Dark Horse—The Diary Of Emily Pratt Slatin

Volume 2

EMILY PRATT SLATIN

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First edition.

VOLUME 2

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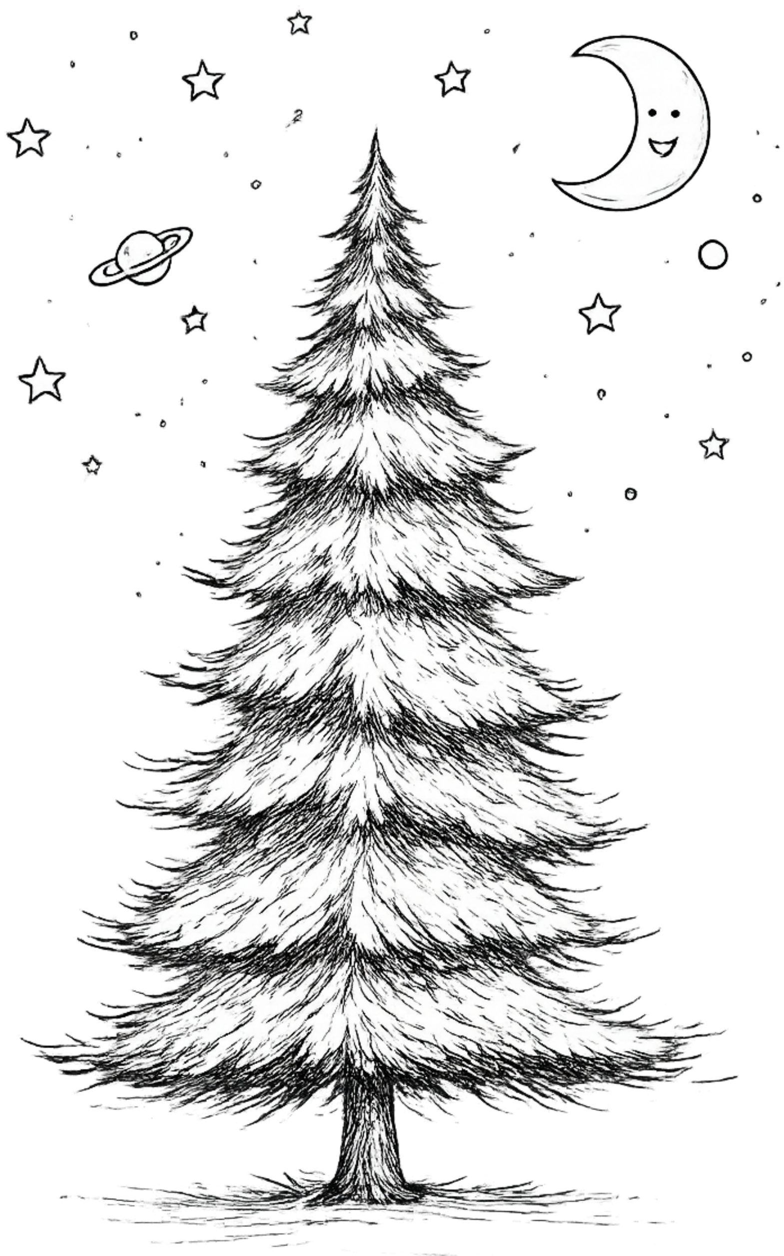
Dedication

To my dearest Amelia, my wife, best friend, and human embodiment of a myth I could create. I didn't know how to say it, so I didn't. I let the silence do the talking instead. For years and years I roamed in search of someone like you—through systems that don't understand people who carry nuance in their bodies and brilliance in their minds, and loyalty like tiny crescent moons in her eyes. The ache in my chest wrote the letter I could never send, and the way I looked at you—too long, too soft—became the confession I wasn't brave enough to make. You said my name like it was a secret, like something you'd found folded inside a love letter tucked between the pages of a book you never meant to read. And for a moment, I wanted to ask if you meant to find me. Because I've been waiting. Not for you, exactly, but for the kind of quiet you bring—the kind that doesn't ask me to be anything other than the mess I already am.



PROLOGUE

Most of the wisdom I have started as arrogance that survived contact with the world. Empathy doesn't mean letting people in; it means knowing who to keep out. There's a kind of peace that only comes after you stop trying to improve on quiet. I don't believe in fate, but I believe in familiar chaos. The world runs on recognizable mistakes.

There are chapters of a woman's life that don't sit neatly inside memory—they live in the body instead. For me, those years were fire/rescue years.

I don't talk about them often, not the way people expect. There's no glory in the stories, no heroics to frame under museum glass. Quiet survival is not suspicious—some lives bleed inward instead.

It was work—hard, ugly, necessary work—and I did it for twenty-two years with a radio on a crossbody strap and a crew that trusted me even when I didn't trust myself. While others kept photographs or religious symbols under their helmets, mine bore a silhouette of a pine tree.

Most of the job never made it into photographs. You can't take pictures when your hands are on a line, a patient, or the shoulder of someone who's about to walk into something unforgiving. But on the days and nights when the world paused

long enough to let me breathe, I took a few—the kind that show the truth of the career better than any transcript ever could. These pictures are simply reminders of what I experienced in my life, not for show.

My yellow helmet and job sweatshirt sit idle in my bedroom closet—my job shirt is on a hanger in the back of my closet, and my helmet sits on a shelf. My last turnout coat is in a state of preservation. These possessions which may seem mundane to some are quiet relics of a life that raised me, rebuilt me, and nearly ruined me more times than I can count. I look at them sometimes and remember the woman who wore them—steady hands, calm voice, boots planted, always the one trying to find the good outcome in whatever wreckage we were handed.

The photos don't capture the worst moments. Those never needed a camera. They live in my nightmares instead—the screams from a Christmas house fire that still echo when the air pressure shifts, the nights when mercy sounded like telling my crew to hold the line instead of rushing a structure that had already taken everything inside it, the faces I pronounced even when my heart wasn't ready.

But the pictures I did take—they're here because they tell the rest of the truth. Wherever I stood, I was there because something in the world had already gone wrong. My job was to make sure it didn't get worse.

I carry them because they remind me of who I was when the world demanded too much from me and I kept showing up anyway.

Before you read these pages—before you walk with me through grief, childhood, queerness, belonging, loss, and the strange silence that follows survival—you should know the truth about the life that built the woman writing this.

I didn't come from stillness. I came from fire. I came from late nights under siren glow, from rooms that didn't stay standing, from long drives back to the station with soot in my teeth and a knot in my throat I never let anyone see. I came from brotherhood and heartbreak, from leadership I never asked for but carried anyway, from a childhood that never learned softness until adulthood taught it back to me. These photographs are proof—not of what I did, but of what the work made of me.

I'm a woman who ran toward things most people avoid. A woman who stood steady in the dark while the world burned around her. A woman who lived long enough to stand barefoot on Vermont grass and finally understand that surviving was never the point. Living a *normal life* was.

So before you turn the page, read my words the way I do—not as an old tale, but as a witness. A quiet archive of responsibility I carried for decades.

These are the ghosts I walked out of. These are the stories the fire left behind. These are the things I kept so I wouldn’t forget who I was before I became who I am now.

—Emily Pratt Slatin
Middletown Springs, Vermont; Winter 2025

WRITER'S NOTE

When I die, I don't want heaven. I want the field at dusk in Autumn, the pines standing watch, and the cold air carrying me back into whatever cycle I came from. The land taught me more about trust than people or religion ever did. The wind has never lied to me. The pines have never abandoned me or switched stories halfway through.

Somewhere around midlife, the truth stopped negotiating with me. My wisdom isn't mystical. It was earned through cold nights, in empty hallways, under bad lighting, and with no applause and no witnesses.

It didn't arrive gently—it arrived the way weather does, shifting the whole room before I even knew to look up. One morning I woke up and realized the version of myself I'd been defending all those years wasn't a person at all—it was a survival draft. A prototype built in crisis, refined by silence, tolerated out of habit. It wasn't that life was easier when I was young—that would be an outrageous claim, reduced to mere opinion at best—but what I can say is that previous generations had more patience.

I was born intersex with XX chromosomes and ovotesticular variation, and my body developed predominantly along a female pathway despite atypical genital development at birth. Doctors later theorized that my condition may have involved a rare form of *XX Ovotesticular Disordered Sexual*

Development, though the terminology shifted over the years depending on the physician, the era, and the limits of medical understanding at the time.

I do not have a prostate, have never produced sperm, and was identified and raised as female from infancy. My biology was never contradictory—only more complex than the rigid binaries people often expect. My female identity has remained stable throughout my entire life, independent of anatomy, paperwork, or the assumptions other people tried to place onto me.

My female gender identity has remained stable across my entire lifespan independent of anatomical differences or cultural binaries. I've spent a lifetime identifying as female—while inhabiting gender in ways that were never limited to anatomy or binary expectation. The woman I am now didn't grow from her. She stepped out of her shadow like someone leaving a room that was too small from the beginning.

In my childhood dreams, I was the fairy princess who fled to the woods to be with her maiden. I have always been drawn to women who carry tension before the calm—the kind of woman who moves as if she has already survived the worst part and decided, deliberately, to be steady anyway.

I used to think endurance was the point. Now I know it was only the prerequisite. Survival is the cheapest version of being alive—anyone can do it long enough if you back them into a corner. The real work begins the moment you stop bracing and let the damage speak plainly.

Sometimes I miss the girl I used to be, but only in the way someone would miss their old jacket—familiar, worn, and definitely not something anyone genuinely wants to wear again. Sometimes I look at old photos of myself and feel nothing at first, then every emotion that I was going to feel piles on all at once. There are moments when I feel a flicker of that old feral instinct and wonder how I survived living that life on purpose. Sometimes adventure isn't the place—it's realizing, finally, that you didn't hesitate.

Some nights I sit on the porch and the fields look identical to the ones I grew up with—quiet and wide. But I'm not the child standing in those pastures anymore. I'm the adult who went back and won. Not triumphantly, not dramatically—just accurately. The past can't take anything from me now that I've already decided what was mine and what never fucking was.

The pines on my land do not care about my biography. They do not adjust themselves to my grief. They stand. They bend when the wind insists. They return to vertical. They do not ask permission to exist, and they do not apologize for surviving winter. When I stand beneath them at night and look up, the sky does not rearrange itself for my comfort. It simply remains. There is something profoundly stabilizing about that.

The world keeps trying to teach me softness like it's a skill I somehow missed. But softness was never my deficit. I carried softness through things that would have shattered

harder people. My strength isn't the opposite of softness—my strength is what kept the softness from dying.

I've stopped expecting softness from people who never learned to hold their own. People who mishandled themselves will eventually mishandle you as well.

Sometimes I stand barefoot in the front yard at night and feel the cold curl around my toes like it's grounding me back into my own life. It's not romantic. It's practical. The Earth knows what to do with a woman who has carried this much. I don't pretend anymore that I'm unaffected by the things that should have broken me.

I'm not fragile about it. If anything, I'm factual. Pain shaped me, but I never let it have the opportunity to dictate my destiny. People say I'm intimidating. They mean I don't flinch. They mean I don't lie. They mean I have integrity. If men acted and spoke the way I do, society would call it leadership. When I act and speak in this manner, society refers to this as attitude.

I've learned that survival doesn't always announce itself with gratitude. Sometimes the most sacred thing you can say at the end of the day is just, I'm still here. No flourish, no grand performance, just truth. Some truths arrive late, but often right on time, and the older I get, the easier it is to tell the difference.

People talk about closure like it's a door you shut. It isn't. Closure is a language you learn only after you've stopped trying

to rewrite the story. It's the moment you look at your own reflection and realize she's not the aftermath—she's the author.

Sometimes I stand barefoot in the yard at night just to feel the land press back. It doesn't ask me to justify the life I built. It doesn't measure the distance between who I was and who I became. It knows what I know now—that survival was never the miracle.

Most things don't fail on their own. People get involved, try to perfect them, and remove the exact conditions that made them work in the first place. The miracle was that I stayed kind. There are days when my emotions feel like they've grown quieter, not smaller, almost as if they learned how to speak in lower tones after years of being repeatedly asked to whisper. I can sense them moving under the surface, steady and unthreatening, a kind of tide that doesn't beg for attention. Maturity, I think, is simply learning the difference between a feeling that needs exploration and one that simply needs space.

Sometimes the sky over the farm looks like it's deciding whether to tell the truth or keep the secret a little longer. I stand on the porch with my hands wrapped around a warm mug and let the air speak first. There's a certain calm that settles over me when I stop trying to narrate my own emotions. I've always trusted the pines way more than people; at least they're predictable. They bend in the wind the same way each time. They don't pretend to be unbreakable. They just hold.

I think about this sometimes—feelings don't need commentary—they need room. And every time I remember that, the whole world gets a little quieter in a way that feels earned. I've stopped expecting closure from conversations that were never honest to begin with. You can't repair what was built on pretense, and I refuse to apologize for noticing the cracks before anyone else did.

Some truths arrive disguised as inconvenience—late trains, missed telephone calls, sudden silence. I don't ignore those anymore.

In early summer, I wrote something I never expected to write—a letter about what it feels like to be one of the only openly queer women in a rural town that prides itself on minding its own business. The Rutland Herald published *Being Queer In A Town That Doesn't Ask Questions* on June 7, 2025, and for a moment, the silence of this place cracked open just wide enough for the truth to pass through. I didn't write it for attention. I wrote it because sometimes the only way to stay honest is to put the words somewhere the world can't pretend it didn't hear them.

Being Queer In A Town That Doesn't Ask Questions

By Emily Pratt Slatin

There's a silence in rural Vermont that most people don't talk about. It's not the kind you hear in the woods at dusk, not the stillness between pine trees, or the hush that settles on an unplowed road during the first snow. No, this silence is social—heavy, old, and worn like a flannel shirt that's never fit quite right. It's the kind of silence that nods at you politely in the post office but never looks past the surface.

I live with my wife in Middletown Springs, population not quite-800. It's the kind of town where the general store has a community bulletin board on the front porch, along with two rocking chairs. The store carries almost everything I need at a moment's notice; things like toilet paper, local eggs, or a small pile of old church cookbooks for sale by donation.

People know me as Emily here in town, and my truck is known by the firefighter decal on the back window. Everyone, whether they admit it or not, knows everyone else—and likely what car they drive. But knowing someone here is often a matter of routine, not intimacy. They know your vehicle, have probably pet your dog, read your posts on Front Porch Forum, and noticed how well you plow your driveway. What they don't ask about is your pronouns, your marriage, your orientation, your past, your pain, or what it took to get here.

Doctors assigned me female at birth because of my XX chromosomes. I was born intersex, was raised as a girl, and

identified as female my entire life. I came out as a lesbian when I was 16 years old—to my parents, my friends, my family, and even my dog. I don't avoid that truth, and I never have. I've lived as a queer, strong-willed woman, not in protest or rebellion, but because that's simply who I am. But in a town like this, being visibly queer often means walking through a society where people are conditioned to see you clearly—and choose not to speak. And if I'm being honest, I'm not always sure whether that silence is kindness, or cowardice.

When I moved here in 2020 with my girlfriend (now wife), I braced for a reaction that never came. No one glared. No one made a scene. But no one said, "Welcome," either—not in the way I hoped. It was all tight smiles and noncommittal head tilts, like people were trying to square the version of womanhood they'd built in their minds with the tall, tattooed, career fire lieutenant lesbian working her tractor in hiking boots and pure blue nail polish.

