by one of my classmates that designated times that I could rehearse in the actual space I would be performing in (LSU's Studio Theatre), as well as other reserved rooms. In the beginning of the rehearsal process, I used my time to stage my piece. In my script, I begin at my Grandparent's house in Aiken, South Carolina on May 30, 2014. By the end, I am in my apartment in Baton Rouge, Louisiana on July 8, 2014. The transitions from Aiken to Baton Rouge were quite easy with lighting and a line in my show where I state, "Back to Louisiana."

What was important to me about the set was that it make me feel comfortable and that it feed my impulses to become new characters. I made my set as close to that of my own apartment as possible, using many items that would help me along the journey of my piece, such as a framed picture of my late mother and the stun gun that I keep on my night stand. The set also had a bed, couch, and table, which served as the three locations to turn into my aunts, grandparents, cousin, and sister.

The next step in the rehearsal process of *Missing* was to specify the characters. My one-woman show has seven characters, including myself. Six are women and one

is a man. We all come from the same family and from the same town. I was advised by my voice professor, Stacey Cabaj, to pick a defining trait in each one of their voices. My cousin, Amber, for example, speaks with vocal fry. Though she does not constantly use it, for the purpose of distinction from the other characters, I made that her main vocal quality. Everyone in my family speaks very fast, but again, it was important to me to figure out whose character would benefit the most from quick speech. It had to be that specific. I decided to have my twin sister, April, have the fast speech because, vocally, we are very similar. At times, when I hear myself on recording, I think, "That sounds like April." I wanted to keep that quality of togetherness or "twin-ness," while still making her idiolect different from mine. After mapping out each one of my family member's distinct vocal qualities and, furthermore, mapping out the ones that we shared, I applied a go-to vocal quality and key sentence to each character, as a way in. Did I sound exactly like each of my family members? No. Theatrically, did their vocal representation benefit the plot and their individual stories? Yes.

The next way into each of these characters was to find how they physically moved in the world of this piece. I referred back to the video interviews and finding distinction was quite easy. My Aunt Deborah is straightforward. She had her arms crossed the entire interview. My cousin Amber was a bit hunched over with her hands interlaced. My Grandfather has a hand that is permanently closed into a fist from a stroke he had a month after his daughter's disappearance.

The vocal life that I created for each character really fed into their physical movements. My sister speaks quickly and her movements were buoyant. My Grandfather's speech is very slow and deliberate and he stayed in one position the

entire time. Specifically finding the vocal and physical life separately benefited me more than simply trying to mimic my family.

I gave each of my family member's characters' a designated spot for their monologues to be performed. I tried to stay as true to where I interviewed them as possible. I interviewed my grandmother at her kitchen table and my Aunt Deborah at her desk, so I placed them stage left, seated at a table. My Aunt Sandy and cousin, Amber, were interviewed in my Grandparent's living room, so I placed them center stage on the couch. My grandfather was interviewed in his bedroom, so I placed him stage right on my bed.

Rehearsing a solo performance piece was different from my usual process because I had to constantly remember that what felt good to me might not necessarily look good on stage. For example, after showing my piece to a faculty member for the first time, he let me know that a lot of my blocking was drifting stage left and that I rarely used stage right, making my apartment seem not quite "lived in." Directing one's self is difficult. I had consistent check-ins with my faculty members and peers and had the opportunity to show my piece to them individually. I needed another set of eyes. When rehearsing a play, for example, I may enter a scene and just find a place, amongst the other actors, that will allow the stage picture to look its best. I did not have that for this process, so the showings to my peers and faculty were extremely beneficial. In hindsight, I think the best thing for me to do would have been to video record myself rehearsing so I could have made the rehearsing easier on myself; however, ultimately, directing myself gave me the ultimate gift! I was able to ask myself, "How do I like to be directed? What feeds me?" Preparation was so important: creating key sentences,

blocking my piece, memorizing the script. I have always known that I thrive in structure, but this is when it was really confirmed. I dislike for things to be willy-nilly. When there is preparation and less things to think about, I can be and live in the moment.

Otherwise, I am thinking about my piece as one large clump, as opposed to what my character is going through right now, in this moment.

