

Advance Praise for *Dissonance*

“*Dissonance* is a courageous and riveting exploration of childhood sexual trauma, and how it reverberates into adulthood with devastating aftershocks. Farison has transmuted her pain into an exquisitely told story that depicts, with great precision, the grooming process that allowed an exploitative teacher to forge a bond of diabolical dependence, holding her emotionally hostage for years. This unforgettable book is a must-read for those who cannot imagine the web of bewilderment, guilt, and helplessness that ensnares victims—and it will inspire survivors who long to reclaim their lives.”

—Stephen Mills, author of *Chosen: A Memoir of Stolen Boyhood*

“Bridging the divide between past and present, consent and exploitation, Megan Farison invites the reader into a powerful story of redemption and healing.”

—Dr. Ingrid Clayton, PhD, author of *Believing Me*

“... a knothole into an Escher-like depiction of how grooming erodes our foundational understanding of trustworthy connection. Megan reveals the disorienting impact of child sexual abuse and the enduring confusion while simultaneously illustrating a love of family and self-compassion too often absent in a survivor’s narrative. Through her authentic writing, Megan emphasizes that, while abuse is a piece of her history, love is the heart of this book.”

—Anna Sonoda,
author of *Duck Duck Groom: How a Child Becomes a Target*

“As an educator who has worked in the field of sexual abuse prevention . . . as a mother, daughter, woman . . . as a human who lives in a world where adults use their positions of power to take advantage of the children they have vowed to protect, I can say with absolute confidence: *Dissonance* is a must-read.”

—Mackenzie Bufis, co-founder of The Elephant Alliance

“Every voice that speaks up is one more voice in the battle against sexual abuse. Megan tells her story bravely and selflessly, and in doing so brings society one step closer to quashing the stigmas that seek to silence us.”

—Cara Kizer, classical musician and survivor

“Compelling, timely, honest, and necessary.”

—Anna Schechter, head coach at First Book Coaching,
MA Victorian Literature, University of Oxford

“As band directors, music teacher educators, and leaders, we have a responsibility to bear witness to these stories to better recognize and respond to signs of abuse within our profession. In *Dissonance*, Megan bravely confronts her childhood trauma with the clear purpose of protecting others from the pain she endured. The future of music education is safer because of her.”

—Hannah Greer-Young, music educator and researcher, author of
“The Call is Coming from Inside the House, Sexual Misconduct in U.S.
Band Programs”

“I saw myself in Megan’s words . . . Her bravery paves a path for those who have not yet spoken.”

—Sarah Bigge, survivor

“Dissonance intricately explores the ripple effects of trauma on personal relationships, self, identity, and the struggle for healing and redemption.”

—Kori Orlowski, trauma survivor

Dissonance

Dissonance

A MEMOIR

MEGAN FARISON



GIVE HER THE PEN

Dissonance is a work of nonfiction.

Some names and identifying details have been changed.

Copyright © 2024 by Megan Farison

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States.

ISBN:979-8-9918867-0-3

Application to United States Library of Congress in progress.

Cover design by Victoria Heath

Interior Design by Danielle Szabreath

meganfarison.com

giveherthepen.com

*For Dan, who said,
“Do whatever it takes to heal.”*

And for You . . . wherever you are.

“As long as you keep secrets and suppress information,
you are fundamentally at war with yourself . . .
The critical issue is allowing yourself to know what you know.
That takes an enormous amount of courage.”

—Bessel A. van der Kolk
The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma

“I suppose that I did for myself what psychoanalysts do for their patients.
I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion.
And in expressing it, I explained it and then laid it to rest.”

—Virginia Woolf

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I've often read the advice, *wait until you're fully healed to write your story*. I disagree. If we all waited, most of our stories would never get written, and those who need our stories most would never hear them. As Dr. Brené Brown once said, "Shame cannot survive being spoken." So, I will speak.

If you've ever lived in fear of what you've done
or what's been done to you.

If you've ever struggled to separate the two . . .
you are not alone.

Prologue

Monday, November 25th, 2019
6:13 P.M.