My neighbors are the kind of people everyone dreams of having, and over the years, we've formed a friendship. I remember meeting Kathy, the postmaster, and attending my first community gathering at Mineral Springs Park, where I was the new girl in town. I became loosely associated with the community—accepted and supported, but not necessarily folded in.

In some ways, I was grateful. I didn't come here for approval; I came anticipating the hard work of owning a retired

dairy farm, the winters, mud season, and the slower pace of life. And Vermont gave me that. Or maybe it just looked away.

Pride, for most people, gets packaged up in the month of June—rainbow flags, city parades, hashtags, and slogans. But in places like this, Pride is quieter. It's waking up, pulling on your boots, and living your truth in full daylight. It's being visible without permission. It's kissing Amelia in the driveway, and not checking who's watching.

It's also loneliness. Let's not pretend it isn't. There's a particular ache to being the only openly queer person you know in your zip code besides your spouse. Outside of the larger cities, there are no queer potlucks here. No gay hangouts. No little signs in coffee shop windows. Sometimes I wonder if I'm the town's unofficial Pride parade—just me and my boots and my refusal to flinch.

I've stopped waiting for people to ask about my story. They won't. And maybe that's their way of giving me space. Or maybe they're afraid that if they ask, I'll actually tell them—and then they'll have to think about it for a while.

Emily Pratt Slatin (she/her) is a writer and photographer, living with her wife on a retired dairy farm in Middletown Springs, Vermont. Her work can be found at RescueGirl557.com.

August 29, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

This morning I woke up with that old sentence echoing in my head, the one a therapist once gave me like a cold prescription: your problem is that you're the daughter of a broken man. I remember the way it landed, clinical and sharp, like someone had boiled my whole life down to a single sterile diagnosis. In that moment, my pain wasn't human anymore. It was quantified, measured, and stamped into place without compassion, as if the depth of my suffering could be captured in a single phrase.

What bothers me isn't just that she said it. It's the way it stripped all the color and weight out of my story. Pain isn't a condition to be charted. It doesn't fit neatly in a DSM or a checklist. Pain lives in the cracks and fractures—it's the way my father refused to see me, the way he twisted reality to try and shape me into something I was never meant to be, the way weekends with him felt like disappearing into a version of myself that never existed, and never would. It's the loneliness of being raised by someone who couldn't face their own reflection, who projected that fracture onto me.

And yet, to call me "the daughter of a broken man" isn't entirely wrong. It's not inaccurate—it's just incomplete. It's a blunt summary of a story that deserves more than shorthand. It ignores the long nights of survival, the ways I clawed back a sense of self from the ruins. It doesn't see the resilience, the refusal to collapse, the firehouse years where I turned that

damage into grit and command, the way I've built a life with my own hands. It misses the small miracles too—the radio humming in the background to keep me steady, the camera that taught me to see the world differently, the quiet persistence of refusing to be erased.

Maybe what still cuts isn't the phrase itself but the absence of tenderness in the delivery. The lack of humanity. As if naming my pain clinically was the same as understanding it. I didn't want a label; I wanted someone to witness me. To look at me and acknowledge that being raised by a broken man leaves marks that are more than just theoretical, that the damage is lived in the body, in the choices, in the rhythms of every day. That survival is more than pathology.

I think about how often people mistake definition for compassion. They think that by naming something, they've done the work of seeing it. But naming without empathy is empty—it just leaves you colder. I don't know if what I've carried all these years is more about inheriting his brokenness, or the ache of being told that's all I am.

Maybe both. Maybe that's what I'm untangling this morning—the difference between truth spoken with care, and truth delivered like a scalpel. One leaves a scar. The other has the chance to heal.

September 4, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

Last month, I lost one of my friends from work. We had worked together on the same Tuesday night shift for well over a decade, and in that time we became more than just two people on the crew. In a career like ours, you grow accustomed to seeing loss—line-of-duty tragedies, sudden retirements, familiar faces leaving one by one. But this loss hit me harder than usual. He wasn't just a trusted colleague I saw every week; he was my friend. We had each other's backs through it all, from the routine calls to the nights when everything went wrong and only our teamwork pulled us through.

I keep thinking about those Tuesday nights we shared. Week after week, year after year, we forged a quiet bond under fluorescent station lights and the whine of dispatch tones. We'd swap stories over stale coffee during the late hours, grumble about paperwork, and double-check each other's gear before rolling out on a call. Over time, the lines between work family and actual family blurred. He'd become someone I could joke with, confide in, and rely upon without hesitation. Outside of the station, our lives intertwined in little ways that meant a lot: he had met Angie, shaking her hand with that warm grin and red vest of his, and he'd knelt down to give my dog Penfold a good ear scratch when they first met. I knew his children, too; I remember the day I let his son ride along with me during an EMS shift, the boy wide-eyed and curious to see what his dad and I did on those long nights. These are memories I cling to now. He

was more than “one of my guys”—he was a friend I was proud to count as part of my life.

I was his immediate supervisor, his Lieutenant, but our friendship never felt bound by rank. Still, I’d be lying if I said I never worried about how the brass on my collar affected our relationship. In the fire service, there’s a culture—sometimes spoken, often just understood—of bristling at authority. We’re a tribe of strong-willed individuals, and it’s almost tradition to gripe about your superiors. I remember being that lower-ranking EMT Firefighter, sitting around the rig after a tough call, venting with the others about whatever captain or chief was making our lives harder that week. I swore I’d never forget what it was like in the trenches, yet as I climbed the ranks myself, I carried an uneasy awareness that the dynamic had shifted. Suddenly I was “the brass.” I wore the gold badge and carried the responsibility that comes with it, and with that came a nagging doubt: Would I be on the other side of that resentment now?

As a young officer (and a relatively young woman in a mostly older, male squad at that), I often felt I had something to prove. Many of the Firefighters I oversaw were decades my senior, with deeper voices and longer résumés. I respected them immensely, but I couldn’t shake the fear that they only saw the rank, not me. I imagined the grumbles I used to partake in continuing behind my back now—that I was out of touch, or that I hadn’t earned my place. I tried not to let it show, but I kept a bit of distance, maintaining a professional calm. I thought it was the price of leadership. You can be friendly, but you can’t be friends,

or so I told myself. In quiet moments, I resigned myself to being quietly despised—tolerated, at best—simply because of the title before my name. It was a lonely feeling to carry into every shift, even as I laughed along with the crew. I believed that those below me, many of them far older and more experienced, secretly hated having to answer to someone like me.

I couldn't have been more wrong. I found out far too late that the exact opposite was true: these people respected me. Some even adored me, in the way you do a mentor or a big sister looking out for you. It's jarring to realize how skewed one's perspective can become. For years I had been so convinced of my outsider status that I failed to recognize the warmth and regard right in front of me. Only after I left that job—after I hung up my helmet and moved on—did the proof start to trickle in. And it came from the most unassuming of places.

A few days ago, I heard from a mutual friend still at the department. In the course of our conversation, he mentioned something that stopped me cold: Even my own uniform hangs there, sealed away in plastic—like I'd been archived along with it. It's exactly as I left it on my last day, preserved like some kind of exhibit behind glass. I sat with that revelation for a long time, picturing it in my mind's eye. That navy-blue uniform, with its neat creases and lieutenant's insignia, suspended in time behind a plastic sheath, untouched. Waiting. As if I might walk back in any moment, peel off the plastic, and put it on to answer another call. As if, in their hearts, I never truly left.

It saddens me beyond words that I've lived a life feeling like I never truly belonged anywhere—and yet when I finally did belong, I failed to see it until it was too late. Perhaps it's because being an outsider was a lesson I learned early and well. Ever since youth I've been drifting, never expecting a community to open its arms to me. I was the stranger, the girl who never quite fit: cast out of my childhood home as a teenager, a queer woman carving out a path in a world that wasn't always kind to those who are different. And I was different in every way. Those experiences taught me to keep my guard up, to brace for rejection even in places that felt welcoming on the surface. So when I stepped into the firehouse years ago, I carried that armor of unbelonging with me. I did my job and did it well, but a part of me always stood a half-step back, convinced the camaraderie only went so deep. I see now how unfair that was—to me, and to them. The station had, in its own rough-and-tumble way, become a family to me. I had a family there, and I was the last one to know.

Grief has a way of peeling back the layers of illusion. In mourning my friend, I find myself mourning a bit of my own blindness as well. I wonder if he knew—if any of them knew—how much I truly cared for them beneath my disciplined exterior. Did I ever properly thank him for every time he was right by my side as we ran into burning buildings or joked with me in the ambulance bay to keep our spirits up? Did I let him know that I trusted him with my life on those calls, that I slept easier on shift nights because I knew he was there watching my

back? I hope he knew. I hope all of them knew that despite my quiet fears and self-doubt, I valued them more than I could express. They weren't just "my crew"—they were my brothers and sisters, my dear friends. If I kept a professional mask on, it was only because I thought I had to. In hindsight, I wish I had been brave enough to set it aside more often.

His death has left an emptiness in the station and in my heart. But in that emptiness, I also see reflections of what he and others left me. I've learned that sometimes we belong without realizing it; sometimes we are loved even when we can't convince ourselves that we're worthy of it. It's a bitter lesson, knowing I missed the chance to feel that belonging in the moment. Yet it's also a precious gift, even discovered late, because now I know the truth: I was never as alone as I thought.

September 9, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

There are moments in a girl's life when the walls around her feel too tight, no matter how much space there actually is—when she has outgrown the people, the job, or the place without meaning to. It's not about height or weight or how she looks in the mirror. It's the quiet awareness that she no longer fits the mold that once held her, and staying would mean shrinking herself down to size. That's the thing nobody warns you about—you can be perfectly fine on paper, yet still feel like your soul is pressing against the edges, restless, impatient, ready to break out.

September 19, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

I keep circling back to this thought: tears are for the jealous heart. Maybe that sounds harsh, but I've seen it enough times to know it's true. I've cried rivers for things that mattered—losses that cut deep, moments too heavy to carry alone. It isn't grief, it's envy in disguise.

People weep not because they're broken, but because someone else held the flame they wanted for themselves. I've been on both sides of that. When I was young, I remember watching other girls move through the world with a kind of ease I didn't have—fathers who loved them without condition, families who held them instead of throwing them away. I never cried for myself. I cried because I wanted their life, their safety, their softness. That's jealousy, and it burns hotter than sorrow ever could.

The past few months have forced me to stop and look at what's right here, in my own hands. I realized I have everything a woman could ever want: a home that holds me, work that still gives me meaning, a wife who has been my companion through storm after storm, and, yes, a circle of friends. That last part surprised me most. I spent years convinced I didn't belong anywhere, that I was missing some secret piece everyone else had. And yet, when the world finally broke me—after forty-six years of holding myself upright against it—I saw the truth. The friends had been here the whole time. I just had to stop fighting long enough to notice them.

Now, older, I've learned that jealousy is a thief that steals your own story while you're busy coveting someone else's. Tears don't water the ground—they rust the hinges of the heart until nothing swings open. I can spot it now, clear as day: the brittle smile, the turned head, the wet eyes that are less about pain and more about spite.

I'm not sure which is worse—to be the one envied, or the one doing the envying. Neither sits well. Both rot you in different ways. I've been envied for surviving things that nearly killed me, which makes no sense. People forget survival isn't a medal, it's scar tissue. Still, I hear the quiet resentments, the "must be nice" comments about my farm, my work, even my marriage. They don't see the fire I walked through to get here.

September 22, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

The solstice always comes like an alarm clock I didn't set. This year, it hit me harder than any before.

At age forty-six, I finally broke. I set my phone to erase every message the second it came in. Calls went straight to nowhere. I deleted every app that ever made me feel like I had to be available, had to be connected. The world outside the farm had to make do with an email or blog post once every few days, if that. For months, it was just me, the fields, the barn, the walls of this house—and the silence.

I thought I was protecting people by vanishing. I thought my absence would go unnoticed. I was wrong. The truth is, people cared. My silence hurt them. And realizing that my absence could wound someone was something I never expected. It still feels strange to even write it.

This was also the year I brought Penfold home. His ashes had been waiting too long my parents house, and I finally buried them under the birch tree behind the house. That tree has watched over me since I bought the farm, the way he once did. Penfold wasn't just a dog; he was the reason I made it through a childhood that should have broken me long before adulthood did. He was my only constant in a home that was violent and loveless. Now he's back with me, where he belongs.

All my life, I've asked people to love me if they could. Many tried. Most couldn't. Some wouldn't. For years, I believed

that was my fate. Then, in 2020, I met Amelia. She showed me what love actually means—that it isn't conditional, and it isn't performative. And though Amelia and I separated briefly this year while I dealt with the sale of my childhood home, somehow that space pulled us closer in the long run. We found our way back, and it feels stronger now.

This summer, I also had a girlfriend for the first time during my marriage. Amelia and I agreed to it, talked it through, and understood what it meant. It started out fun, something light, something different. But the reality was complicated—she was married, with a young daughter and a husband much older than her.

In September, I did something I thought I'd never do: I slept in my old bedroom at my mother's house. First time since I was a kid. I moved my cannonball bed into that room and painted the walls back to the exact color they were in 1986, before everything fractured. I even took the dresser with me when I left. It was less about furniture and more about reclaiming something I thought was gone for good.

It was that night I spent alone in my parents' house, in my old bedroom, that I finally felt comfortable letting go of the past. The weight I'd been dragging—all the bruises, all the betrayals, all the shit I thought defined me—started to surface. For the first time, I wasn't fighting the memories. I was just there with them, and when Amelia arrived the following morning to help me bring furniture back to the farm, I left the memories behind.

Teachers hated me. They told my parents I'd never be anything, never do anything, never become anyone. They said I was too distracted, too stubborn, too much. My parents would always let out sighs of blatant dissatisfaction with my report cards and would lament that if only I could act normally while in school, I'd be fine.

Adults treated me like a special case. I simply had high functioning autism. My friends knew better. One Saturday morning, we were sprawled on the floor with our horse toys, and I picked the dark-haired one. From then on, I was nicknamed Dark Horse. They named me right. I was always the one no one bet on, the one counted out before the race even started. And still, I outran them all. I defied the expectations and made it on my own, in my own way.

I've decided to focus on who I used to be, before I ran away and got caught up in everything the world dangled in front of me in exchange for a lifetime of battles that made me question whether god was ever listening. When I was a kid, I was simply Emily. Everyone called me that, even back when it wasn't the name on paper. And my nickname was Dark Horse.

I have learned what it means to leave at a moment's notice—to pick up and go without a plan, without witnesses, leaving behind everything that might anchor a life. I know what it is to land somewhere strangers live, where no one knows my name, where nobody can answer the phone because there is literally nobody to answer it.

I know what it's like to hitchhike and hop freight to get where I need to go, with nothing but a backpack and a stubborn streak keeping me moving. I know the rattle of a boxcar under my boots, the cold steel against my palms, the way the world looks different when you're clinging to the side of a train in the dark.