I always made sure to get a good physical preparation before I began my piece because doing a one-person show is physically taxing. I would go about my usual physical and vocal warm-ups and end it by laying on my back and just taking a few breaths, allowing my breath to deepen and lower into my diaphragm. By the end of my piece, my breath was usually very high in my chest and I would do a cool down with the same method.

PERFORMANCE

I had the opportunity to perform my show twice: once on December 11, 2014 and again on December 14, 2014. My stomach was in knots the entire day of my opening. *This story is so important to me. What if I'm the only one who cares? This story is also very exposing. Should I be airing out my family secrets? It's too late now!!!* Some of my family came into town to attend the show. That made me even more wracked with fear.

As I reflect on my performances, I can say that they were among the best experiences of my life. One never really knows the full impact (or lack thereof) of their piece until it is presented in front of an audience. I believe my audience "got it." They laughed when I expected them to laugh and even at some moments that I wasn't expecting! They seemed connected and emotional when I hoped they would be. A

periaktoi was placed upstage left with a projection of my Aunt Shebby. It is the same picture that has been used on her missing person's poster for 27 years. It was another way of stating, "She may not be here, but she *is* here." I've heard countless times throughout my life as a theatre artist that some of the most influential characters in a piece of theatre are those that never appear onstage. I took that to a different level by making that "influential character" my scene partner. Having her image remain even after my final words were uttered and the last light was brought down expressed that she will never be gone. This form of grief will go on until we find answers. By choosing to make my Aunt Shebby my scene partner, I made my audience my scene partner and, therefore, my family. In an assessment of the show, one of my advisors stated that he loved seeing me onstage, as myself, with a whole group of people who were on my side. I felt the audience and I had taken the journey together. Many who saw my show have shared their stories of missing loved ones with me. One man told me that sitting behind my family and watching them as they watched me was one of the best theatre experiences he has ever had.

FINAL SCRIPT

MISSING. . . A STORY OF AMBIGUOUS LOSS

This piece surrounds the disappearance of Sharon Lynn Hart-Wills or, as her family lovingly called/calls her, “Shebby” on July 10, 1987.

CHARACTERS:

Ashley

Amber

Frances

April

Sandy

Deborah

Doug

Sharon’s Niece

Sharon’s Daughter

Sharon’s Mother

Sharon’s Niece

Sharon’s Youngest Sister

Sharon’s Oldest Sister

Sharon’s Father



My Aunt Shebby went missing in July of 1987, 27 years ago. I’m 23 years old, so I never got the opportunity to meet her, but she’s had a profound impact on my life and the way I was raised. She is a polarizing figure in the life of my family. Interesting, in my younger years, I found myself talking to her, consulting her, telling her I missed her. She was, in a way, an imaginary friend and she still holds a dear place in my heart, despite the fact that I never met her. This picture has hung at the highest level of my matriarchal grandmother and hilarious grandfather’s home for as long as I can remember. This image is also the one that has been used for almost 30 years on my Aunt Shebby’s missing person’s poster. All my life, I’ve wondered where she is. . .

(The above image is projected behind Ashley for the entirety of the piece.)

Ashley:

Lights up. May 30, 2014. I’m at my grandparent’s house. And it’s my birthday!

(sings) *Happy Birthday to us! Happy birthday to*

Us, us, us

We’re an “us.”

We're a "we."

I got a twin sister

It's my birthday?

It's hers too. It's gotta be.

Happy Birthday to us

It's memorial day weekend so everybody's here.

There's my baby cousins, Angel, Alex, and Amari, the lady

Brandon, Shameka, and their new born baby

My Aunt Sandy, my Aunt Deborah, my gra-ma, and grendeddy

My twin sister, April, and her boyfriend, Charlie

My boyfriend, Ellington,

And Amber, Mike-Mike, and Kenya, her husband

(Sees picture of Aunt Shebby)

Where are you?

Did you materialize?

Are you in disguise?

Did you run away?

Were you led astray?

Are you scared? Are you warm? Do you eat good?

I know you were caught up in some things. You should

Know. . . You're missed.

You stepped off the grid.

No one knows why you did.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Did we track you?

That reminds me. . . Back to questions.