It was as if the house and I were grieving together. I looked around me and all I could see was *loss*. In shadowed corners, tables and countertops suffocated under stacks of unopened mail. The kitchen sink drowned in crusted weeks-old dishes. Cardboard boxes laid in corners, slumped, their dusty heads collapsing under the weight of neglect.

Except for a mid-century lamp that hung in the dining room, every light in the house was off. The lamp cast a sick, yellowy glow across a nearby wall that held the history of a love story, told in framed photos of family and friends, babies and school pictures, cherished pets that had long since been buried in backyards. Through my sore, swollen eyes, I narrowed in on a particular image—older than the rest—of a starry-eyed teenage girl with long sandy blonde hair, lanky limbs, and under her hazel eyes the permanent dark circles she inherited from her grandmother. She's standing behind a birthday cake and smiling. She's happy.

Of course she is. She doesn't know.

Into the adjacent living room I dragged two chairs and positioned them in front of the sprawling brick fireplace mantle. I turned the chairs to face each other, then stepped back to measure the distance between them. I made slight adjustments to one, then the other. Again and again. As if it would make a difference. Still, it was something I had control over, and that was enough to stay the course. Once everything was in place, I waded through the thick twists of wool beneath me, the remains of a shag carpet that would soon be gone. Pieces of it had already been ripped out, revealing patches of worn subfloor that for decades had been hidden from sight.

When I reached the center of the living room, I realized there was nothing left to do but wait. I glanced back at the girl in the photo as if to say, *I'm sorry*. I imagined what I'd do if I could magically climb into the photo, back into my old kitchen. I'd wrap my arms around her and tell her everything. But what would she do? She's just a child.

The distant rumbling of an engine drew my gaze back to the front window and its view of the driveway, which sat dark and empty. It wouldn't be empty for much longer.

I checked my phone.

6:31.

Oh God.

As the engine grew louder, the beating inside me grew faster and heavier. My chest tightened, like someone had double-knotted a shoestring around my heart, the painful and persistent thud marking time with each passing second.

Oh God. God, please. Please help me.

Panic shot up as two beams of ghostly light darted across the dining room wall. I turned my head and saw the truck pulling into the drive, its headlights growing larger and more threatening as it inched its way closer to the house. With clenched fists, I held my breath and braced for impact.

This is it. Any moment he'll walk through that door. He'll know what's happened, and our marriage will be over.

Seven Months Earlier

April 8th, 2019

Today is going to be a great day. That was my first conscious thought that morning. Most days I'd wake to a head full of chatter, a relentless monologue of dos and don'ts: *make breakfast, pack lunches, load the dishwasher, sign the field trip permission slip, reschedule the dentist appointment, pick the boys up from school, take them to piano lessons, find the motivation to cook dinner instead of grabbing McDonalds again.* But that morning, as my gaze drifted across the bedroom ceiling, my mind was quiet. My body at ease. I wasn't worried about work or my weight or my kids. I didn't even feel guilty for drinking half a lowball of bourbon the night before, even though I had promised myself all day that *this* was the day I would avoid the liquor cabinet.

Lazily, I rolled over to find Ian on his back, the tip of his nose pointed at his phone screen. "Reading anything exciting?" I said.

"The usual," Ian said, yawning. "The world's a mess."

I reached over to the bedside table and checked my phone. "It's past seven. You gotta get up," I said, rubbing his shoulder. "Just think. Only two months of school left."

His eyes shifted toward me. He looked unamused. "Easy for you to say."

I was in the kitchen packing lunches when Ian grabbed a light jacket from the closet. I watched as he hurried past me to the sliding glass door that led to the three-season breezeway. "Excuse me," I said, playing coy. "You're just going to leave without kissing your wife goodbye?"

Ian made a quick about-face and hurried back to the kitchen. "Sorry, I've got a lot on my mind." With a sharp, stilted gesture that was almost marionette-like, he leaned forward, eyes open, lips puckered. I threw my arms around his neck,

pressed my mouth to his, and waited eagerly for him to press back. When his lips didn't budge, I felt a familiar ache in my gut. "I mean, a *real* kiss," I said.

Ian's sturdy frame softened. He stared down at me, shaking his head and smiling. "That *was* a real kiss."