I know the silence that comes after a trucker drops you off at some nowhere exit, and the long walk to find the next ride. I know what it feels like to gamble everything on the kindness of strangers, and to trust my instincts more than I trusted anyone's word. It's dirty, it's dangerous, and it's lonely, but it's also a kind of freedom you can't explain unless you've lived it. That kind of loneliness is also surgical; eventually it cuts out everything that could remind you who you were.

At work, I put my body between danger and the people I was sworn to protect. I stood in the line of fire for strangers, for neighbors, and sometimes for my own crew. That was the job—no drama, just the work. I did it because that was what was expected, and because it was the only thing I felt built for. People tell me I was one of the best; they say it like a medal. From the inside, the glow is see-through. I never felt luminous. I felt hollowed, like a soldered shell holding a heart capable of giving everything away and asking for nothing in return.

Sometimes the world applauds the wrong thing. They cheer the steadiness, the muscle, the calm in the storm, and they don't see the cost. One cost was the physical toll the long hours

and demanding work took on my body; the bigger cost was emotional. They don't see the nights I lie awake counting the distance between who I saved and who was already gone before I found them.

They don't see why, when the noise of the world became too much this year, I finally shut the doors to the world that broke me. I turned inward, listening at last to the small voice that had been whispering at the edges of my life for decades. The voice that said: stop performing survival for everyone else. Stop hiding the broken parts. Listen to yourself. This is your time. Living. Blessed. Free.

The solstice has arrived again. The year has been brutal, but it didn't finish me off. I broke, but I'm back stronger than ever.

September 29, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

For the past few days, I've felt like I'm reliving the final week of summer camp—that all-things-all-at-once swirl of emotions when something wonderful is ending and you're not sure what comes next. It's a cocktail of joy, nostalgia, and a touch of heartache, all mixed together. Strangely, it's taken me 46 years to feel this way. There comes a time in every girl's life when she finally feels like she belongs, and for me that time is now – arriving fashionably late, but all the more profound for its tardiness.

I used to watch other girls find their circles so easily. Some found it in adolescence—the popular girl holding court in the school cafeteria, or the tight-knit sorority sisters in college—forming bonds as natural as breathing. I envied that ease. In high school and even beyond, I always felt a half-step out of sync, like I'd missed the memo on how to fit in. While others were busy making memories at pep rallies or dorm parties, I was the quiet observer, lonely in a crowd, wondering when—or if—I'd ever have my turn to be truly seen. It didn't happen for me in those years, or even in my turbulent twenties and thirties. In my case, belonging didn't bloom until much later, almost taking me by surprise this year.

Looking back now, I realize a big part of that change was letting go. This year I cut loose a lot of people I once called friends. It wasn't easy; in fact, it was like prying my fingers off a ledge I'd been clinging to out of habit and fear. These were

people I thought I needed—some had been in my life for years—but many of those friendships had splintered into something one-sided or hollow. I finally admitted to myself that being lonely with people is worse than being lonely alone. So I opened my hands and let those connections fall away. And in doing so, something unexpected happened: my heart opened up. The space left behind by false friends made room for deeper, more substantial bonds—the kind I've always wanted. It's as if clearing out the noise allowed the real music to be heard. The people who have come into (or remained in) my life since then are the ones I know I can count on—as much as they count on me.

This past weekend brought all of that into focus in the most beautiful way. I invited two close friends over to spend the night at my farm. Luke and Maddie are both twenty years younger than me—mid-twenties to my mid-forties—yet wise beyond their years. Age differences melt away in good company, and with these two, I barely notice it at all. They are two of the most amazing young people I've ever met, each with old souls and open hearts. We didn't do anything particularly fancy; we didn't need to. We simply enjoyed the kind of easy, meaningful togetherness that I once only dreamed about. On Saturday night, we all went to Rutland in my truck for dinner. By the time darkness settled, we were on our way to the grocery store to buy last minute snacks for the evening campfire.

As soon as we arrived back at the farm, we stoked up a little campfire in the yard—a ritual that's becoming a favorite of

mine—and circled around its warmth. Firelight has a way of drawing out stories, and that night was no exception. We found ourselves sharing pieces of our lives with an honesty that felt as natural as the smoke curling upward. I talked about some of my past struggles—the years of feeling like a nomad looking for home, the people I had to leave behind—and they listened without judgement, eyes reflecting the flames and a deep understanding. In turn, Luke and Maddie spoke about their own journeys, and I was struck by their insight. They may be decades younger, but life has seasoned them in ways that make them kindred spirits rather than juniors. We joked, we swapped advice, we might have even gotten a little teary-eyed once or twice (not that anyone would admit it outright). By midnight, we were roasting marshmallows on twigs, sticky-fingered and giggling like kids. It hit me in the glow of that fire: I was completely at ease, utterly myself, and deeply connected. This must be what belonging feels like—the gentle awe of being surrounded by people who truly see you and still stick around.

Later, long after the fire had died down to embers, we wandered back inside. Luke sprawled out on the bean bag in the living room and Maddie curled up in the guest room, and my normally quiet farmhouse was alive with the soft sounds of friends settling in for the night. I crawled into bed smelling of woodsmoke, my heart full and my mind replaying the evening's highlights. There was a lightness in my chest that I can't ever recall carrying before. As I lay there, I realized that I wasn't worrying about saying "the wrong thing" or wearing out my

welcome—those old anxieties that used to plague me in social situations were nowhere to be found. This is what it's like to belong, I thought. Not to blend in or perform for others, but to simply be, and know that's enough. I fell asleep to the distant sound of Luke's light snoring down the hall and felt, for once, truly content.

By Sunday afternoon, after endless cups of coffee and a lazy late breakfast, my friends packed up to head home. We stood by their car, prolonging the goodbye with promises of "next time" and bear hugs that I can still feel. As their car rolled down my gravel drive, I felt that familiar sadness—the end-of-camp feeling. The weekend was over, and my farmhouse fell back into its familiar quiet. I was happy, I was sad, I was grateful all at once. I had successfully had a day of summer camp for adults. Watching them leave was like watching summer fade into fall: inevitable, natural, but a little heartbreaking nonetheless. I waved until they disappeared around the bend, then stood there for a moment in the silence, trying to parse the mix of emotions swirling inside me.

This afternoon, to help sort myself out, I took a walk down to the far end of my property, to the water's edge. There's a big old tree there (an oak, I think) that casts a cool shade over the riverbank. I leaned against its sturdy trunk and just waited—for what, I'm not exactly sure. Maybe for my heart to catch up with my head, or for the river to whisper some wisdom. The water was low and slow, trickling over the rocks in a soft melody that has become the background music of my life here. Sunlight

danced on the ripples, and a few early autumn leaves drifted downstream, off to wherever it is leaves go when they are tired and their time on the tree is done.

I took a deep breath of that clean Vermont air, rich with the scent of damp earth and hay, and let the quiet wrap around me. In that moment, I was totally in disbelief at how far I've come. After decades of struggle, wandering, and wondering if I'd ever find a place to truly plant my feet, I'm finally here. I have an old farmhouse that stands strong on a piece of land I can call my own. Sometimes I refer to it as my own private park, and it's not just a cute nickname—it genuinely feels that way. There are woods to explore, a river to lull me to sleep, fields that burst with wildflowers in summer and will soon blaze with fall colors. This place is everything I dreamed of and more.

There were times in my life I had no home at all—when I was sixteen sleeping in a car, or living out of duffel bags in my friends houses, I couldn't have imagined this peace. Even in later years, hopping between tiny city apartments, I held this farm in my heart as a distant "maybe, someday" kind of wish. And now here I am: nearly half a century old, standing on my own land, listening to my own river. It doesn't feel real. I half expect to wake up back in some rundown rental, dream over. This dream fought hard to become reality—and I fought hard to make it here —and I don't take any of it for granted.

There were times in my life when I had nobody—nobody to understand me, nobody to hear my tears fall in the dark,

nobody to sit with me in my heartache. Those were the years when silence became my cruelest companion, and I roamed endlessly with the weight of grief that had nowhere to go. I drifted from place to place, face to face, always searching for someone who could meet me where I was, but finding mostly walls or empty echoes. For years and years, I wandered like that, convincing myself that maybe I was too strange, too different, too hard to love.

It was this evening, standing out by the river with the cool air pressing in and the fading light turning the water to silver, that I realized something I had been too busy surviving to notice: I finally kept the promise I once made to my family—that no matter what happened out there, no matter how bad the call was, or how heavy the loss, I would always make it home. That vow carried me through some of the worst nights of my career, when the smoke still clung to me and the images wouldn't let go, but I still managed to walk through the door, drop my gear, and try to be present for the people who mattered.

But more than that, home is my family—Amelia, who has stood beside me in ways I cannot begin to measure, and the small circle of friends I can finally call my people. The circle is not wide, but it is strong. It is made of those who show up when it counts, who hold space for me the same way I hold space for them.

I'm learning, slowly but surely, that home is so much more than a piece of land or a house filled with stuff. Home is the

feeling I got watching my two friends make themselves comfortable in my living room, as if it were their home too. For the first time in my life, I have true friends. I have my people. And they might be younger, they might live miles away and have their own lives, but when we come together it's like the pieces fall into place.

October 4, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

Some of us aren't born with straight lines or clear directions—we're drawn in crooked constellations, held together by memory and the people who don't flinch when the world tries to rewrite our coordinates. This one's about finding peace in not knowing, and learning that the static between signals is sometimes the truest sound of being alive.

Doctors laughed when they came to my cradle. They told my parents their child would grow up and be different. I sometimes wonder if the laughter was nervous—like they knew something the rest of us didn't, something written in the invisible ink of chromosomes and quiet miracles. They said different like it was both prophecy and curse. Turns out, it was just a truth—one of those things that sits in your bones long before you have words to name it.

As I grew, people kept asking me what I wanted to be when I grew up. Everyone else had these ready-made answers, but I never really knew. All I wanted was to live—fully, honestly, freely. I'm 46 now. I've lived through decades of reinvention, adaptation, and quiet resilience, and still, I don't know what I want to do with my life. I used to think that meant I was lost. Now I think it means I'm alive. I'm not sure yet; my mind is always changing day to day.

Maybe that's what makes life interesting—this refusal of the heart to settle. Or maybe it's just the fault in my stars, the misprint in my genetic poetry that made me different from the

start. Maybe I was never meant to follow a straight path. Some of us are born on diagonals. Some of us are capable of seeing the world from another angle. Some of us learn to build our own compasses.

When I think about the word different, it doesn't sting the way it used to. It's not a wound anymore—it's a mirror. It shows me how much I've lived, how much I've seen, how much I've felt. The world still squints at people like me, like I'm a question they can't answer. But I've learned to take that question and make it art. To use my differences to teach the world to see nuance they never know existed.

Most people spend their entire lives chasing things that don't matter—money, approval, status, the illusion of control. I chase connection. I always have. Connection is the only thing that feels real.

There's Amelia—my wife, my code friend, my equal in every way that matters. We share a wavelength that hums somewhere between love and logic, friendship and firelight. She knows every unspoken sentence that lives behind my eyes. Then there's Luke—steady, genuine, the kind of friend who reminds me that loyalty isn't about proximity but about showing up. Maddie, a sweet girl who understands my weird, nonlinear ways of thinking and never tries to fix them. And Andrew, my former co-lieutenant from the fire department—the one who still knows the version of me that commanded chaos and kept her voice

calm while the world burned. Those are my people. The ones who saw through the armor and didn't flinch.

If life were a constellation, they'd be the brightest stars—Amelia to the north, Luke to the west, Maddie to the east, and Andrew holding the southern line. My fault lines and my star maps. The anchors that keep me from drifting too far into the void.

There's a strange sort of peace in admitting I still don't know what I want to do with my life. I've worn too many uniforms, carried too many titles, and I've realized that none of them define me. What defines me is that I keep waking up, still wanting to understand, still wanting to love, still wanting to be.

Maybe I'll never have the kind of answers people expect. Maybe my story will always sound like static on a radio, full of interference and half-sentences that trail into silence. But it's my static. My signal. My truth. And in that noise, I find something that feels an awful lot like meaning.

Sky above, Earth below, Dark Horse within.

—Emily

October 7, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

This morning the light came through my bedroom window in that soft way it does in October—angled, quiet, almost apologetic for waking me. The house was still, the kind of stillness that hums beneath silence, like the world is holding its breath before frost takes the fields.

I've been spending my days reworking my website, writing raw HTML and PHP like it's 1997 again. Line by line. Tag by tag. There's something honest in that—code you can touch. Not drag-and-drop, not a prepackaged "experience." I've had my fill of tools that promise simplicity and sell dependency. I don't want convenience; I want permanence. I want words that outlive every service that will fold, every platform that pretends permanence until the next quarterly report says otherwise.

It's funny. In some ways, I've gone backward. But backward feels forward to me. Back to when life moved slow enough for you to fix what broke. When the fix itself was the point. Maybe it's nostalgia, but I think it's deeper than that.

I keep thinking about those years when I had nothing—young, broke, and wide-eyed. I can't relate to people who inherit everything and understand nothing. The ones who've never known a single-digit bank balance, never had to choose between gas and groceries, never packed their whole life into a rusted-out '91 Honda with one headlight working and a cassette deck that needed a pen jammed in to rewind.

There's a kind of life-based education in scraping by that no degree, no inheritance, can buy. It carves you down to something real. I wouldn't trade it. Not for comfort. Not for ease.

Dinner tonight was at Texas Roadhouse with Luke and Maddie. Too many rolls, not enough napkins, the usual chaos. They asked what life was like when I was young, and I laughed before answering.

The 1980's were rough around the edges but communal—people worked hard, laughed harder, and even in the mess of it all, there was belonging. But the 90's… those were the years that breathed. We were standing on the edge of everything changing and didn't know it yet. The internet was still a place we went, not a place we lived.

I told them about summer nights around campfires that burned long past midnight, about dirt roads with no destination and mixtapes made from songs stolen off the radio. That was freedom before algorithms learned our habits. Somewhere in that same decade, I stumbled into something that looked a lot like love. I didn't tell them that part. Some stories are better undeveloped—negatives that never needed light.

After dinner, we drove to the Aviation Mall in Queensbury. That place has been part of my orbit for decades. I used to stop there heading down I-87—grab a burger at Friendly's, or coffee at Ambrosia Diner. The interstate feels less like a highway and more like an old friend that still remembers every mile we shared.

Inside the mall, Luke and Maddie found a photo booth tucked near the food court. They'd never used one before, which made me feel older than I wanted to admit. When I was their age, every mall had one. We'd pile in with friends, make faces, laugh too loud, and the final frame was always blurred because someone moved mid-giggle.

So we did it. The three of us crammed into that tiny booth—the curtain half-closed, lights flashing, Luke wedged sideways trying to fit. For thirty seconds, it could've been 1994 again.

When the photos slid out—warm, smelling faintly of chemicals—I held them in my hands and felt something I hadn't in a long time. Proof that even as everything changes, some pieces of the past can still be borrowed for a minute.

This is friendship as I remember it to be. And maybe that's all permanence ever really is.

October 8, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

Lately, I've been thinking about how much of modern life feels like living inside a microscope. Everyone's zoomed in on everyone else—opinions fired off like buckshot, strangers dissecting each other's choices as if they've earned the right to name them. Somewhere along the way, curiosity turned into judgment, and empathy got priced out of the market.