Were you kidnapped, attacked, shoved in a sack?

Thrown over a shoulder and taken, just like that?

Can you hear this? Can you see this? Can you feel this? Do you notice?

We did.

Dead, alive, ran away, witness protection?

You missed the cake.

It was your daughter's birthday.

Amber, my cousin, her take.

Amber:

My mom went missing in July because Gra-ma said she knew something was wrong when she didn't come to my birthday party. She went missing when I was 3 and I'm about to be 30 so 27 years. I know it's weird because I was so young, but I remember the last time I saw her. I could hear her fussin with grendeddy and I heard gra-ma say, "No, Shebby, don't leave, don't leave." And she came, gave me a kiss, said she loved me, and then she left. And that was the last time I saw her. I have a son and I never intended on having kids because I didn't ever want them to go through what I went through, to grow up without a mom, but since I do have a child, I am very protective. I don't like to leave him for long periods of time because I don't know if that's going to be the last time I see him; but, when I do leave him, I make sure to kiss him and say I love him so that, if something happens, that will be his last memory. I would like to say that

she's still alive and that she's under protection from circumstances and people that she was involved with at the time. I constantly feel like someone is watching me, but it's always a comforting feeling, like someone is looking out for me. I think she's watching our family. If she were here, I would say, "I'm not angry with her. I've always been told that she loved me so much and I feel like the reason she left was to protect me and I love her."

Ashley:

No way. That's a clue. That's a sign.
You're no family of mine,
If you'd leave a 3-year-old daughter to forever wrack her mind,
As to how you left, why you're gone, where you are.
Where are you?

(To her family offstage)

Bye! I love yall!
I'll call when I'm home!
Back to Louisiana
Back to being alone
I love you too.
I'll miss you.

(To herself)

Miss miss miss missing. . .
Where are you?

(lights up on rest of the apartment. Ashley arrives home and goes through her routine of locking her doors, putting board in door, checking windows, under the bed, table, and setting her alarm)

How it's affected me? Ashley?
I'm paranoid. A freakazoid.
I triple lock doors, I'm on all fours,
Trying to look under the bed,
Cuz I know the one time I don't, I'll be dead.
I've got a stun gun by my bed
Mase on my keys
Slight experience in self-defense so I can whack 'em in the knees
Them? Who is *them*? Who are *they*?
I think someone's after me.
I'm afraid.
Why shouldn't I be?
This thing's real to me.
This thing tore apart my family.
My mom went crazy.
Is somebody watching me?
You were last seen walking down Church street.

What went down after that is still a mystery.
It's like our family's big bang theory.
Something happened, something occurred, seemingly unseen.
The effect it's had is nothing short of amazing.
So what's the truth? Where are you?
Truth. Truth. Truth. Truth. Truth.
I guess you make your own truth.
Gra-ma. Your mother. Frances Ruth.

Frances:

Shebby was 24 years old. She left her pocketbook. She left her clothes. She left her driver's license. She left her social security number. She left everything and the police told us that because she was 24, she ran away. Noooo. They ain't look for her. Why would a woman leave her personal stuff? Shebby's husband got caught up in drugs and they both started experimenting and by the time Shebby got really hook, her husband caught hisself getting off drugs. We sent Shebby to a rehab center in Columbia and while she was away, her ex-husband used that information to get custody of their child, to get Amber. We went to the custody hearing and his lawyer was sayin' all this stuff about her and her husband was just sitting there like he was a saint. God gon get him for that. Shebby called me that Thursday before she disappeared. She say, "Mama, I'ma get my life straighten out. I'm gon get my baby back and everything gon work out." She was talkin so good. She was talkin just like my Shebby. She said, "I love you and I'm gon get my baby back." That was the last time I talked to her. We ain't heard from her since. That was 1987. We started looking for her the next day cuz she was spose to come to Amber's birthday party. Not knowing where she was. . . It crushed me. It still crushes me. The first few days I thought Shebby got mixed up in something that was too big for her. The sad part about this is she don't know yall. She don't know Mike-Mike, her own grandchild, or Cali, or Sandy's children, or you and April. She's been gone longer than I had her. People don't know what that's like. They just don't know. Me, Sandy, and Debbie sometimes feel like somebody watchin us. It's weird. If Shebby were to come to the door, I wouldn't know whether to hug her or slap her. I just want her to come home. Whatever the problem is, we'll deal with it. We always do.