I had seen this look before, many times—an expression that fell somewhere between fondness and frustration. It seemed to say, *What do you want from me? Don't you know I love you?*

Of course I knew he loved me. I just wanted to *feel* it at that particular moment.

Breaking Ian's gaze, I turned back to the counter and patted the blue vinyl lunch box. "Don't forget to take this."

"*Right.*" Ian grabbed the lunchbox, along with the lanyard that held his work keys. As he was getting ready to leave a second time, footsteps appeared, padding across the floor above. Ian turned back in my direction, his eyes assuring me, *Don't worry. I'll wait.*

Before long, our nine-year-old, Evan, was standing at the bottom of the stairs in his Spiderman pajama set, rubbing sleep out of his eyes. "Bye, Daddy," he cooed.

Ian bent down. He pushed back the thick tuft of dark hair Evan had donned since birth, gazed lovingly into Evan's brown eyes (a perfect color match to Ian's) then kissed him on the forehead. "Love you, buddy."

From a distant room, a high-pitched voice cried out, "Wait! Daddy!" followed by a *thump, thump, thump*, zooming across the floor and down the steps. Like a wild animal, our six-year-old, Eli, jumped at Ian, who caught him with a guttural *oof!* Ian threw his head back in laughter, gave Eli a kiss that made him tickle-squirm, then carefully lowered him until his bare feet were safely on the ground.

"I've got to go," Ian said, his words picking up speed. "Be good at school." He opened the glass slider and stepped into the breezeway, passing the metropolis of boxes that still needed unpacking from the move.

As he disappeared from sight, I called out to him one last time, "Love you!" His voice echoed back to me, followed by the thud of the garage door.

When it was time for school, the boys and I meandered out the door to our white minivan, which sported over 225,000 miles and a growing coat of rust. It was paid-off, though, and the engine still ran, that's what mattered—one less bill to pay. Evan yanked the sliding door open and hoisted himself into the booster

seat. I checked Eli to make sure his seatbelt was laced securely into the red safety clip, then I walked around the van and climbed into the driver's seat. "What's our pump-up song for the day?" I asked. It was Evan's turn to pick.

Before Evan could speak—"Old Town Road!" Eli hollered, his legs kicking excitedly.

Evan rolled his eyes. "You always want that song. How about 'High Hopes,' Mumma?"

I peered into the rearview mirror and gave Evan an approving look. "Good choice, buddy."

It was never Ian's dream to live in the city. He had always groaned about "city living" and "city people," said there was nothing worse than someone practically living in your backyard, telling you what you can and can't do with your property. Ian grew up in a rural area outside of Midland, Michigan, on seven acres of mostly wooded land. It was a far cry from my upbringing in Flint, one of the largest cities in the state and, at one time, one of the most prosperous, until General Motors closed up its factories in the '80s.

Before I turned three, my mom and I moved in with my stepdad, Randy, who sold used cars for a living. The house Randy owned sat directly on the car lot, a fact I wore like a medallion because it set me apart from other kids. Whenever I told friends or classmates where I lived, their eyes would widen with disbelief. They'd say, *You live on a car lot?!* And I'd smile back and say, *Yes, I really do live on a car lot.*

A child of the '90s, I was raised on Disney princess films and boy bands. I dreamed of getting married and moving into one of those white picket fence colonial-style houses in made-for-TV movies: yellow birch trees lining the sidewalks, couples walking dogs, neighbors hosting cookouts, the cranking of wheels and sharp ringing of bells as children ride by on their bicycles.

Ian, on the other hand, cared little for suburbia. His dream was a reincarnation of the life he'd had as a child: wide open spaces to plant gardens and raise livestock, a pole barn to fix vehicles and tinker with old trucks. When he and I got married, I happily made his dream my own. What mattered most to me was that we were in love and we were on a journey together. Besides, it was easy to romanticize country living—the quiet pastures and porch swings, late-night bonfires and peaceful walks in the woods. A simple life against a picture-perfect backdrop. Since neither of us

came from money and both of us wanted to be teachers, Ian and I knew we would never be wealthy, but we always thought we'd make enough to live comfortably and provide a good life for our family.