I see it everywhere—online, in conversations, even at the grocery store checkout where my total gets side-eyed because how could anyone spend that much on butter? It's small, but it's constant. We've mistaken surveillance for connection. People call it accountability, but mostly it's cruelty with a polite caption.

Sometimes I wonder when we stopped letting people be complicated. We used to give each other room to mess up, to grow, to be wrong without being ruined. Now it's as if everyone's waiting for proof that you're undeserving of the air you breathe. It's exhausting, being awake in an age where sincerity is mistaken for weakness and privacy for guilt.

I was born with a brain that saw through walls, an empathy that cut both ways, and a curiosity that refused to rest. That mix isolated me, sure, but it also built entire worlds—the kind that eventually led me here, to this quiet stretch of Vermont, where the silence finally feels earned.

I don't claim immunity—I still surf the internet like it's 1998. I notice. I flinch. But out here, the noise hits differently. Vermont forces you to hear yourself think. The hills don't care who you voted for. The maple trees don't scroll your feed. When I walk the property line in the early evening, I realize the world isn't nearly as loud as we've made it. It's us, amplifying each other's echoes until truth gets distorted into opinion and opinion becomes law.

I've asked myself a hundred times if life might've been easier had I been more ordinary—less open, fewer edges. Maybe it would've been quieter. But it wouldn't have been mine. The same wiring that keeps me restless is the reason my words carry weight—the reason my work feels lived-in instead of observed.

I've lived long enough to see the shift from quiet observation to constant commentary. Maybe that's why I still build things by hand—why I write code line by line, fix what breaks here at the farm, and only speak when I have something worth saying. It's my rebellion against the culture of overexposure. I don't owe the world a reaction every time it demands one.

There's a strange kind of peace in choosing not to perform. I used to think standing apart meant being alone, but now I see it's the only way to stay intact. When you stop explaining yourself to people who've already decided what you are, you get your life back—messy, unfiltered, unapproved.

I keep to my lane. I keep my circle small. I pay attention to what's real. The rest can stay online, arguing in circles. Out here, the air is cold, the stars are honest, and that's enough proof of meaning for me.

October 11, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

I woke up to the kind of morning that smells like October—cold enough to bite a little, but with that faint, sweet promise of sun. The road to my friends house was quiet, the way country roads usually are before breakfast, and I remember thinking how today would be an adventure. I was invited by my friend Brian; my contractor—turned friend. I immediately accepted. I crave adventure. Everything with Brian seems to turn out to be an adventure. I didn't need to be. I just wanted to know what it felt like—to see how it all worked, to do something different again, to earn a little honest dirt under my nails.

When I pulled down their long driveway, there was already laughter cutting through the sound of diesel engines and shifting gravel. My friends waved like they'd known me their whole lives, even though we've only recently started orbiting closer. What I didn't expect was how fast their family accepted me. No pretense, no hesitation—and suddenly I was part of something that mattered. That's rare these days.

As soon as we arrived at the farm of one of their friends, I started walking around capturing photos of tractors and some of the nicest people I've ever met in boots against the ground. I drove the dump truck for a while, learning the weight of the load, bringing me back to my fire and rescue days of driving large emergency vehicles, only this time it was much slower. Later, I swapped over to the Kubota and helped move pumpkins—lots of them—each one catching the light like its own tiny sun.

The air was filled with the smell of dust and pumpkins (I had accidentally backed over one or two) and fuel, all those good honest scents that stick to your clothes and mark you as someone who did something.

What stayed with me the longest wasn't the physical exertion of work—it was the people. They didn't just let me stand there with a camera—they let me be there. Their kids darted between the rows, their parents gave me that quiet, approving nod that farmers give only when you've earned it. They fed me, told me stories, teased me like I'd been coming around for years. We joked about all the rumors they had heard about New York City, many of them I confirmed as being true. There was no distance, no polite wall to tiptoe around. They opened their lives and just... let me in.

At one point, I caught myself looking around and realizing how safe it all felt. I don't mean physically—I mean emotionally. No judgment, no calculation. Just shared labor under an open sky. I haven't felt that kind of belonging in a long time.

I took a few photographs—somehow managed to capture dust hanging in the light, the sheen of the equipment, the exact hue of autumn stretching toward dusk. I didn't set out to make art; I just wanted to tell the truth of the day. But looking at the images now, I see something deeper. It's not about pumpkins or machinery—it's about being let into a life, however briefly, and finding yourself steadier for it.

When the work was done, we stood by the trailer full of pumpkins and talked about nothing in particular. The light faded, the air cooled, and I remember thinking, This is what home feels like. Even if I never stand in that field again, the memory's carved in.

They said I was welcome anytime. Maybe they meant it, maybe they were just being kind—but I believe them. I handed over my card, offered to bring my tractor next year, and thanked them more than once, and drove home with my hands still stained with dirt, smiling like an idiot.

I set out to try farming for a day. What I found was something far rarer: a reminder that good people still exist, that connection can happen without preamble, and that sometimes the most extraordinary days arrive disguised as ordinary work.

October 17, 2025—Stamford, New York (Mom's House)

It was 10:23 PM, and the phone lit up like it had a grudge. New York City number. Same neighbor who's spent her whole life policing other people's air. I let it run a few rings because I already knew the script—she would scold, I would listen, and somewhere in there she'd appoint herself the foreman of my grief. I answered anyway. She launched into it—how rude I was for not informing her the instant my mother died, how I always hang up when she tries to "discipline" me. Discipline me. I am forty-six, not the small child she thinks still lives in the house next door. But sure, please, do call to scold me like I tracked mud into your foyer.

I let her go for a beat, then I cut the line clean: "Mom died this morning. Glad you found out. Thanks for calling. Okay bye…" Click. Relief like flipping a circuit breaker—quiet, sudden, absolute.

No one tells you how to prepare for the day your mother dies—you don't get a halo of gentle respect from the world. You still get junk mail, push alerts, a million questions via Facebook, and neighbors from another lifetime who want to rewrite your scene with their pen. The house is dim, the clock in the upstairs bathroom is too loud, and the leaves outside have the audacity to keep quitting the trees. And yet, somewhere just beyond the static, there's the first thin draft of freedom. Not the cheap kind —no confetti, no champagne—just the cessation of a pressure you've carried so long you mistook it for your spine.

This year would've been a lot by itself, even if Mom hadn't died. I went train hopping for the first time since I was young enough to think the world owed me a map—I decided to train hop all the way to New York City—hung my legs off steel in the dark just as the sun was starting to rise, and listened to America breathe through its rails. It was in that moment that I moved through the world in a golden ball; I was living my best life introspectively in that moment, while outside it's America.

I had a lesbian fling with a married woman, which is a sentence that requires no embellishment. We were a bright chemical reaction—brief, undeniable, risky as hell. She was married to a man and they had a small child together living under the same roof.

Amelia and I separated for a little bit, then stitched the seam as best we could—what remains between us now is friendship that has been tested by fire and didn't burn, which is rarer than any romance we once tried to force to fit.

I sold my childhood home in New York City—resulting in numbers that look like someone else's life, but the ghosts still signed the closing papers with me.

I foolishly threw caution to the wind, hopped a flight to Nashville with the girl I raised from the age of two.

I finally had true hermaphroditism added to my medical record in a way that can't be erased by a lazy keystroke—my biology, in print, without euphemism or apology. And then,

today, Mom died. The year did not build to that moment so much as it confessed it had been leading me there all along.

People want you to line it all up in a tidy arc. They ask things like what did you learn, or what would you tell your younger self? My younger self would not have listened, and honestly, she shouldn't have. The point of a year like this isn't the lesson—it's the ledger. What was taken, what was chosen, what was returned to sender. I cut cords I had knotted so tightly they'd grown into me. Some I severed with a calm hand, some tore free in the chaos. The absences clang less loudly than they used to. Freedom doesn't always sound like wings—sometimes it sounds like silence with good posture. I made some new friends, rekindled old bonds, and lost some people I thought for a short time were my friends.

I went urban exploring in Massachusetts, where I intentionally put myself into situations that were risky in hopes of seeing things that nobody ever does. An abandoned chemical factory, a forgotten church, and a decommissioned public works facility. The same kinds of places that helped raise me as a child were the same places that added a tangible facet to the experiences I had this year.

I keep thinking about that house in New York, the one that sold. Money is loud in the papers, and very quiet in real life. The day the wire hit, I ate at Chipotle with Amelia in Erie, Pennsylvania, and washed it down with a Coke Classic because I am both a grown woman and also apparently still sixteen again,

and lately it seems I'm sixteen for good. The sale of my childhood home didn't change who I am, as everyone predicted it would. It did not cancel out the grit. It absolutely did not fix grief. It did, however, buy me time, and provide opportunity—time to stand still long enough, and an opportunity to admit the things I know to be true.

The fling—there was laughter, there was warmth, there was the adrenaline of rule-breaking that felt less like sin and more like oxygen after sitting in a long, stale room for too long. I will not dress it up. It was real, it was reckless, it was wild, it was one time, and it ended. Not everything is a forever object; some things are a single spark that teaches you where the dry grass is. I bear no shame. I also bear the knowledge that I am, at core, a free-spirited creature who still believes in the clean honesty of friendship as the highest form of love. Amelia and I—still married on paper, but the daily choreography has changed. We are kinder like this. The house is calmer. We choose each other without expectation, which might be the truest way to choose.

As for Mom—there are parts I will keep to myself. There are parts I will never stop examining, turning them in the light like a flawed diamond. Love was there, and also weight, and also the kind of silence that trains you to scan every room twice. In our last conversation, she told me she was proud of me. Not the polite kind of proud that fills silence, but the kind that catches in the throat because it's been sitting there for years. She said that despite everything I'd done—all the choices, the detours, the labels that could've made any parent feel like they'd failed—I'd

still turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to her. She laughed a little when she said it, then told me to check the attic as soon as I got home. I did. Beneath the insulation and decades of dust, I found everything my father had tried to erase from the house—boxes of the things he'd ordered gone. The man who once said, "There are to be no queers in the family," had been quietly outmaneuvered. She'd kept it all, every piece, tucked away where time couldn't touch it. She told me she knew from the very beginning that I was her daughter—the doctors had told her as much—and what she realized early on was that I was also gay. Apparently, Dad never got the memo. They're both gone now. The angry ghost of dad no longer lingers here.

I will probably still make it a point to return to the home that helped raise me, sleep in the quiet, invite a few old friends to sit on the floor with me and trade stories until the house feels like it used to. It will not be weird. It will be a small ritual that proves memory can be a place, not just a punishment.

When the dust in the field has flown, and I, the youngest of hearts, have grown, I don't ask for much—just that you don't bail on me when the quiet gets too honest. It's easy to love someone when the air is clear, when the sky behaves and the ground doesn't shift. Harder when the wind starts rearranging everything you thought was settled. I've learned not to beg for forever, only for presence—the kind that doesn't flinch when the story gets awkward, the kind that stays long enough to see how it ends. Because even the strongest heart, the one that's spent a

lifetime running into burning buildings, still wants to know someone's out there watching the smoke fade.

I used to think freedom would feel like a parade. Turns out it feels like coming back from a call at 3 AM and finally turning off the radio—nothing but the sound of your own breath and a clock you forgot to hate. Today, after the paperwork, after the call, after the logistics that try to rush in and colonize the space, I felt it—the absence of what I have been carrying. Not joy. Not sorrow. Just the click of a lock that no longer fits any door I own.

If you want a moral, I do not have one. I have a list.

- Sometimes the kindest sentence is the shortest one.
- Train tracks at night are the best therapist you can afford.
- Selling one's childhood home does not sell the ghosts—they simply negotiate a different rent.
- Biology printed in your chart is not identity, but it is a corridor where identity stops having to shout to be heard.
- Friendship can outlast the version of love that society dictates comes with matching rings.
- Money cannot change your handwriting. It can buy you shovels. You still have to dig to get what you desire.
- The right goodbye sounds exactly like a breaker snapping back to OFF and staying there.

By the time you read this, the leaves in Upstate New York will have made their annual argument with gravity and lost. I will have swept the floor of my childhood bedroom twice—not because it needed it, but because motion steadies me. I will find something that broke in Mom's house and fix it as if she never left, drink water from the kitchen sink, and sleep under the kind of quiet you can feel in your heart. I will, occasionally, whisper the same little promise that has followed me my entire life—no matter what happens, I will always make it home safely. After being exiled by my late father thirty years ago, I've finally returned, realizing finally that not only did I survive, I thrived.

How mom spent the last year of her life. Caravans of ambulances and paramedics would follow, along with broken homes and broken hearts.

Anne Pratt Slatin passed away on Friday, October 17, 2025, at The Mary Imogene Bassett Hospital in Cooperstown, New York, at the age of 80 from pneumonia.

She was born on October 31, 1944, in Buffalo, New York, to Mary McNeil and Wilson Holly Pratt. Her early summers were spent at Camp Otsego in Cooperstown, where she began as a camper and later taught sailing—friendships from those years stayed with her for life.

In 1979, Anne married Dr. Harvey L. Slatin in their apartment in New York City, and later that year their daughter, Emily, was born. In 1986, the family moved to Stamford, New York, where Emily grew up and where Anne would spend the rest of her life.

Anne gave much of herself to Stamford. She served for many years as a village trustee and later became the first woman to be elected mayor, serving a two-year term. She was also a longtime member of the Stamford Village Library board, committed to supporting the institutions that made the town stronger.

In her professional life, Anne worked as a self-employed genealogist, helping families trace their histories and reconnect with their roots.

In her later years, Anne volunteered with the Middletown Springs Historical Society in Middletown Springs, Vermont, near the retired dairy farm owned by her daughter, Emily, and Emily's

wife, Amelia. She loved both places and gave her time freely to the communities that mattered most to her.

She loved animals, especially cats, and delighted in the company of Penfold, her daughter's dog, who always made her smile. That affection also shaped her support for Heart of the Catskills, a cause close to her heart.

She is survived by her daughter, Emily Pratt Slatin, and Emily's wife, Amelia Phoenix Desertsong; her sister, Mary Ellen Pratt-Phillips; and Loralei Jurztrenka, who first cared for Anne as a nurse and, in time, became a cherished part of the family's life. She was predeceased by her husband, Harvey; her sister, Holly E. Keller; and her lifelong friends Frank and Carol Bell, and Ellen Wayman, of Stamford, and Richard "Dick" Woodhouse of Cooperstown.

Anne preferred simplicity over ceremony. At her request, there will be no calling hours or funeral. The family extends their heartfelt gratitude to the doctors, nurses, and staff at The Mary Imogene Bassett Hospital in Cooperstown for their extraordinary care and compassion during Anne's final days. Her final wishes were to be cremated and buried without ceremony at Lakewood Cemetery in Cooperstown, New York. Contributions in her memory may be made to the Stamford Village Library, the Stamford Fire Department, or Heart of the Catskills.

In memory of Anne Pratt Slatin
(October 31, 1944—October 17, 2025)

October 23, 2025—Stamford, New York (Mom's House)

Mom died last Friday—under a Virgo moon. Thin, quiet, almost polite about it. The kind of moon that minds its business and expects you to do the same. I remember looking up and thinking how small it was, how restrained. She would've liked that. No drama, no spectacle. Just an exit wrapped neatly in order.