Ashley:

You were caught up in drugs
Just couldn't give it up no matter how much the love
Of your family, your daughter just tugged and tugged
At your heart strings
You were a fiend.
I'm gonna be honest. I don't understand that.
Why? Why would you do that?
How? I'm having this horrible thought.
I know this is awful; I know my gra-ma's distraught
And I ought not even think this,
But it's something I've got

To ask. . .
Did you do this to yourself? I kinda blame you
For my family's worst nightmare eventually coming true
You had choices. You made choices.
Choices, choices, choices
Your drug of choice
Choices, choices, choices
Your lifestyle
Choices, choices, choices don't matter, Ashley
You're no saint, you're no martyr
A lot of this is ambiguous, but this one line doesn't blur
You were a person. You are a person.
Mixed up with those narcotics that were coursing through your veins
Is the blood of my family, of every human being.
You are not your choices
You're a mother
You're a daughter
You're a sister
You're a niece
Not a record or a profile or a skin tone
We must cease
These labels
You are a person
You're not the "media's missing person."
You're not a blonde teenager or seemingly perfect
But you're lost
You can't put a cost on a person
So someone should've looked for you
Someone should be looking and working on bringing you home.
And you wanted your baby back
What's so wrong with that?
Drugs doesn't equal no love.
I'm gon get my baby back!
Determination! I like that.
You had goals. You had purpose.
Purpose, purpose, purpose
Did you disappear on purpose?
I'm gon get my baby back.
It must've been sickening to live with that
The girl you grew inside you
Ripped from you
And there's nothing you can do
Oh God
That's what gra-ma goes through
Everyday without you
Where are you?

A daughter wouldn't do this.
She wouldn't leave her own mother broken up and essentially clueless.
You *must've* been taken.
But where's your being? Your body?
Maybe you ran off with some hottie.
Maybe you fell in love, he got you off drugs,
You moved to Paris, away from all the thugs.
You drink tea and take walks
And you don't give your old life a second thought.
Maybe. . . you're happy? No.
I . . . don't. . . know. No. know.
There is no "know." There is no knowing.
We have all of these theories, but where is the showing.
There's nothing to show for it.
Can anyone find hope in that shit.
Find faith in a pit
Of black, of unknowns, of no proof?
My Aunt Sandy, your youngest sister, did it.

Sandy:

Amber has grown up to be almost exactly like her mother. Shebby loved Amber. She was the light of her life. She named her Amber because of what it meant: Amber, golden bronze. She ate raw liver because some told her it was good for the baby. She would do everything. She went through anything to keep her safe. It flabbergasts me what could take her from her. She could leave us. She could leave her husband. She would absolutely not have left her child unless she had to in order to protect her. She and her husband were so bad for each other. Finally, she decided she was going to leave and there was a custody battle and it got really ugly. They painted her as an unfit mother and there were things that she wasn't happy about and she knew that she needed to change, but she loved her daughter. At that point, your grandparents felt the need to protect Amber because, really, she didn't need to be with her mom or her dad and your aunt Shebby, in her state, felt that we were trying to take the only thing she ever loved away from her. She had a sensitive side that she couldn't hide well. Things hurt her very deeply. Your grandparents had a hard time with it because they issued tough love. We just needed her to admit that she had a problem. I was 14 when she disappeared. We fought all the time. She's ten years older than me. I was the obnoxious little sister. I think the one thing that affects me most about her disappearance is that the last time I talked to her, I said I wish I'd never see her again and I, obviously, didn't. . I thought maybe when your mom died, that she'd show up. I waited outside of the wake while everyone was inside, just thinking, "She couldn't stay away from Cat's wake." I didn't see her. I don't know if I'd recognize her. Shebby was so tiny. Like 5'4", 120 pounds and she was stunning. She would walk into the room, didn't matter if it was a KKK meeting, everyone was in awe of her. If I could say something to her, I would say, "Come home. We'll work it out. You're missing so much here. We have a great family.