Things didn't exactly go according to plan. In 2016, after eight years of marriage and teaching, we were finally able to afford a home with some acreage. We were living in the country, but we weren't living the simple, country life we had hoped for. There was too little time and not enough money. Ian and I were both working full-time as choir directors in the same school district—Ian on one side of town and me on the other—leading high school and middle school choral programs in addition to teaching multiple classes of elementary music each week. We led after-school ensembles and musical rehearsals, organized concerts and community events. Every day, one of us would drop Evan and Eli off two hours before their school day started, and one of us would pick them up two hours after their school day ended. To help with bills and paying off student loan debt, Ian worked as a wedding DJ most Saturdays from May through October.

It was nearly impossible to keep up with the demands of work and personal life. When I wasn't at work, I was still working, or I was thinking about work, which left little time or energy for anything else. I didn't want to give up teaching, but I was drowning mentally, emotionally, and physically. I needed more freedom to take care of myself and my family. So I started praying for a way out.

In the summer of 2018, a full-time music director position opened up at a prominent church in town, a unicorn of a job that paid a teacher's salary but offered a more flexible schedule. When I got the job, I felt lighter than I had in a decade. I had forgotten what it was like to be present—truly present—with my children, to have enough free space inside my head to read stories and play make-believe with them.

The church job improved our lives significantly, but it was still a full-time job with evening and weekend commitments. Meanwhile, Ian's teaching responsibilities were expanding and the boys' schedules were growing busier. Since our daily routines revolved around work, school, and church, Ian and I discussed moving into town as a way to make our lives easier. The discussion was never too serious, at least, not for Ian. I knew he wanted desperately to stay where we were. I knew he would bend and twist himself into whatever shape life demanded,

carry whatever load was necessary so we wouldn't have to surrender what we had worked so hard to attain.

In October, Ian surprised me with pictures he'd found online of a 1960s mid-century ranch. "That is the only house I will move into town for," he said.

I didn't see the appeal right away. It certainly wasn't the two-story colonial I'd been dreaming of since I was a child. But when Ian described how he saw it, the house magically transformed into a charming vintage time capsule. He *oohed* and *aahed* over the craftsmanship of the cabinets and the built-in shelves, marveled at the living room's sprawling fireplace hearth.

I pointed at the picture of the living room, my face squinted. "Lime-green shag carpet? Are you serious?"

He laughed. "I like it! This is the neighborhood where engineers and doctors used to live in the '60s and '70s. This house reminds me of simpler times."

We moved in on March 1st, 2019.

It seemed too good to be true. I had a job that gave me room to breathe and, as a bonus, provided a wonderful church home for my family. I was living in a beautiful house in town, tucked inside a picture-perfect neighborhood. Everything was falling into place, and I couldn't imagine wanting anything more.

Not long after I started working at the church, a visiting pastor and I were having a casual conversation following the Sunday worship service. We were seated at a circular table, one of many scattered throughout the brightly lit fellowship hall where churchgoers gathered every week for coffee and donuts.

"How old are you?" he asked, sipping from his glass of water.

I wondered why this question was relevant. Did he think I looked too young to be the church's music director? He wouldn't have been the first. "Thirty-three," I said.

His eyes brightened. "*Ab.* The Jesus Year."

I'd been attending church my whole life, and I'd never heard anyone use that phrase. "What's that?" I asked.

The pastor leaned in, his expression sharpening. "The most significant events of Jesus' life occurred when he was thirty-three. His growing ministry, his death, and his resurrection." He nodded, gesturing toward me. "This is *your* Jesus year. It's going to be a significant one."

• • •

After dropping the boys off at school, I stopped by my favorite coffee shop just down the street from work. Tea latte in hand, I circled the block toward the church parking lot. It was empty when I pulled in just before 8:30. I strolled through the lobby and down a hallway to the last door on the right. Once inside my office, I slid the dimmer switch to a half-lit position and turned on my corner floor lamp, saturating the cozy rectangular room in a warm glow. I relaxed into my office chair and began tackling my to-do list for the day.

It was ten o'clock and I'd just finished an email to the worship band. I was flying through each task, reveling in my productivity, when the phone rang.