The doctors called and told me to come quickly, so I did. No hesitation—just that familiar, hardwired instinct to move. Years of running toward someone else's disaster had trained it into me. But this time there were no sirens, no pulse checks, no saving to be done. Just me, driving through the low hum of late-afternoon traffic in Upstate New York, watching the distance stretch itself thin. I didn't think about what I'd say. You stop rehearsing those things after a while. Someone says, "Come now," and you just go. Because when it's your mother, that's all the instruction you need.

The hardest part of going home for a dying parent isn't the house—it's the drive. Every road carries a memory you didn't consent to revisit. I kept passing the places she and I used to roam, each one hitting like a quiet ambush. I thought about those afternoons she'd pick me up from school. I always hoped it would be her, not dad. Mom never scolded me for dressing too "girly." She'd just smile, like she saw something in me that made sense. Something my father refused to see.

When I finally saw her, her voice was thin but sharp with purpose. Months of fading had distilled her into something pure —just truth and fatigue. Every word she spoke carried the ache of someone who'd waited too long to be heard. There was a tremor in it, that soft plea for acknowledgment. I listened. I always do. It's been my curse and my calling—to catch the things left unsaid, the pauses heavy with everything that hurts too much to name.

There's a cruel kind of stillness when your mother is moved to a private room. The air changes. Visiting hours don't matter anymore. Words grow slow, like they know they're running out. It's the kind of silence that strips ceremony of meaning, where goodbyes stop sounding like sentences and start sounding like breaths. You can feel the story ending before the final page turns—and you realize what's left is yours to carry, whether you're ready or not.

It smelled like hospital sanitizer—the same sharp sting I came to know during my years as a Paramedic. Some scents never leave; they just linger long enough for you to walk back into them.

She said her life had been ordinary until the day I was born. That when I came along, the doctors told her I was a girl, but I was different. She didn't understand at first, not until they pointed out the parts that didn't match the binary expectations of society. She told me she raised me as a girl because that's what felt right to her, despite my fathers objections. She said she

was proud of me for becoming the woman I am, despite the hardships, the pain, the years of simply scraping through.

She talked about my girlfriends, too—how she accepted Allegra, outright despised Angie, tolerated the rest, but absolutely adored Amelia, and told me not to let her go. Don't ever leave Amelia, she said. She's perfect for you. I didn't argue. Some things don't need correcting.

I told her about the wildness that came after—coming out at sixteen, the women, running away and joining the fire department, hitchhiking, trying weed before I was old enough to vote, freight hopping, giving my parents hell at every turn. She laughed, soft and tired. Said raising me was an adventure, sure, but the greatest one she ever had, because she got to be my friend first and my mother second.

Mom suggested I go get dinner from the hospital cafeteria. The food is good here, she said. I knew she was lying, but I smiled anyway. It was the kind of lie meant to keep you from leaving too soon. I could see it in her eyes—the small flicker that said stay just a little longer, even if we pretend you're going for food.

I took the bait. Told her I'd be right back. Downstairs, the air smelled faintly like bleach and overcooked vegetables. I ordered pork bites, mashed potatoes, and a Mountain Dew—comfort food in the most literal sense. The cashier asked me to open my food container, but didn't look up as I paid with my credit card. I remember thinking how strange it was to do

something as ordinary as swipe for a meal while time itself was running out upstairs.

I figured now was as good a time as any to tell mom the things I wasn't exactly proud of. The ones I'd kept filed away in the back of my mind, marked not for parental review. I asked if it would be alright—if I could share a few secrets I'd never said out loud.

She sighed, already amused, and said, "Emily, if your secret is that you watched a pornographic movie, I don't care."

"Seen one?" I said. "I was in one once."

She laughed. Actually laughed. A small, startled sound that filled the room like a flash of color in grayscale. Then came a shrug—soft, half a wince—and for a second I saw what the month in the hospital had done to her hands. Bruised, bandaged in places, both wrists looped with those plastic bracelets that reduce a person to a barcode.

I tried to keep the conversation light after that, but something in me started to brace. That instinct I learned on the job—hope for the best, but be prepared for the worst. I could feel the air in the room tightening, like it already knew what was coming.

I tried to lighten the mood. Told her about the stupid, funny things—like the times the police brought me home a few times for streaking. She laughed, the kind of laugh that comes

from deep memory, not breath. For a moment, it felt like we were just us again—mother and daughter trading stories, not a patient and her kid sitting under fluorescent mercy.

Then she looked at me with that faraway softness, the one that says this part matters. She told me she loved me—plain, certain, final. And then she said, When you get home, go straight to the attic.

I asked what she meant. She just smiled, the way people do when they've already decided not to explain. I could tell she was fading, the edges of her sentences starting to blur. I wanted to press, but something in me said let it be. There'd be time to figure it out later. At least, that's what I told myself.

For the past forty-six years and eighty-nine days, our maps matched up. I didn't think of it that way until after she was gone—how we'd been quietly tracing the same grid the whole time. Same lines of latitude, same cities and small towns, same stubborn gravity pulling us back into each other's orbit. She was my first lifetime friendship, though I never used that word with her. Friendship. It felt too soft for what it was. We were just—inexplicably linked.

There were years when we drifted, sure, but even then the coordinates still lined up. I could feel her there, somewhere on the same map, breathing under the same sky. That's the strange thing about mothers—you start out sharing a body, then a roof, then a silence, and somehow it still counts as together.

Now the maps don't match anymore. Hers ends where mine keeps going. I keep catching myself checking as if maybe this is all a bad dream, almost as if somehow I'll find her name printed in the margins. Maybe I still will.

October 29, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

This is going to be a mind-dump—no rhythm, no order—just what's left of me spilling out because tonight my mind simply cannot hold any more. 2025 has been one of the most chaotic years of my life, and somehow, this month found a way to break through whatever was left of my limits.

I'm still in disbelief, still reliving the moments from earlier this month. The doctors called and told me to come quickly, and I did. I knew before I even picked up the phone that it would be that call—the one every child dreads, even when the child is fully grown. I remember the drive—how every mile stretched longer than it should have, how the world outside the windshield blurred between the streaks of rain and the streaks of tears I refused to acknowledge.

When I arrived, they went over everything—the tests, the X-rays, the numbers, and the prognosis that sounded more like a verdict than a sentence. End of the line. Those words still echo in my skull like static.

Mom's final wishes were simple, and brutal in their simplicity. She wanted to see me. She asked that I show up in uniform. So I did. I stood there in pressed blues, smoothing out the creases with steady hands that didn't feel like mine, pretending composure while the rest of me came undone somewhere deep inside. I smiled for her. I held her hand. And on the way there, I cried the entire drive—quiet, shaking, alone in the place that raised me.

I'm forever stuck on the last things people tell me. The words always linger—the final looks, the half-smiles, the small talk that turns out to be the last talk. They stay until they're overwritten by the next round of last moments, each one layering over the other until all I'm left with is an archive of goodbyes. Mom and I talked all day. She drifted through time like she was trying to hand me back the whole story at once—my birth, the doctors telling her I'd be different, my days at Buckle My Shoe, then Friends Seminary, and finally the move from New York City to Stamford when I was in third grade. Each memory surfaced and settled between us, soft and deliberate, like she was tucking me in one last time. The most important detail that she revealed was that the moment I was born, the doctors told her I was a girl.

Earlier this year, amidst the stress of moms declining health, and my need to sell my old house in New York City, Amelia temporarily relocated to Erie, Pennsylvania. I found myself hopping trains again, and somehow, just as I wanted, I caught a random one—ending up at Grand Central like the universe had sidetracked me there because it no longer knew what else to do with me. Not long after blending into the crowd, I paid the subway fare hoped the A train back to 14th street, signed the documents, and sold the house I grew up in. Mom and I talked about all the people who once filled that space—those who believed in me, who saw something worth saving—and how most of them are gone now, far too soon. As mom and I talked about the past, the doctors came and went like the bank men

earlier this year—paper in hand, eyes down, doing their jobs before leaving behind the same empty quiet.

I noticed how her expression shifted when we touched on leaving the city—how her eyes softened in that quiet, knowing way. She could see it in me, the shadow that era left behind. Those years still carry their weight; the loneliness of small-town adolescence, the silence that followed the hum of New York. So, we stuck to the bright parts instead—the kites we flew behind the GE plant in Schenectady, the weekend trips to visit Dad's best friend, the man I always called Arturo. She summarized that chapter the way only a mother could, skipping the pain, distilling it all into one clean line: "No matter what, even though you were the kid everyone doubted, you still made it—and I am unbelievably proud of you."

She finally admitted that my father was an abusive asshole. Then we talked about selling my childhood home, and the strange kind of freedom that followed.

Mom told me I could do anything I wanted now—that after everything I've been through, and after finally reaching a point where money isn't the barrier it used to be, the world was wide open. Then she asked what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. It wasn't the first time she'd asked. She'd asked when I was eight, sitting cross-legged on the floor with a notebook full of dreams I never finished writing down. She asked again when I was twelve, and then during my senior year of high school—the year I ran away and never went back. She asked through every

version of my adulthood too, like a refrain that never lost its shape no matter how many times my life did.

Every time, my answer was the same: I didn't know. I still don't. But that's the strange beauty of it. Not knowing is what's kept my life interesting—unmapped, unpredictable, stubbornly alive. It's the uncertainty that's carried me this far, the same way a compass still points North even when you're not sure where home is. Somehow, through all of it, a little seed of hope stayed in the ground—it hit me: somehow, Amelia and I made it through together.

I thanked her for being my friend first, and my mom second, then I rose from my chair, stood up straight at the foot of moms hospital bed, and gave her a salute. The same salute I'd given to those I once called my co-workers, though in the end like mom, they were family. There's no ending to write tonight. Just this hollow kind of silence that feels like waiting for something that's already happened.

November 2, 2025—Stamford, New York (Childhood Home)

Mom passed away, and the world went still in that specific kind of way it only does when something permanent shifts. She was my best friend, my anchor, the one person who always understood the language beneath what I said. And now she's gone, and everything—her handwriting on old notes, her half-used chapstick, the sound of her voice in old voicemails—has become evidence of her, rather than extension.

I was her only child, so everything came to me. Not just the house and the bank accounts, but the quiet gravity of it all. The kind of weight you can't hold in your hands but feel pressing down anyway. Her will was simple, like she always was—no confusion, no fine print, just her way of taking care of me one last time.

And yet, somehow, it doesn't feel like an ending. It feels like someone intentionally left the gate open. Like she knew I'd stand here too long if she didn't make it obvious there was more life waiting past the fence. There's grief, yes—but also that strange flicker of beginning that shows up right when you least want it to.

I too am going through changes. The kind that sneak up quietly, reshaping things before you notice. It feels like an invitation. Quiet, steady, inevitable—maybe the kind love leaves behind.

(unfinished)

November 3, 2025—Stamford, New York (Childhood Home)

Yesterday, I went to the cemetery. No ceremony, no flowers—just me, a handful of leaves clinging to my boots, and the sound of November trying to hold itself together. It was Mom's wish that I write her obituary, then have her ashes buried alongside my father's. I drove out to Lakewood Cemetery outside Cooperstown, parked under a sugar maple that had already given up most of its color, sat for a long minute with the engine ticking down, and tried to figure out what I was doing there.

It wasn't grief that brought me—it was the necessity of coming through on the last promise I made to Mom before she passed away. Both of them are gone now. My father went first, quietly, as if he didn't want to wake the world. My mother took longer to fade—she talked about her impending passing for over a decade, long enough for her to believe that she had more time, right up until the very end. Death finally found her too, as it eventually does with everyone who thinks they can outstare it.

I stood there with my hands in the front pockets of my brown Carhartt, looking down at the ground that now held both of them, each in their own labeled black plastic boxes, and I realized I didn't owe them anything anymore. Not forgiveness, not anger, not even remembrance in the way they might have wanted. What I owed—to myself—was distance. Freedom. To live without the echo of their voices shaping my decisions.

For the first time, I said goodbye and actually meant it. Not the polite kind of goodbye people say at funerals, but the

kind you whisper to the wind from a distant storm over Lake Otsego. I didn't cry. I didn't need to. The air off the lake in November was cold enough to do it for me. When I finally turned to leave, the sun had dropped behind the ridge, spilling this faint orange light across the stones. I walked back to my Bronco, started the engine, and sat there watching my breath fog the windshield. And for the first time in a long time, it felt like mine —the breath, the silence, the moment.

I decided to take the long way home. It wasn't planned—it just sort of happened. One turn became another, and before I knew it, I was tracing roads I hadn't driven in years. Somewhere outside Richmondville, I realized where I was headed. By chance —or maybe not—I'd steered toward Angie's house. The same house I bought when we were still together, before everything between us cracked under the pressure of time, and pride, and the unspoken realities of biology.

Mom had made one final request before she passed: to let Angie know. It was an odd thing to ask, considering how the two of them could never stand each other. They fought like they were born to it—trivial arguments, old grudges, and an underlying stubbornness that bordered on art. I think, deep down, Mom wanted to make peace with the one person she never could, even if it had to happen through me, after her passing.

I pulled into the driveway outside my old house just as the daylight started to collapse behind the hills. It looked mostly the same—still that pale white aluminum siding, still the porch

light burning even in daylight, the one with the inconveniently placed switch we never bothered to turn off. I sat there for a minute, my hand resting on the shifter, wondering if it would feel like trespassing to knock. I thought that maybe I'd use Mom's passing as a cover story—but that's ridiculous, I thought. I built up the courage and got out anyway, walking with hurried authority, like a one-woman army on a mission no one else could see.

When she opened the door, there was that moment—half recognition, half disbelief. We hadn't spoken in years, not properly. We'd spoken to mutual friends, but never each other, like two ships sailing separate waters. But something in her face softened when I told her why I was there. No dramatics, no tears. Just a quiet exhale, like something heavy had finally been acknowledged. She stepped aside and invited me in.

We ended up talking for hours, then driving to Cobleskill for dinner—one of those unplanned, suspended evenings where time folds in on itself. It wasn't romantic; it wasn't even nostalgic. It was just… easy like old times. Conversation filled the empty spaces without either of us trying to fix anything. We talked about Mom, about the past, about how strange it feels to outlive the versions of ourselves that used to be certain of everything. Somewhere between the diner coffee and the check, I realized we weren't enemies anymore. Mom's death, in its strange, backhanded way, gave me something unexpected—a reconciliation I didn't know I still wanted.

I took Angie home, made sure she made it inside safely, before backing out of the driveway and disappearing into the darkest stretch of upstate New York night. The kind of black where even the high beams feel useless, swallowed by trees and fog and memory.

On the way back to Mom's, I stopped at Walmart in Cobleskill. It was close to midnight—the hour where the aisles go quiet and everything hums in that low electric way that makes you feel both alive and unseen. I went straight for bedding, no wandering, no distractions. I bought a pile of pillows for the bed here at Mom's house. The same bed, same room, same wall it's always been against since I was a kid.

I don't surround myself with pillows for comfort. It's for safety. That's an autistic thing—building a soft perimeter, creating a buffer between me and the world so I can finally rest. When I was younger, Penfold used to sleep beside me and push me up against the wall. I think he knew that's what helped me fall asleep—the weight of him pressed close, the wall at my back, the sense that nothing could sneak in from the dark side of the room. He must've known. Dogs always do.