It has always been your grandparent's dying wish to see her again. We always, always, always, work everything out. And, obviously, I didn't mean it when I said that I never wanted to see you again. On the contrary, I would probably never leave your side again if you were to walk through that door.

Ashley:

I didn't mean it, I didn't mean it, I didn't mean it
Can you imagine regretting something that you said at 14? It
Would seem so stupid, so small
If she could have foreseen it
I know Aunt Sandy wouldn't have said it
She's come to dread it
And thread it into her head
She can't leave things unsaid
Regret.

(Ashley says a prayer for her family and her Aunt Sandy.)

(Ashley grabs computer and goes to desk.)

I can't even imagine. I cannot explain.

The torment, the pain

If my sister went missing and was never seen again.

You and my mom were best friends. Like twins.

Like me and my sister. We are inseparable.

My mom losing that connection must have been unbearable.

I think Mom's glad she had twins. One to look out for the other.

The three musketeers: me, April, and our mother.

My twin, April, your niece, the other half of my piece speaks.

April:

This idea of "the missing" is really interesting to me. Like, this one time, I was in WalMart and I saw this lady take out her chapstick while she was walking. Don't ask me why I was watching this girl. I'm a creeper. Whatever. Anyway. . . I saw this lady take out her chapstick, swipe some on her lips, and put it back in her pocket. Only she didn't stick it in all the way so it fell out, it hit the ground, and the guy she was with, her boyfriend, husband, whoever kicked it under the ice machine. They both looked down because they heard something hit the ground, but both were completely oblivious to what happened. I had an impulse to help them out, but they were walking really fast and it was just chapstick. The point of that whole story is to say that she probably got home and said, "Where's my chapstick? I know I put it in my pocket." She'll never know where it is. She probably thinks it just disappeared, vanished; but, I know where that chapstick is. I'm probably the only person on this planet who knows where that chapstick is. Somebody always knows. Someone has information on Aunt Shebby's whereabouts and, for whatever reason, they've kept quiet. Things don't just magically disappear. They just get lost. When mom lost Shebby, I think she lost part of herself. I don't think either of us, in the 16 years that we were raised by mom before her aneurysm, got to experience being raised by a mother that wasn't constantly coping with *this thing*, ya know? She was a fantastic mother; she did damn good for being a

single parent and I think we turned out great; but, ya know? Something was missing. I mean, I don't know what I'd do if you were just (*snaps*) "Poof. Gone."

(Ashley picks up her phone and improvises a call with her twin sister, April)

Ashley:

Gra-ma told me once that when you disappeared, mom had a break-down and never bounced back

Looking back on it, I guess that's true. I can see that.

I can see why or I can understand why.

I can't see anything. I wasn't there, but I try

To comprehend what knowing you would have been like.

What losing you would have felt like.

Mom told me once on an anniversary of your disappearance that she knew you were dead.

I don't know what she thinks now cuz she's actually dead.

Actually, actually, actually

I actually witnessed her death

I actually saw her take her last breath

I actually watched as they laid her in her in the ground

I ugly cried and I screamed.

It was an awful, terrible sound

I held her hand and I grieved by her death bed.

My mom is actually dead.

That ain't ambiguous grief.

That's grief. That's loss.

Loss loss loss lost lost

What would we classify you as?

Dead? Alive? Somewhere in between?

What's stepped off the planet and never again seen?

A "legal" death certificate

My family don't care.

That doesn't tell us if you're gone or if you're *actually* out there

Somewhere

You know what I mean?

(Referring to computer screen)

July10, 1987: The last day Sharon Hart-Willis was seen.

Wait. What? Your last name's spelled wrong. Sharon Hart WILLIS.

Who messed that up? It's had a ripple effect.

Your name is spelled wrong on every missing person site I've checked.

It's like the person you are. The person you were?

Keeps getting more lost in this big universe.

Are you on my grid? Are you on my wavelength?

Thought. Thought. Thought. Thought. Thought. Thought. Thought.

Thoughts beget questions. Answers? NOT!

Wow. Willis. Willis. An "I." The letter "I."

Makes a difference.
I... miss you.
I... love you.
I... wish that you'd come home.
All the things my family thinks when they're sitting all alone.