It was Ian. "Hey, honey. How's it going?"

"Really great," I said. "I'm getting a lot done."

"That's great. Can I stop by and see you?"

He didn't typically visit me during the workday. I figured he must've been on a short break, traveling between school buildings, and missing me. "I'd love that," I said.

"Okay, I'll be there soon." He paused. "I love you."

Ten minutes later, Ian came through my office door. I hopped up from the desk and threw my arms around his sturdy center, squeezing him. He squeezed back, but when he let go and took a step back, his posture weakened. He looked as if he'd just taken a beating in a boxing match—shoulders slumped, head hung low.

A series of questions raced through my head. *Did someone die? Was there an accident? Is someone sick? Are the boys okay?* "What's wrong?" I said.

He lifted his head, a film of water now present in his eyes. "I wanted us to be together when you saw this."

I followed Ian's gaze down to his phone. He was holding it to his chest, clinging to it tightly. When he moved to hold it out in front of him, his hands were trembling, his fingers hovering hesitantly over the black mirror below. He drew in a labored breath, tapped on the phone to unlock it, and turned the screen to face me.

In my narrowed vision was a photo—*No, a mugshot?*—of a man who, all at once, was intimately familiar and painfully unrecognizable. Above the man's face were big blocky letters, a headline of some sort. The words "Band Director" and "Underage" hooked into my consciousness.

Everything stopped.

I couldn't move. I couldn't speak. I couldn't think. I just stood there, eyes frozen to the screen. Disoriented. Numb. Like my insides had been sucked out and spit back in. The minute I could move again, I grabbed onto Ian's arms and pulled myself into him, leaning my cheek against his shoulder, inhaling the familiar scent of his sweater. "It's okay, honey," I exhaled into his chest. "This doesn't affect us."

I believed what I said. Of course this didn't affect us, I'd forgotten this man even existed. He had absolutely nothing to do with our lives.

Ian straightened his posture and wiped away the tear gathered in the outside corner of his eye. "You need to read the article," he said, holding the phone out for me to take.

I had no desire to know what was in the article. Perhaps my brain had already formulated a story. Something familiar. Something I could make sense of. I wanted to tell Ian, *This has nothing to do with me. Whoever this article is about, I'm sure she's fine, too. He's the one who has to deal with the consequences.* But I did as Ian asked. I took the phone and sat back down in my office chair.

For the first time, the title of the article came into clear focus: "BREAKING NEWS: WINTER PARK HIGH SCHOOL BAND DIRECTOR ACCUSED OF RECORDING SEX ACTS WITH UNDERAGE STUDENT." The page looked like a bunch of jumbled up meaningless words. I felt nothing, like I was reading air. I moved on to the first paragraph.

"Winter Park High School's band director, Christopher Blackmer, was arrested after a video surfaced of him and a juvenile engaging in sexual acts"

The word "video" was a blow to the side of my head. *What video? Whose video?*

" . . . The investigation started after an anonymous witness contacted the Orange County Police Department on January 28 regarding inappropriate messages between Blackmer and a former Winter Park High School student After Blackmer's car and several personal items were seized, a search of Blackmer's phone revealed a video of Blackmer and a male victim engaging in sexual acts."

Male.

I read the word again to make sure I hadn't imagined it. It flashed repeatedly, like a glitch in my brain. *Male. Male. Male. Male.*

My eyes shot up from the phone screen. "What is this?"

Something started to gnaw at me, like a dull-toothed rodent burrowing and chewing its way through the top of my head, making its way down, down, down

into my chest and my stomach until it had consumed the very core of me. I unraveled into violent muscle spasms, jerking and shivering uncontrollably. Tears poured down my cheeks and onto my blouse, my body wringing itself out in long, angry twists. This wasn't an arrest article, it was an obituary. The man I knew had died, swallowed up into a black abyss, and in his place was this imposter.

Out of my hollowed chest, an unfamiliar voice spoke: *He's gone. I'm never going to see him again.*

A second voice broke in, this one more recognizable: *Why does that matter? You had never planned on seeing him again.*

Five minutes earlier, thoughts of Chris were an ocean away. He was a long-forgotten relic left on some desolate island of memory. But now, the only thing I wanted was to be in his presence, to know he was okay, that he was *alive*, for him to assure me that these terrible things were not true.