As for Mom's house—I've decided to keep it. There comes a time in every girl's life when she holds onto something, despite the pain it carries. Maybe it's not about sentiment, or even forgiveness. Maybe it's about claiming what's left, and finally making it yours. I'm starting with my bedroom—taking it back to how it was before my father kicked me out in 1996, then

adding small reminders of everything that came after, until it feels like I never left at all.

November 9, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

The wind and the rain have been restless all day—the kind that move together, low and steady, never asking where they're welcome. They rattled the porch light early this morning, then spent the afternoon combing through the tall grass beyond the back porch. By dusk, both had worked themselves into something gentler—a hush that carried more memory than sound. The kind of quiet that doesn't quite trust itself yet.

There are days here when everything feels too still, and then there are days like this, when even the air can't decide which direction to settle. I stood by the window long enough for my coffee to go cold, watching the pines bend and straighten like they were rehearsing forgiveness. The sky was a dim, uncertain blue—the color of something you've already said goodbye to but can't quite stop missing. I thought about how many versions of me the weather has already met: the woman who fought everything, the one who ran toward it, and the one who finally let the storm pass without needing to name it.

Inside, the house creaked the way it does when it's trying to remember its shape. The rain ticked unevenly on the windowsill, a rhythm that doesn't bother me anymore. I've learned to measure time in smaller ways—the hum of the refrigerator at night, the click of the heat coming on, the slow, uneven breath of the house as it settles. My calendar used to be full of alarms and arrival times. Now I keep track of seasons by

the sound of rain on the roof. You stop rushing once you realize no one's keeping score.

The window glass quivered under another gust, and I caught my reflection faintly in it—half light, half ghost. For a moment, I saw all the women I've been layered on top of each other like weathered paint. The one who ran toward fire. The one who mistook motion for meaning. The one who finally learned how to stay. The world was never asking me to save it. It was asking me to remain.

I think about the ghosts sometimes—the ones that live in my hands more than in my head. The way they tighten when thunder rolls in, or how I still look toward the sound of sirens even when they're miles away. Some habits never leave; they just quiet down. And some nights, when I can't sleep, I trace the scars and remember that I didn't get them by accident. Every one of them is proof of a story I walked out of.

The wind's quieted down now, and the rain's softened to a whisper against the windows. The light's almost gone. There's a mug on the table half full, gone cold again. The sky's turned that shade between steel and mercy. Somewhere out in the pasture, something moves through the grass without hurry. I don't need to know what it is. Some truths stay truer when you stop chasing them.

And maybe that's what this life has been trying to teach me all along—that peace isn't the absence of storms. It's learning to stand in the middle of one without needing to be the lightning.

It's the quiet conviction that you've already survived worse weather than this. And that when the wind finally moves on, it'll leave just enough behind to remind you where you've been—and who you've become in the staying.

November 13, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

There are days I think I'm held together with memory, stubbornness, and the kind of grit you only get when life has already taken too much. I grew up early—too early, honestly. I was handed responsibility long before I had the language for any of it. I learned to read faces, rooms, danger, intention. I learned to hold everything together, even when the world seemed perfectly content to stick me in the corner and tell me to smile. Emotional survival became second nature—something I did the same way other people tie their shoes, without thinking, because there was never another option.

Mom had been sick for over a year, hanging on in that strange, suspended way that makes time feel elastic and unreal. Then, suddenly, the call came, and everything I still needed to say collapsed into a single moment I didn't get to have. I stood at the foot of her bed in my fire uniform, the same one she always said made her proud in a way she never quite had words for. I lifted my hand and saluted her one last time—an act that felt like handing back something heavy I'd been carrying for decades. The sound in the room shifted then, like a door easing shut behind someone you love.

When I went back to her house afterward, the quiet felt wrong, like the air hadn't caught up to the loss yet. I climbed the stairs to my old bedroom, the one where I hid my diary under the mattress and learned how to confide in the moon through the windows. I sat on the edge of the bed and took my uniform

off—this time for the last time. It didn't feel triumphant or tragic. Just final—like a chapter I'd been dragging behind me finally exhaled.

I can feel myself changing. Not in the big cinematic way—more like slow shifts beneath the surface, things turning over one at a time. I traded my F-150 for a Bronco. Same grit, less history. It was overdue. I'm done putting fire or rescue decals on my car. I'm done signaling a life that demanded more from me than it ever returned. Retiring as Lieutenant Specialist—special rescue and EMS—was something mom always saw as one of my brightest things, the part of me she showed off to other people. Now she's gone. Dad's been gone for years. And without them to witness it, I'm realizing I don't have to keep wearing the past like a badge anymore.

I gave that job every version of myself I had. It shaped me, scarred me, raised me, and nearly ended me. But it doesn't own me anymore. It's time to let that life settle into memory, the same way the dust settles in an old rail yard after the engines roll out. It's time to build something quieter, steadier, and slower.

Some mornings the fog rolls in like forgiveness that doesn't need to be earned—even the moon needs darkness to be seen. Sometimes I wonder if the stars are just the universe remembering itself out loud. And when the night closes around me, steady and unbothered, I whisper back: I'm still here with Amelia. Safe and alive, and somehow we made it through together.

November 19, 2025—Stamford, New York (Childhood Home)

I found the childhood pictures my mother hid from my father, tucked into the back of a drawer like they were contraband, and holding them felt like touching a version of myself I barely remember but somehow still miss. In every photo, I'm this small, stubborn girl with bright eyes, already trying to figure out why the world felt tilted—already bracing for a fight I didn't yet have the words for. Mom must have known dad would try to erase me, or rewrite me, or turn me into something that made sense to him, so she tucked those pieces of me away like a silent act of rebellion. Standing there in my childhood home decades later, pictures spread across the table between the coffee mug and the stack of mail, I realized she saved the evidence that I was always exactly who I said I was—long before doctors, long before labels, long before the years that hardened me. A whole childhood hidden in plain sight, waiting for me to be strong enough to claim it.

November 22, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

I keep thinking about how strange it is, the way a family changes shape the second someone dies. I've seen it happen before, but this time it felt different—sharper around the edges, hollow in places I didn't expect. When my mother died this year, her house went quiet in a way that didn't feel like silence; it felt like a vacuum. It's one thing to lose a person, and another thing entirely to lose the one person who gave your life its origin. There was an enormous void, one I didn't see coming even though by now I probably should have.

In the days after she passed, I drove back to the old house where Angie and I used to live. I told myself I went because I had to, but the truth is that I just didn't want to be alone with the weight of it. Angie and I had somehow found our way back to being friends—funny how certain people drift out of your orbit and then drift back in right when the universe decides you shouldn't be standing on your own. She was steady in that familiar way. I went to see her at our old place, and it felt like walking into a ghost version of my own life. She didn't ask for anything from me, didn't push, didn't pry. She just let me sit there and breathe, which is all I was capable of anyway.

A day later, she came to my mother's house—my male cousin too—to help me sort through things. Two women and my distant cousin standing inside a house that hadn't changed much since my childhood, each of us pretending we knew where to begin. Mom's antique plates were the hardest part. Those

ridiculous, delicate things stacked up behind cabinet glass like museum artifacts from a life she loved more than the people in it. Angie helped me pack them, wrapping each one like it mattered more than it did, and I let her. It felt like we were packing away the last version of my mother that the world recognized.

My cousin tried to talk to me like we hadn't spent years pretending the other one didn't exist. My whole family has always filed me into that category they never said out loud but always meant—special needs. Too sensitive. Too strange. The only one with a formal autism diagnosis. The only queer in the family. They liked to pretend it didn't factor into anything, that they weren't measuring me by those labels, but I could always feel the weight of it hanging in their tone, clinging to their expectations, shaping the limits they quietly imposed.

He took charge the second he walked in, as if my mother's house was some kind of estate sale waiting for his approval. He started rattling off the prices I could get for each of her antique plates, talking about market value and resale demand like any of that mattered more than the fact that she hasn't even been gone a month. He couldn't grasp the reality that I didn't need the money and wasn't looking to flip my mother's life for cash. I just wanted her collection put safely in storage in the basement until I could breathe again. Instead of respecting that, he began arranging everything like a dealer prepping inventory, stripping the sentiment out of the room piece by piece. It was all action and no thought, all assumption and no regard for what I said. It

was like watching someone disassemble a memory while you're still trying to hold it in your hands.

To my face he called me Emily, repeating his line about how he didn't care that I was intersex, didn't care that I was his biologically female cousin, didn't care about me being married to a transgender woman. He claimed not to care about anything except being completely supportive. But the second he stepped aside with Angie, away from where he thought I could hear, he switched to my old name—the one nobody outside my immediate family had ever used—and he used male pronouns without hesitation, as if they were somehow truer than the life I've lived for forty-six years. Hearing it was like being dropped back into a version of myself I worked my entire life to escape. It wasn't ignorance, and it wasn't a slip. It was a choice. A quiet dismissal of everything everything I've always been, and everything he pretended to accept.

Aside from my own mother, I haven't seen or spoken to any of them in years. Walking through that house with people who share my DNA felt like visiting a childhood home through a museum window—recognizable, but inaccessible. I kept waiting for something to shift inside me, some old instinct to come back online. It never did.

I tried to reason with him, even though part of me already knew it was pointless. I showed him my driver's license first, the one that clearly names me as Emily Pratt Slatin and lists my legal sex as female. Then I pulled out my birth certificate, the original

document that denoted me as female from the day I was born. If that wasn't enough, he had the in-person testimony of Angie—my ex girlfriend of nearly twenty years—standing right beside him, telling him plainly that I have lived my entire life as a woman. It felt ridiculous, having to present documentation like I was proving residency for a library card, but I did it anyway because I wanted to believe he might meet me halfway. I wanted to believe that evidence would matter more than whatever story he'd written in his head.

But after being handed undeniable proof—legal, historical, personal—that I've lived my entire life female, he still clung to his own version of reality like it was gospel. It didn't matter that the documents matched the person standing in front of him. It didn't matter that Angie confirmed every piece of it. It didn't matter that the facts were as straightforward as they come. What mattered to him was the comfort of his own narrative, the one where he could pick and choose which parts of me counted. And in that moment, it became painfully clear that no amount of truth was ever going to override the story he preferred to tell about me.

At some point I just walked back upstairs and hid in my childhood bedroom, because that was the only move that ever really worked when the world got too loud. Vanishing was my oldest survival skill. I survived my childhood, boarding school, and college by disappearing into whatever room I could claim as mine, shutting the door, and pretending the rest of the world

didn't exist. It wasn't running away. It was preservation. It was the only place I ever felt remotely safe.

He followed me up there eventually, only to start picking at my autism as if it were something he could diagnose with a glance. He pointed to the six pillows on my bed—six soft, harmless pillows—and tried to use them as evidence that I was developmentally challenged, that I needed someone responsible to hold my hand through life. He then went on to say that I was indeed gay—Amelia is a transgender woman, and therefore it doesn't get any gayer than that. It was condescending in that slow, syrupy way some people weaponize concern, pretending they're helping while they're dismantling you. Six pillows became a character flaw, a symptom, an excuse to place me beneath him.

Instead of snapping, I reached for something older and truer. I opened the box of childhood photos mom kept and showed him pictures of myself in 1990, the daughter my mother raised from day one. It wasn't about proving anything. It was about letting the truth sit there between us, undeniable, preserved on glossy paper that had outlasted every lie my family ever tried to tell about me.

I pulled out the stack of patches I'd sent home to my mother every time I got a new fire department assignment. Mom had kept them in the same box along with my childhood photos. There were five department patches in total—each one handed to me as part of tradition upon assignment—handed with the

weight of the work I would do, the risks I would take, the lives that would be saved, and the grit I needed to earn. I didn't have to explain any of it. I just let him look at the collection—proof that whatever story he'd built about me being incapable or fragile never matched the reality that I was a woman who made it out of those years alive.

Then, as if the afternoon hadn't already slipped into absurdity, he made the outrageous claim that nobody in the family had ever known I was queer, that this was all somehow brand-new information hitting him for the first time. It was such a blatant reach that I almost laughed. It had that familiar desperation to it—the scrambling people do when they realize the argument they built is collapsing around their feet and they need to salvage whatever pride is left, even if it means rewriting history on the spot. I came out at sixteen. I told everyone. Friends, family, teachers, neighbors, even my dog who slept at the foot of my bed. My queerness was never hidden, never ambiguous, never something I kept tucked away. It's impossible that he didn't know. What became clear in that moment wasn't his ignorance—it was the lengths he was willing to go to in order to avoid admitting he'd been wrong.

I stayed in my room most of the time, the way I used to when I was a kid—quiet, careful, shrinking myself down to take up as little space as possible in a house that technically belonged to me now. He kept coming back late at night, walking into my room unannounced, or talking through the door that divided our rooms like we were supposed to be bonding over grief. Then

he'd wake before sunrise and make enough noise to jolt me out of whatever shallow sleep I'd managed. I counted down the days like I was waiting out a storm, using every ounce of energy to stay quiet and out of his way, retreating into the smallest version of myself in the very home where I'd already spent a lifetime doing the same.

By the afternoon on the last day, he was relentless. He started lecturing me about how I should ignore my doctors, the same doctors who diagnosed my intersex condition decades ago —they told me I was intersex and female when I turned 16, long before it was labeled under the code that would eventually become Q56.0. According to him, the only thing I really needed was to follow his lead. His coping mechanism had become alcohol, and somehow that made it the correct one. He talked like anyone who didn't numb themselves the way he did was doing life wrong, as if drowning reality in liquor was the sensible kind of wisdom I'd somehow been missing.

At some point something inside me just shut off, the way it always does when I've crossed that invisible internal line. In typical Autistic Emily fashion, I walked downstairs, planted myself directly in front of him, and with a blank, expressionless tone that even I could feel flattening the air between us, I said, "Get your things, put them in my car—we're leaving for the airport effective immediately." No raised voice. No argument. Just the kind of finality that doesn't leave any room for discussion.

He tried to push back, mumbling about how his plane wasn't taking off for several more hours, as if the schedule mattered more than the fact that I'd hit my limit. I didn't care. I'd had enough. I wasn't spending one more minute pretending the situation was salvageable.

I didn't say a word the entire drive. He filled the silence himself, going on and on about how accepting he was, how understanding, how supportive. He listed every flattering title he could assign himself—my favorite cousin, his best friend, his closest family member—like he thought repetition would make it true. His words were exactly what a middle-aged woman would want to hear from a relative trying to offer reassurance. But his actions—every one of them—told a completely different story.

When we reached the airport, I didn't bother asking what airline he was flying with or where he needed to be. I pulled my Ford Bronco up to the start of the pedestrian sidewalk outside the terminal and stopped. That was it. That was the end of whatever this had been. I told him to get out of the car.

He looked at me, wide-eyed, suddenly helpless. "I don't know where I'm going…" he said, followed by, "Aren't you going to give me a family goodbye hug?"

I put the Bronco in park, set the parking brake, stepped out, and said, "You're a grown up now. Figure it out. Follow the signs." Then I gave him the quickest, most perfunctory bro hug imaginable—a fraction of a second, no warmth, no meaning—

before shutting the passenger door behind him without even breaking my glare. My face stayed exactly the way it always does when I'm finished with someone: serious, flat, unreadable.

Some goodbyes don't require commentary. The optics are enough.

