

'IT DIDN'T HAVE TO BE THIS WAY'

When Thigpen looked back, here's what she saw. She was in her late 20s and married with two young daughters when she came out to her family as gay. "We were living in rural Arkansas," Thigpen says. "My oldest daughter, Erin Lee, was 5, and my youngest, Paige, was 2."

Thigpen's then-husband, 16 years her elder, at first took the news in stride.

"Initially, he wasn't so upset, nor surprised," Thigpen says. "When he and I got married, I was already attracted to women, but I believed I could choose to be heterosexual."

While her kids were little, Thigpen was a stay-at-home mom, a job she adored. She tried to be straight. "I made a go of it, but it wasn't on my choice list," she says.

Thigpen divorced her husband and, at first, the pair shared joint custody of their daughters.

Then things changed.

In a suit brought against her after the initial divorce and custody hearings, the state of Arkansas awarded full custody of Thigpen's girls to their father, based largely on Thigpen's sexual orientation while questioning her emotional stability and referencing a distant attempt at self harm.

"He realized the power that my sexual orientation afforded him," Thigpen says. "But I don't want to villainize him."

Thigpen flips through the score she's written for *The Woman of Salt* and sips a bit of water.

"They got a homophobic lawyer. The judge is a deacon in the Southern Baptist Church," Thigpen says. "I got an original judgment and took it to the state Supreme Court, where I also got the shit kicked out of me."

Thigpen half-smiles, shaking her head. Then she looks at me, almost as if I'm a foreigner.

"How can I explain the Deep South?" she says. "My own parents were instrumental in leading the charge against me."

Thigpen grows quiet, her eyes focused.

"My parents were, and are, supporters of David Duke. My dad had a colleague who wrote his master's thesis on the disproportionately small size of the Negro brain. They were — we were — steeped in racism, homophobia. It's an illness and a blight — culturally, spiritually. I'm totally estranged from my parents and brothers."

In the courtroom, Thigpen's mother and father testified against her. Claiming that she was unfit, Thigpen's parents encouraged the court to terminate their daughter's rights to her own children.

"There is no immunity from that kind of assault," Thigpen says. "No defense."

In an instant, Thigpen's role as primary caregiver was reduced to dust. "The court order limited my access to the girls and said I couldn't take them out of state," Thigpen says. "I was shunned, criminalized and impoverished."

'I CANNOT TELL YOU WHY'

Thigpen turned 60 this year. She grew up in a tiny town — Lecompte, Louisiana — where she learned to play the piano from Miss Martha Faye White, "who was classically trained and offered lessons out of her home," Thigpen says.

"I studied from the age of 8 or 9 right through high school. And I've never moved anywhere without my piano."

Thigpen's father taught English when she was growing up, and her mother stayed home. She has two siblings, an older brother and a younger one. She has no contact with any of them.

"Family estrangement is probably much more prevalent than we are willing to talk about," she says. "It's like a collective secret."

Though wounded by her family's betrayal, for the sake of her girls Thigpen persisted.

After the court tore her daughters from her, Thigpen moved to Austin, Texas, to pursue a doctorate. And every two to three weeks, for years, she made the 500-mile one-way drive from Austin to Little Rock and back to see her girls for a few precious hours.

"Every time I could, I got in my beat-up truck and drove to Arkansas," she says. "I think this opera was being written on the drives home. My blood was a caustic sludge of rage."

'WHAT WAS AND WILL EVER BE'

In the midst of profound loss, Thigpen completed a Ph.D. in biochemistry. It's a subject that fascinated her from the moment she'd cracked her first chem textbook in college. "If we know biochemistry, then we know the basis for all things physiological," she says. "Birth, death, life, disease — everything."

In 1995, she met the woman who would become her spouse, Andrea Halliday, who had a little boy, Toby.

"I met him when he was 5 or 6," Thigpen says proudly.

She continues to tell her story as she moves briskly around the house, collecting family photos off the walls in various rooms.

"I was in a start-up company in Dallas, and Andrea was on the neurosurgical faculty at U.T. Southwestern. But a lesbian interracial family — in Texas?" Thigpen says, calling down from her home's second floor.

Thigpen returns, loaded down with framed photos.

She recounts a frightening moment in a parking lot. She and Halliday — and little Toby, who's African-American — were just heading to their car when they were confronted by a large aggressive man who clearly had a problem with their sexual orientation and the color of their little boy's skin. "He's talking to us, standing like this — big — and I'm saying, 'Get in the car! Get in the car!'"

"There's no way I could have written the opera in Texas or Arkansas, because I didn't feel safe," Thigpen says. "Eugene, Oregon, is the promised land."

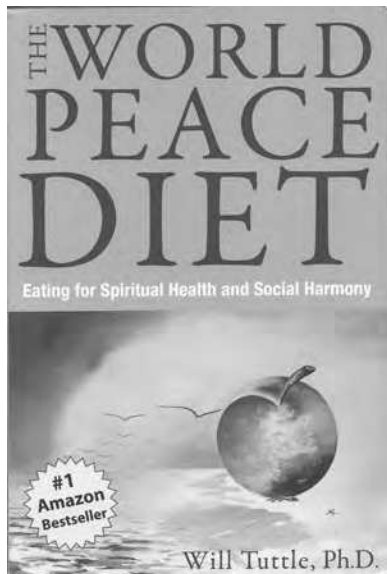
After choosing the community for its open-minded culture, the family moved to Eugene in 2005.

Thigpen assembles photos of her daughters as children and as adults, a portrait of handsome grown-up Toby, and snapshots of Halliday on the coffee table. She shows recent

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