I I I I I

Eyes. They wanna see you.
If seeing is believing, than I guess you don't exist.
If seeing is believing, then I guess that all the twist-ed
Explanations that come to mind mean nothing? Have no merit.
The only problem with that is I've come to inherit
This weird-ass paranoia that is, literally, crippling.
It makes me short of breath and makes my body do this stiffening. . . thing.
What if I disappeared?
To think that this could happen. . . You know what? I'm out.
I can't think about this anymore. I'm getting scared. Lights out.

(Ashley turns off her lamp and goes to bed or, at least, tries. She tosses and turns. She hears a noise and sits up. (beat) She reaches to her bedside table and picks up the pepper spray; grabs stun gun; activates it; goes to window)

Dark thoughts. That's what keeps me up at night.
Unlike the people who knew you, I get a fright
When I feel that someone is watching me
I feel it constantly.
It's not a comforting feeling. It's very unsettling.
It starts with a thought and then turns into me wrestling
With how "uncommon" this
This couldn't happen to me
But, it happened to you and you're on my family tree
Did you know Baton Rouge had a serial killer?
Derrick Todd Lee
He was on America's Most Wanted
Top 10 Fugitives: Number 3

(flips window open; No one is there. Ashley slides to the floor, closes her eyes, and the lights come up as if the night is done and morning is breaking through.)

When I wake up in the morning from a bad night's sleep,
I'm so relieved to see light I could actually weep
There's something creepy about the dark, about unknowns
I know it's kind of silly because in 23 years I've grown
Into a respectable, young adult who shouldn't scare so easily
But, when I get to thinking about this stuff, it's hard to feel completely
Safe. It's creepy. It's freaky. It hurt everyone so deeply.
You could be dead.
When that thought gets going, you can't just go back to bed.
Bed bed bed bed

Dead dead dead

Deb Deborah Deborah Aunt Deborah, your oldest sister

Deborah:

The last time I saw Shebby was on Amber's birthday before the party. Actually, the day of Amber's birthday, she tried to take Amber. She said she was going for a ride and wanted to take her with her, but I wouldn't let her. I didn't want mama to be mad wit me. When she first disappeared, I thought she had gotten herself into something she couldn't get herself out of. I thought maybe she got scared and ran away. But, around that same time 8 girls disappeared and the police thought they may have been abducted and put into sex trafficking. They were all young, light complexioned, petite, and small like Sharon.

Mama stayed in contact with the coroner of town and every time they found skeletal remains, they would call Mama and she would bring Shebby's teeth records. Daddy went out and did his own investigation. That's how he had his aneurysm. He worked all day long, went looking in the street all night long, was spending all kind of money, almost went bankrupt trying to find Sharon. He didn't want to tell Mama what he was finding out and that's how he had his stroke. He held it all in.

Mama and them were always terrified. We had to stay in constant contact with them. I had to watch my parents buy all of these presents for Christmas and birthdays and they would pile up. Just waiting for her to come home. Dead. I think she's dead. I miss her and I love her. She was just lookin for love in the wrong places.

Ashley:

Looking for love in all the wrong places. . .

I think that's a challenge every human being faces

My family loves you

My grandfather searched for you

He didn't find you or the truth

Was he looking for love in all the wrong places?

Searching night and day, just hoping for some traces

Or some clues to your existence

So your legacy wouldn't end with a "disappearance."

My grendeddy, your dad,

The dad I never had.

Doug:

I tried to tell you grandma the stuff that your mom and Shebby were caught up in, but she didn't wanna hear it. There was nothing I could say. Your gram-ma didn't want nobody sayin nothing about her children. I went all over looking for her. I went all over Aiken and to Augusta. I drove all up and down the highways. I just couldn't find her. Sometimes I'd be out 2 or 3 days just looking. I finally realized I couldn't run her down so I just stopped. I aint never gave up, I just hoped she'd come to me. I believe I saw her one day in Augusta. I thought I heard her yell, "Daddy. Daddy." I tried to run her down, but couldn't catch her. I tried everything. I just couldn't run her down.