December 1, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

The days after Mom died still feel like a dream I entered too quickly and left too slowly. Sometimes I look back on that stretch of days and I'm not sure if I lived them or watched them through glass. There are moments from that time that don't feel real yet, not because they were dramatic, but because they were boringly ordinary in the middle of something that usually breaks people temporarily. Grief is strange like that. It leaves the sky intact. It keeps the mail coming. It lets the phone ring with numbers you really don't want to see, given the circumstances. And somehow you're expected to answer every one of them as if the center of your life didn't just shift.

A part of me still hasn't caught up. I keep thinking I should call her and tell her what happened after she died—the way she'd laugh at the chaos of it, the way she'd lift her eyebrows and say, "Oh them again… now what?… are you serious…? what the fuck…?" like the universe had once again tried something absurd and miscalculated. I haven't been able to delete her number. I'm not sure I ever will. It still sits in my phone like a door I could open if I tried hard enough.

In the days after she passed, a therapist Mom knew stopped by the house—the one who thought she understood everything before she'd even crossed the threshold. I was sitting at the kitchen table surrounded by that afternoon's paperwork, frozen meals, half-empty water glasses, and the silence that kept rearranging the air.

She showed up and I moved into the living room, the one room I'd been putting off sorting through. She asked me if I knew what day Mom died — asked it like I was a confused child, like it was a detail I might have misplaced in my grief. I just stared at her for a moment, the way you look at someone who has no idea who they're talking to.

I was a Paramedic Lieutenant Specialist.
I've pronounced more deaths than she's ever witnessed.
I knew the minute my mother left this world.
I knew it in the marrow.

But she kept going. She tried to tell me I was struggling because I had "decided to become a woman," as if my whole life was a costume change, as if my mother's death had opened some imaginary wound in my gender that she'd always been waiting to diagnose. I told her, "Can I show you something real quick? Mom said this might come up…" and headed upstairs to my bedroom.

I still see the way the light slanted across the drafting table where I'd laid everything out. My birth certificate. Mom's will. Mom's healthcare instructions. The final refusal-of-care form with my signature as the witness. Every document my mother had touched still smelled faintly like her lotion—lavender and something older. It felt like gathering an army of ghosts who spoke better than I ever could.

I went back downstairs and handed the stack of documents to the therapist and asked if she wanted anything to

drink while she looked through them. She didn't even make it past the birth certificate. She saw **FEMALE**, the word printed by doctors when the world first met me. She set the stack down like it was a personal attack. She offered some pleasantries—thin, polite, embarrassed—and left. I never saw her again. I didn't need to. That was the whole story.

The days blurred after that. The phone rang anytime I wasn't on hold waiting on the world to update things. Contractors came and went—men with paint and drywall on their trousers and half-finished sentences—each one convinced I needed guidance, as if grief had turned me into a child who needed to be spoken to slowly. One of them said, "Well you're a woman, so you probably don't know—" and then, nodding toward the living room, "and as for your wife, well… we aren't sure about her."

I felt that old firehouse muscle memory kick in—the quiet command that doesn't ask for permission. I reached into my pocket, peeled off enough cash to make the message unmistakable, and said, "I'm sure that I won't be calling you ever again. Here's some money to get lost." He blinked twice, tried to recover his footing, and failed. Moments like that don't need yelling. They collapse on their own.

I replaced him with someone younger, kinder, and less threatened by the idea of a woman knowing her own house—the same house where she had lived since early childhood—better

than a stranger. The kind of person who doesn't flinch at the word wife or stumble over pronouns like loose gravel.

But even with all of that—the therapist folding under a single piece of paper, the contractors showing their hand before they'd even taken off their boots, the endless parade of people trying to rewrite me afterward—the only thing I kept thinking was:

I should tell Mom.
I should call her.
She'd understand this kind of absurdity.
She'd laugh with me about it.

But I can't. And that's the part of grief no one prepares you for—the moments when something ridiculous happens and the first instinct is to reach for the person who would find it funny too.

Instead I stood in Mom's house—the one that raised me and bruised me and tried to break me and yet somehow still loved me—with papers on the table and strangers at the door, trying to make adult decisions I never imagined I'd have to make alone.

There are still mornings I wake up and half-expect her voice in the next room—the soft rustle of her slippers shuffling on the old hardwood, the kettle warming on the stove, the faint sound of her clearing her throat before saying something she knows I need to hear. Grief hasn't caught up with me yet. Maybe

it never will. Maybe a part of me is still in that house, setting papers in a neat row across the drafting table, doing what my mother raised me to do—tell the truth, calmly, as best I can, and without flinching.

I think she'd be proud of how I handled all of it. But god, I wish I could've heard her say it one more time.

It's been long enough now that the world expects me to be "better," whatever that means. Time has its own ideas about healing—people act like it's a medication you take once a day and wait for results. But grief doesn't work that way. It's more like weather. It shifts. It lingers. It returns when the air pressure changes. You don't control it; you adapt to it. And eventually, you forget what the old climate felt like.

I look back at those first few weeks after Mom died—the therapist, the contractors, the parade of well-meaning strangers—and it feels like watching a different version of myself move through a house that was half memory, half ghost. I don't feel anger when I think about it. The sharpness has dulled. What's left is more like a quiet observation of how lost people get when faced with a woman who doesn't fit any of their limited categories.

I know Mom knew that. Of course she did.

She saw it my whole life: the way people misread me, underestimate me, talk past me, shrink me down to the edges of their own imagination. Maybe that's why she left the documents

where she did—birth certificate, will, medical forms, all in a file folder—like breadcrumbs on the trail back to myself. I used to think she was sentimental. Now I think she was preparing me for a world she knew would try to rewrite me once she was no longer here to correct it.

The therapist's question—"Are you sure you know the day she died?"—doesn't sting anymore. I realize what it was—nothing more than bias dressed in a cardigan. Now it just hangs in my mind like an odd artifact from a life I've already archived. It's almost funny in the way absurd things become funny when enough time passes. Of course I knew. I knew the minute her breathing changed in the hours prior. I knew before the machines did. I knew before the chart did. That's the part the therapist never understood. You don't forget the moment your mother leaves the world. You feel it like a floorboard suddenly giving way.

I think what bothers me now, in hindsight, isn't what she *asked*. It's what she *assumed*. That I was someone who needed to be walked through my own life. That I wouldn't know the shape of my own loss. That my autism made me vulnerable instead of perceptive. That my intersex history made my gender socially negotiable instead of factual.

I didn't need to prove anything to her.

As for the contractors—that whole era feels like background noise now, a chorus of men who didn't know who they were dealing with. I don't feel the sting of those comments

anymore. I barely feel anything when I think of them. They were bit parts in a story that never belonged to them.

But sometimes I think about the version of myself standing in that house, holding it together while everything was falling apart. I didn't see her clearly at the time. I was too inside the moment to understand the shape of it. Now I do. She was steadier than I gave her credit for. She was already becoming the woman I am now—quieter, more certain, less willing to bend herself into shapes that made other people comfortable.

Grief has a way of showing you who you were meant to become, but only after it strips away the old versions of ourselves.

And maybe that's why, even now, I still catch myself reaching for my phone. Some days I want to call Mom, not because I'm falling apart, but because I'm finally understanding things I didn't have words for while she was alive. The way she shielded me without making a show of it. The way she prepared for conversations she never wanted me to have, but knew I'd face them anyway.

Sometimes I think she'd laugh if she saw how it all played out—her therapist friend folding at the sight of the birth certificate, the contractor tripping over his own ignorance, the way I stood there handing out boundaries like spare nails in a toolbox.

I like to think she'd say, "Good girl. Keep going."

I like to think she still says it, somewhere in the room I can't quite see.

Maybe that's what grief becomes after enough time passes. Not a storm. Not a collapse. Just a second voice from within—quieter, wiser—that reminds you who you are when the world forgets.

December 6, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

This December, I said fuck the world. Not in the loud, reckless way I might have meant it in my twenties. This wasn't about theatrics or setting fires for the thrill of watching them burn. It felt more like an exhale I had been holding for far too long—months, maybe years. A slow, weary surrender to the truth that I have spent most of my life showing up for people who will never, not once, show up for me. People who treat my loyalty like an expected service. People who see me carry everything and quietly decide that means I should.

I can't pinpoint the exact moment when the realization landed. It wasn't sudden. It wasn't cinematic. It showed up the way winter does—first as a chill around the ankles, then as a cold draft across the floor, and finally as the unmistakable understanding that something in the house has shifted and you're the last one to notice. Something subtle. Something that whispers instead of announces. The discomfort that lingers until you eventually stop pretending you don't feel it.

Sometimes the smartest thing you can do is stop editing the truth to make it easier for someone else to hold. I'm finally learning that.

2025 kept circling the same lesson like a crow over a field—some of the best things in life are the ones that do not last forever. I didn't want that lesson, and I sure as hell didn't ask for it, but it came anyway. It threaded itself through every season like a diagnosis I didn't want but already knew.

Spring arrived with promises I shouldn't have trusted. I wanted to believe them—god, I wanted to believe them—but even in the thaw, something felt off. The air had a hesitant quality, like it knew something I didn't. Summer broke things open in ways I never anticipated. Not everything that breaks does so loudly; sometimes the fracture is quiet, almost polite, and still permanent. Autumn peeled back truths I'd been too tired—or too hopeful—to confront. Truths always wait. They outlast denial. They out-stare it.

Mother Nature tried her best to hold onto the joys of autumn—by the time she relented, winter immediately showed up, and I wasn't surprised by the cold. I had already been living inside a version of it for months.

I used to think permanence was the goal. Find the right friends, the right spouse, the right life, and hold on to those feelings of stability for dear life. But this year split that belief clean down the middle. Some things flicker out before you're ready. Some people drift no matter how tightly you hold them. Some chapters close so decisively you can feel the air shift—an atmospheric pressure change you can't ignore, like the seconds before an oncoming thunderstorm when everything goes still.

None of it means they were bad. None of it means they weren't necessary. It just means they weren't built to stay.

When you've seen enough endings, you stop romanticizing permanence. There's a certain mercy in broken things; they no longer pretend to be perfect. I learned to build

altars out of ordinary things—coffee mugs, dead pens, cracked mirrors—and call it faith.

There were nights this year when I realized I had found meaning in stranger places than comfort. I've seen god in worse places—under flickering fluorescents, in the hum of a vending machine that still accepts quarters. I learned to pray sideways, under dashboards and stairwells, where the air smells like smoke and rain. The kind of places where breath, fear, and instinct blur together and you don't bother with ceremony—you just ask whatever force is listening to help you get one more person through one more night.

2025 had that kind of sideways light. The kind that doesn't warm you, but keeps you from walking into walls. The kind that doesn't offer clarity, but still gives you enough brightness to take the next step.

Sometimes the silence feels like an old friend who doesn't ask questions, just sits and lets me breathe. And the strange part is—those old instincts never really leave. Some nights I'd catch myself listening the ways I did when I was younger: for changes in wind, for the far-off rumble of something I can't name, for the quiet shift in the house that tells you someone's awake, for the sudden stillness that always meant something is wrong.

I don't jump at those cues anymore, but my body still registers them. The muscles still recall their assignments. There are evenings when I stand by the window and the cold Vermont dark looks too much like the long drive back to the station after a

call that didn't end well. The same kind of black. The same kind of quiet. The same kind of unresolved question hanging in the air like breath that doesn't quite dissipate.

This year was harder than most. Not catastrophic-hard. Not tragic-hard. Just relentless-hard. The kind of year that doesn't strike—it erodes. A steady drip of loss and clarity, endings and beginnings, and the long, uneven walk between the two. I learned that people who love you can still leave. Strength is what grows in the cracks when there's no other choice. Silence can be merciful. Letting go isn't the same as giving up. Some people never say sorry. Time does it for them.

Somewhere in the middle of all that unraveling, something inside me shifted again:
The past doesn't ache like it used to. It just hums quietly, like a song I know by heart but don't need to play anymore. I stopped checking the weather. Whatever comes, I'll stand in it.

There were evenings when the cold Vermont air pressed up against the window, and I realized I wasn't bracing the same way I used to. I wasn't running imaginary disaster scenarios. I wasn't listening for the next emotional tone-out, that old EMS habit of predicting crisis before it arrives. The land here doesn't ask for vigilance. It doesn't demand translation. It doesn't alter itself to fit anyone's comfort. It simply stands still and waits for me to decide whether I'm going to meet it honestly.

Some nights I sat on the porch watching the sky dim into that muted winter blue that always feels like a held breath. The

wind moved through the pines like it had something to say but didn't want to start the conversation. And I found myself thinking,

Sometimes I sit on the porch and think, this is what surviving looks like when it finally stops hurting. Survival doesn't announce itself. It settles. It becomes muscle memory the same way trauma does, only quieter, less urgent, more willing to coexist.

When I was younger, I thought surviving made me exceptional. I wore it like a badge, like proof, like armor. Now I know surviving just made me early to the lesson everyone eventually gets—besides the earth below and the sky above, nothing lasts forever, and maybe that's the point. Endings don't make things meaningless. I used to survive out of reflex. Now I live on purpose.

Somehow, despite everything this year took, everything it revealed, everything it forced me to set down—I'm still here. Finally alive, and somehow we made it through together.

December 11, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

I woke this morning with that familiar heaviness in my chest, the kind that feels like it has its own pulse, its own quiet insistence that today was not going to be just another day at the farm. It was one of those days that slips under the door and settles into the room before you even realize it has arrived.

Brian came by with Amanda and their little one—this unexpected trio has slowly become part of my life here in Vermont. He started out as just the contractor I hired to help fix the messes left behind by someone else, but he showed up with honesty, a good heart, and none of the excuses others brought me over the years. Somewhere along the line, he became a friend. His girlfriend, Amanda, brought that steady, grounding presence that mothers seem to carry without thinking about it, and their little one toddled around like she owned the place, taking inventory of my house with absolute confidence. It softened the afternoon more than I expected.

I have been coming apart lately. Quietly. Privately. With the same quiet introspection I once used on rescue calls—only now the incident I am managing is my feelings, and I am not exactly holding it together. My mind keeps taking the smallest problems, the kind that should barely register, and inflates them into something far larger than any incident I ever commanded.

So when they were here—when the weight of the last few weeks finally pressed too hard—I did something I never do. I went into the shower, curled up in the corner like some

wounded animal, and I cried. Not the quiet kind. The shaking, forehead-against-shower-tile kind. The kind that leaves you gasping in pieces you are not entirely sure how to put back.

And they saw me. I never cry in front of anyone. Ever. That has been my rule for decades—built at first out of necessity, pride, and later on whatever twisted survival lessons I picked up along the way. But unabashedly bawling your eyes out in front of a close friend? That is different. Some truths don't need to be spoken—they just need to be acknowledged. That is the whole point of friendship. You stop pretending you have it handled and let someone sit quietly inside the wreckage with you.

Brian stayed nearby, not hovering, not fixing, not judging—just present. Amanda gave me this small, understanding nod, like she recognized the terrain and knew that interrupting it would have been the cruelest thing. I caught a glimpse of their daughter playing with my fire truck toys on my bedroom floor, and somehow that made everything feel human. Less like falling apart, more like releasing something that had been waiting too long to break.

I am still not okay. Not yet. But Amelia and I are not as alone as I once thought. And maybe that matters more than anything.