Ian watched helplessly as I continued to convulse and purge. When at last I had no energy left to hold my head above my shoulders, I stared blankly at the surface of my desk, fixated on the tiny imperfections, the discoloration of the faux-wood patterns.

"Did you read the part about talking to the police?" Ian's voice was tender, as if one word could shatter me into a million pieces.

"Yes."

He nodded, his eyes expectant. "They said, if you have any information . . ."

"I know."

Ian paused. "What do you think you'll do?"

I had no time to process what was happening. All I knew was, that morning, I thought my life was normal, and in an abrupt flash, nothing was. I never knew I had information the police would want, and now I couldn't *unknow* it. They were asking for help, and I had the power to help them.

"I have to contact them," I said.

Ian checked his watch, then shook his head in apology. "I'm sorry, but I have to go back to work. Are you going to be okay?"

I lifted my hand. "Yes. I'll be fine."

"There's something else I want you to think about . . ." His eyes shifted, uncomfortably. "I think you should consider talking to a therapist."

I nodded in silent agreement. Nothing in my life had ever been too much for me to handle. Nothing so bad I couldn't fix it. But this was different. This felt bigger than I was.

Ian came around the table and placed a gentle hand on my shoulder. "Call me if you need me." I watched him trudge across the room, slowly turn the handle, then disappear.

Alone again, I took my phone and pulled up the article Ian had just shown me. I stared at Chris's picture and thought about the last time I'd seen his face, six years earlier, when a photo of him popped up on my Facebook feed. In the comments section, I read that he was leaving Michigan to teach in Florida. I smiled. "Good for you," I said to the picture, with no one in my kitchen to hear me. "You're finally escaping the cold."

I lingered a moment longer on his face . . . I felt *something*, but I couldn't identify what it was. It quickly disappeared, along with the thought of Chris, and I went back to cooking dinner for my family.

Chris had gotten every job he wanted, at prominent, well-recognized schools. He'd been a leader in the Michigan band world, president of the Michigan School Band and Orchestra Association. He had everything going for him. Why would he throw it all away?

I sat slumped in my office chair, studying the man in the mugshot. The black hair. The pitiful brown eyes, one eyebrow lifted slightly higher in what looked like a plea for sympathy. Suddenly, I wasn't just looking at his hair, a gathering of lifeless pixels on a two-dimensional screen. No. I was *touching* his hair. Not in real life, but something close to it. Somewhere between memory and reality, so vivid I could feel the soft strands between my fingertips, the fruity undertones of Aussie shampoo invading my nostrils. It was there for a brief moment. Then it was gone.

1999

In Honors English, I tried to keep myself from glancing up at the clock every thirty seconds. It would've been easier *not* to look at the clock if Mrs. Richards didn't stand directly under it. She was so tall that the top of her short permed hair made the clock's face look like it had a curly beard.

It wasn't Mrs. Richards' fault I was distracted that morning. I was rarely bored in her class. She was my favorite teacher at Armstrong Middle School. I loved her stop-sign-red lipstick, the halo of warmth that followed her wherever she went. She was also the after-school drama club director, which made her the coolest adult in the building. Best of all, she was the reason I wanted to be a teacher. I had thought about becoming a ballerina, an opera singer, a lawyer, a judge, a pediatric cardiologist (I liked the way I sounded when I said, "*Pediatric cardiologist*"). But one day I was in her class and another student asked me for help on the assignment we were doing. When I explained it in a way that made sense to her, her whole face lit up. I was hooked. I knew, right then and there, I wanted to spend the rest of my life making people feel that way.

Mrs. Richards finished her lecture on Anne Frank, then made her way to the front of the room. She began scratching out our homework assignment on the green chalkboard while everyone quietly slipped books and folders into their bags.

"Meg," a voice whispered to me from one seat over.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my best friend, Andi, slide an origami square across the table in my direction. I plucked it from her fingertips and unfolded the paper. In her familiar cursive was a message: *Good luck today!* She'd dotted the exclamation mark with a heart, the same one she always drew over the last letter