Me:
There's no blanket statement
There's no yes or no
I think that, but she could be
I never met you, but I wish I had
I've never met you but I hope I will?
What's the truth? What's my truth? What's our truth?
We don't know. It's ambiguous. That's the truth.
The rest is. . . I don't know.

(Ashley retrieves a cake and begins lighting candles as she recites her last lines.)

Lights up; July 8, 2014
Amber's birthday. Number 30. Another year down.
It sucks we're getting older cuz we're all out of town.
Where are you?

(Ashley picks up the phone and calls Amber; looking at phone)
(Ashley sings)
Happy Birthday to you!
Happy Birthday to you!
We're together again, but where are you? (referring to pic of Aunt Shebby)

When I was a little girl, mom didn't tell me you were missin
She said you disappeared so I'd picture this magician
Who took a magic wand and, with it, he went, "WUSH!"
And your body disintegrated into this glittery dust.
I kinda like that memory. It's cool. Kinda poetic.
A glittery dust.
Maybe the only thing left of you. . . is us.

Ashley takes on last look at Aunt Shebby, closes her eyes, as if making a wish, and then blows out the birthday candles.

END

CHAPTER 3

I am extremely proud of the work that I did with *Missing*. Countless people were touched by my family's story. Many reached out to me following the performances to share their stories of their own missing family members. That was so fascinating to me because, again, someone "going missing" *seems* to be something that happens rarely or that people categorize in their "that would never happen to me" file. One of the best pieces of feedback that I got was from a student of mine. She emailed, "My boyfriend and me just can't stop talking about it. We can't stop thinking about it." Yes! That's all I wanted! I wanted people to actually acknowledge this complex, rarely explored, rarely discussed form of grief. I wanted them to look at my family and think, "That kind of looks like my family" and then put themselves in our shoes.

My family was so touched by the piece. They actually could not recall what they said in the interviews so they were thrilled and surprised by the show. I love how open they have become since I started the process. My Aunt Shebby used to be someone that we rarely discussed, but now I have seen my entire family open up to talking about her and the circumstances of her disappearance. I feel grateful that my piece of art was able to help them explore their own feelings.

Working on *Missing* gave me the opportunity to examine themes and ideas that have always fascinated me. The concept of "truth" and what that really means has always been something that resonates with me and, through working on this project, I realized why. Ultimately, through my research of ambiguous loss, I found that the only way to begin to heal and work through ambiguous grief is to make the unknown your truth. That seems quite contradictory, but as a person and as a character, in my script, I

came to that very conclusion, saying, “So what’s the truth? What’s my truth? What’s our truth? I don’t know. It’s ambiguous. The rest is. . . I don’t know.” As someone who never met my Aunt Shebby, that is enough for me. This is quite different from the sentiments of some of my family members, who have almost *decided* their own personal truth because they lack concrete facts to supply them with truth. My Grandmother continues to say that she “know[s] Shebby ain’t dead.” My Aunt Deborah says, “She’s dead.” My cousin, Amber, says, “She left to keep me safe.” Ultimately, none of those statements are supported by actual fact, but it is with these declarations that my family is able to move forward, get out of bed every day, and live life. It is how they cope with this impossible situation and “I don’t know” is, simply, not enough for them. They need something they can hold on to as true.

When I first heard my Aunt Deborah say that she felt her sister was dead, I was shocked, but then I realized that if Aunt Shebby was taken into sex trafficking, as my Aunt Deborah believes, perhaps, it brings her solace to know that, at this point, she may be dead and not in the midst of harm any longer. My Grandmother has expressed to me that my mother’s death was worse than my Aunt Shebby’s disappearance. Not knowing where Aunt Shebby is means, to my grandmother, that she may be alive; and, for her, that’s better than the alternative.

I find myself thinking, quite frequently, about the truths I create for myself on a daily basis and how they influence my life. For example, many believe that if they work hard, they will reap rewards; however, is that a universal truth or one that many of us *need* to believe in order to keep working, moving forward, and staying positive? In the future, when I play characters in pieces of theatre, film, or television, I will always ask

myself what their truths are and why? How does that truth benefit them and their everyday life? How does it keep them going?

Writing and starring in my own one-woman show also provided me the opportunity to explore the “historical event” of a family. It really interested me that my Aunt Shebby’s disappearance changed the dynamic of our entire family. My family has been close my entire life! We are constantly calling one another and we always say, “I love you” before separating. It was strange for me to realize that my Grandfather never told his children he loved them until after my Aunt Shebby’s disappearance. It makes me wonder if we would even be as close if it were not for her disappearance. My show actually begins on May 30, 2014, at a party for me and my twin sister’s 23rd birthday. Everyone in our family was able to make it to town for the party because it was Memorial Day weekend. As my Grandmother blessed the food, she wept at having all of her family there together. As I looked up from my bowed head position, I saw that my Aunt Shebby’s picture hung high above my grandmother’s head. We are all very much aware that life can change in an instant.

I know that my paranoia stems from the event of my Aunt Shebby’s disappearance. My mother wouldn’t even let me walk down the street to a friend’s house by myself. She had to drive me. She taught me how to get out of the trunk of a car if I was thrown in and how to use a stun gun that she kept in the house. I believe if my Aunt Shebby could go missing, then so could I; and, I am constantly on alert so that I am prepared to fight whatever force could result in me disappearing.

I also know that my sister and I are close because my mother would not have it any other way. We were not allowed to say, “I hate you” or even fight because it would

usually end with my mother in tears, saying that she wished her sister were there and, here we were, arguing with ours. We *had* to love to each other.

Working through these themes made me realize I want to tell stories like this. I want to tell stories about real people working through real issues. One of the best notes I got from one of my advisors on my piece was that he loved that *Missing* wasn't about a family who had something bad happen to them. It was about a family who had something horrific happen to them and how they've work to keep living every day after. That is what I'm interested in: the after.

CONCLUSION

I feel that I, successfully, shed light onto the idea of the “missing” and opened a door for people to view the coping mechanisms of those experiencing ambiguous loss by weaving short moments caught on film into a living, breathing, active piece of theatre. I want to keep going. This was just a first step in my journey with this piece. I love *Missing* because I know I can do it for the rest of my life and it will, forever, be evolving. As I grow older and, perhaps, get married and have my own children, my point of view will change. My family member’s points of view will change. Our truths will change.

I am so much more confident in my abilities as an actor now. My performance was great. It was great because I played people who I knew, real people with a past, present, and a future. I want every character I play from this point on to be that real to me. I want them to feel so specific and complex that they are me. I did a piece that showcased my talents and now that I know what I do well, I feel more confident that I can translate it back into other works.

I am still writing things down into that tiny notebook! When I do *Missing* in the future, I want to extend some text. My family members had a plethora of great anecdotes about my Aunt Shebby and I would like to delve a bit deeper into her childhood and upbringing and what made her who she was. I want to take my show to South Carolina. That is where my family is from and that is where my Aunt Shebby disappeared. I hope to get Aunt Shebby’s story out and, perhaps, get more information on how and why she disappeared. Eventually, I would like to develop my script further into a play or series with flashbacks to my family member’s memories of Aunt Shebby.

I want to make Shebby a living character, a person. She was and is so much more than “missing,” and, hopefully, with this work, I can make it so that she is never lost.

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VITA

Ashley Adams was born in Aiken, South Carolina. She graduated from North Augusta High School in North Augusta, South Carolina. She went on to attend South Carolina School of the Arts in Anderson, South Carolina, receiving her B.A. in Musical Theatre in 2013. While attending university, Ashley had the opportunity to portray Ruth in *A Raisin in the Sun* and Arsinoe in *Le Misanthrope*. She also worked with regional theatres Centre Stage and Warehouse Theatre on productions of *Beehive!*, *A Lesson Before Dying*, and *Hairspray*. One month after graduating from South Carolina School of the Arts, Ashley relocated to Baton Rouge, Louisiana to pursue her M.F.A. in Acting at Louisiana State University. While there, Ashley starred in several Swine Palace productions, including *Twelfth Night* (Viola), *School for Lies* (Celemine), *Clybourne Park* (Francine/Lena), *Spill* (Andrea), and *Romeo and Juliet* (Prince). After graduation, she hopes to tour her one-woman show and begin pursuing film and television projects.