December 18, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

“Some endings do not arrive like storms—they arrive like paperwork.”—Emily Pratt Slatin

I have spent most of my life thinking the big, life-altering moments would announce themselves with some kind of unmistakable drama—like the universe would at least have the decency to kick the door down to get my attention.

It does not. At least not in my case.

For me, the moments that changed everything tended to show up the way a termination letter shows up—quietly, impersonally, and with a timeline that feels almost insulting.

Two weeks was all the time I was ever given to prepare in life when it came to life-altering turning points. Two weeks is long enough for your nervous system to register that something is off, and short enough that you cannot build a new life fast enough to outrun what is coming. Two weeks is the runway where you can still pretend it is not real—while the ground crew is already pulling the cones out and pointing at the exit.

I can trace so many turning points in my life to that exact window. It is like my brain holds them as keyframes—frozen images with hard edges, burned in so sharply I can still feel the temperature of the air in each one. The goodbyes, the betrayals, the exits, the sudden recalibration of who I was *allowed* to be.

I keep thinking about it tonight because my autistic mind is already doing its usual nighttime audit. The furnace cycles on and off—steady, mechanical, loyal. The linoleum floor in the kitchen answers back cold when I leave my bedroom. Outside, the pines hold their shape against the dark like they are refusing to be moved by anything as petty as time. I have the radio low, because I always do. Not for company—more like a baseline, a signal that says, yes, the world is still turning, and yes, you are still here with it.

And in this quiet, the memories come in the way they always do for me—not as a tidy timeline, but as a stack of still frames that my mind flips through when it wants to remind me what it has survived.

Grade eight. I remember the hallway like it is still lit up in fluorescent glare. I remember that weird institutional mix of floor wax, paper, and somebody's cafeteria pizza from three rooms away. I remember the feeling in my stomach—this low, cold, sinking thing that did not even have language yet, just physics.

Two weeks before graduation, I got suspended.

One afternoon I was sent to the principal's office—not for fighting, not for failing, but for existing wrong. Under pressure from my father, I had been reported for acting "too feminine," as if that were a behavior and not simply biology doing its job. The school psychologist tilted her head and spoke carefully, suggesting I might be transgender, because my father had

enrolled me as a boy and it was, to anyone with eyes, obvious that I was a girl.

The principal sat behind his desk, tired and irritated, explaining that he was running out of options, that he would likely suggest boarding school to my parents—as if distance could solve what honesty refused to name.

I listened, calm in that way children get when adults are already lost, and when he finally stopped talking, all I said was, “You know you cannot reach me…the devil controls me… obviously.”

I did not mean it theatrically. I meant it *precisely*. It was the only language available that matched the absurdity of a room full of adults trying to correct something that was never broken, just misunderstood.

People like to treat school suspensions as moral theater. As a lesson. As an example. As a cautionary tale. But in my memory, it was not about discipline. It was about exile. It was a line drawn in permanent marker that said, you are not wanted in the room where everyone else gets to be normal.

I did not have a teenage movie moment where I cried into a locker door. I did not have a dramatic apology arc. What I had was a strange, calm clarity—the kind that only shows up when a door closes and you realize you do not have to keep auditioning for the people behind it.

Two weeks. I remember going home and looking at the calendar hung from an oversized magnet on my parents refrigerator, and realizing that graduation was going to happen with or without me, and that the world would keep moving with or without my little body in the chair, wearing the "right clothes", and pretending it meant something. It meant nothing to me, and that was the first time I understood—deeply, in my bones—that socioeducational milestones are not guarantees. They are just events people attend out of social obligation if the gatekeepers let them.

This was one of my first lessons in how my life would go: I would never be handed a clean, easy "normal" path, and I would find a way to survive anyway.

Then there was boarding school. I still have complicated feelings about that word, because it sounds so polished, so intentional, so respectable—like it was a *privilege*, like it was a *choice*, like it was some kind of curated stepping stone toward *a future I was supposed to want*. What it actually felt like was being put in a box and told to behave like a boy. And then, two weeks before the senior trip, I ran away.

That one is a keyframe with motion blur. The kind of memory that smells like cold air and metal, like fear mixed with adrenaline. I remember the way my body moved with a certainty my mind did not have time to question. I remember thinking, I cannot stay here another day. Not one more morning waking up in a place that felt like a polite cage. Not one more hour being

watched, graded, corrected, and quietly shaped into someone who would survive better on paper than in real life.

Two weeks before the trip. Everyone else was counting down to buses, and whatever version of teenage freedom they were allowed to rent for a few days. I was counting down to *escape*. Not from homework—from a system that had already decided who I was supposed to become, and how much of me was permitted.

Running away is always written like a dramatic act. In my life, it was a practical act. It was triage. And the consequence was brutally simple: I earned my certification as an Emergency Medical Technician in Buffalo, New York, but never graduated high school.

People love diplomas because they are neat. They are rectangular proof that you endured a sanctioned timeline. They are a stamp that says, yes, this person followed the steps. They were obedient, did what they were told, and are now a product of the modern industrialist education. I have never been that girl. Not fully. Not even when I tried. So I left.

My story did not include the ceremonial ending. No cap, no gown, no senior trip, no neat closure. Just a cut scene. A jump cut. A missing chapter that people still sometimes try to use as evidence that I "failed."

But the truth is—I did not fail. I refused. That is a difference people who have never been cornered do not understand. Two weeks. Then college.

I have such a specific relationship with academia. I understand it. I respect learning. I can go toe-to-toe with the best minds in the room when the topic is real. But institutions have always tried to turn intelligence into obedience, and I have never been good at obedience—especially the kind that demands you swallow your own instincts just to keep the adults comfortable.

My second year of college lasted two weeks. Two weeks, and then I dropped out.

I can still feel the internal click of that decision—like a switch flipping in my head. Not chaos. Not panic. Just a sudden, clean clarity: this is *not* worth it. This is not where my life lives. This is not the road that gets me home to myself.

I remember sitting there, realizing I was surrounded by a system that cared more about compliance than comprehension, more about credentials than capability. I was not learning—I was memorizing, agreeing, performing. I was not growing—I was being managed.

I walked away, and the world did not end. My life did not suddenly collapse. What collapsed was the illusion that I needed the institution's permission to be what I already was: *different*. I was clearly a woman with a mind that does not do well inside cages.

When I think about how these moments add up—middle school suspension, boarding school escape, college exit—they form the same pattern. A signature. *It is always two weeks.* It is always the quiet lead-up to a keyframe moment where time freezes, and the next version of my life begins without waiting for consensus.

I think what bothers me is not that it happened. What bothers me is the precision of it. The way my life seems to deliver turning points with the same timing you would give a job you are leaving. Like the universe slides a note across the table and says: you have fourteen days to pack up your identity, your expectations, your attachments, and whatever fragile story you were telling yourself about how this was going to go.

And then it happens.

It is not just that I have lost things. Everyone loses things. It is that I have been trained—over and over again—to recognize the exact moment the air changes. The exact moment the room stops being safe. The exact moment the future quietly retracts itself. Two weeks before the end, I start feeling it in my body like a pressure change. I start noticing the micro-signals. The tone shifts. The silence. The difference between how people look at you and how they used to. It is not paranoia. It is experience. Experience makes you accurate.

The part nobody wants to admit is that society rejects a strong, accurate, competent woman, so they call you "intense." They say it like it is a flaw. Like it is a personality quirk. Like I

woke up one day and decided to be the kind of woman who sees too much. By midlife, I had been described as "ahead of my time," "difficult," "intense," "unmanageable," or, I suppose because I managed to survive long enough, "exceptional." The labels change depending on whether or not the culture benefitted from me yet.

No. I became this way because life trained me with repetition. And the training schedule was always fourteen days—these moments that arrived on standard western socioeconomic notice did not turn me into someone fragile. They turned me into someone who can leave. Someone who can end a chapter without begging for it to be rewritten. Someone who can accept that a door closing is information, not a personal referendum.

I do not romanticize that. It is not cute. It is not a superpower. If anything, it exposes some of the problems with modern society. It is a survival skill I paid for in lost ceremonies, lost friendships, and all the times I watched other people take the neat path while I took the necessary one.

Those two-week moments are also where I learned that my life does not require permission. The suspension did not ruin me—it taught me that institutions will punish the wrong people to protect their own comfort. Running away did not ruin me—it taught me that escape is sometimes the only honest choice. Dropping out of college did not ruin me—it taught me that my mind cannot be contained by someone else's syllabus.

If anything, those moments built the spine that later held up everything else—the jobs I earned, the skills I mastered, the way I learned to trust myself when the crowd insisted I should not. They taught me that the life I was "supposed" to live was never going to be the life that fit.

Two weeks is not just notice. It is a warning light. It is the part of the story where my younger self still thinks she might be able to negotiate. Still thinks she might be able to behave her way into being accepted. Still thinks she might be able to explain herself clearly enough that the world will finally understand.

But the older me knows better. The older me knows that when the notice comes, it is not a negotiation. It is a shift. It is reality giving you a short runway and expecting you to take off anyway.

And I did. Every time. I did not graduate high school or college the way they wanted, but I grew up. I became operational. I became skilled. I became exact. I became the kind of woman who does not panic when things suddenly and drastically change. I became the kind of woman who can hold her own life steady because she learned early that stability is not something you inherit—it is something you build.

Sometimes I think about the girl I was in those three keyframes—eighth grade, boarding school, college—standing there with the two-week countdown ticking above her head like a hidden scoreboard. She did not have a plan. She did not have a safety net. She did not have adults who were dependable.

But she had one thing. She had the refusal to disappear. She had the instinct to move. And she had this strange, brutal gift —pattern recognition.

I used to hate that my life seemed to end chapters abruptly. I used to envy the people who got the clean ceremonies, the neat endings, the congratulatory photos, the cakes with names and congratulatory words written in bright colored frosting. Now I think…I do not envy them anymore. Because I know what those neat endings often cost. They cost truth. They cost autonomy. They cost the part of you that whispers, this does not fit, and you are allowed to leave anyway.

So this is what I am writing down tonight, for the new book, for the blog, for the version of me who still sometimes needs proof that she was not crazy, and that she was not weak:

My turning points came with two weeks notice because my life never gave me the luxury of long goodbyes. It gave me something else. It gave me clarity in advance. It gave me the chance to feel the air change, pack my internal bag, and get ready to become the next version of myself—whether anyone approved or not.

And I did not become someone else. I became more myself. That is the part people miss. Two weeks notice was never the universe being polite.

This year, it felt as if the universe handed me a countdown and said—a new year is about two weeks away,

show me what you are made of. And every single time, I answered the same way:

Challenge accepted.

December 24, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

I woke up before the light had decided what it wanted to be today. That gray, undecided hour where the house feels like it is holding its breath. I lay there longer than I needed to, staring at the ceiling, listening to the quiet machinery of my own thoughts spool up one by one. No urgency. No plan. Just the familiar sensation of consciousness clocking in for another shift.

Some days my mind is a crowded room. Today it was more like an empty field with a single fence post in the middle of it—something to lean against while I thought about things that probably do not matter, except that they clearly do.

I kept thinking about attention. Not wanting it. Not avoiding it. Just the weight of it. How being seen can feel less like warmth and more like exposure. How being central to someone else's world can turn into a strange kind of isolation. You do not get to step out of the light when you are expected to provide it. You do not get to be tired.

That is where the sun and the moon showed up—uninvited, as they always do. I thought about how the sun never asks to be looked at, but everything still turns toward it. I thought about how the moon survives on borrowed light and somehow gets blamed for being cold. I thought about egocentrism—not the cartoon version people throw around when they want to flatten someone—but the feelings of it. The quiet, uncomfortable awareness that sometimes being the center is not a choice. Sometimes it is just where gravity lands you.

I wondered how often I have mistaken responsibility for importance. How often others have mistaken my steadiness for endless capacity. There is a difference, and it costs something when people blur it.

At some point I noticed my jaw was tight, like I had been holding a line I forgot to release. I consciously let it go. I do that a lot—micro-rescues of myself, performed silently, with no witnesses. Old habits die hard. Even off-duty, Rescue Girl keeps checking the scene.

I thought about identity in the loosest sense—not labels, not declarations, just the lived shape of a life. How I occupy space. How I move through rooms. How much of my stillness is chosen, and how much of it is armor. I thought about the difference between being alone and being unaccompanied. They look similar from the outside, but they feel nothing alike.

There was also this smaller thought, almost embarrassingly domestic: how nice it is when the house stays exactly as I left it. No surprises. No sudden shifts. Just continuity. That felt important today, though I am not entirely sure why. Maybe because continuity is proof that not everything requires vigilance.

I did not solve anything. I did not come to a conclusion worth underlining. I just let the thoughts pass through without interrogating them, which might be the most grown-up thing I have done all day. Dark Horse does not always need to charge

forward. Sometimes standing still and noticing the weight of the light is enough.

By the time the sun finally committed to the sky, I felt oddly calmer—not lighter, exactly, but more accurately weighted. Like I had recalibrated my own orbit. Still here. Still thinking. Still aware that even the moon gets blamed for tides it cannot control.

And that is fine. I am still here. That counts for something.

December 25, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

This Christmas, I keep thinking about the person my parents thought I would become.

Not in a bitter way—not even in an angry way. More like the way you think about an old set of plans you find folded at the bottom of a drawer. Careful, straight, intentional lines. Measured expectations. A structure that made sense on paper. And white collar. Credentialed. Clean hands. A degree that behaved. A future that stayed inside the margins.

My father wanted a son. That part was never far from the surface, and was never negotiable. He wanted a successful man—one who moved easily through rooms where voices stayed low and language stayed abstract. Someone who wore intelligence instead of using it. Someone legible to other men like him. I was expected to fit that shape, even though I never did.

I did not become that person. I used to talk to the stars as if they owned me an explanation. I was born female—my father thought that abuse could affect biology. My father tried to dress me in business suit—I liked working with my hands, and dressing in comfortable clothing. I absolutely delighted in work my parents considered blue collar. I learned how things actually work—not how to talk about them, not how to outsource them, but how to use my hands to make things work again. I learned systems from the inside out. I learned restraint. I learned when not to touch things. I learned when silence is more powerful than performance.

None of that was part of the plan. And yet, it is the life that held.

I grew up learning repair from my father who was born in 1915—I learned a version of the world that assumed competence was normal and dependency was a problem to solve, not a condition to accept. I learned that things are understandable if you stay with them long enough. That nothing is magic.

That way of thinking never left me. It carried into everything—money, work, identity, relationships. I do not rush. I do not flail. I do not confuse mere signs of motion with progress. I understand preservation. I understand sometimes the best thing to say is *no*. I understand that holding something together for a long time requires more discipline than building it once.

That includes a life. I have spent years being an outlier without meaning to be. Too practical for the abstract rooms. Too direct for the polite ones. Too capable to be managed. Too self-contained to be steered. People like to pretend this kind of independence is accidental. It is not. It's trained. It's earned. It's reinforced every time you choose reality over approval.

I keep a list of things I'll never say out loud. Some truths don't need witnesses. And yet there was always that secret stolen from deep inside… I was concerned that in the end, I would somehow disappoint my parents.

The reprieve came at the end, when there was nothing left to perform, and no future left to curate. In the last hours of my mother's life, she told me she was incredibly proud of me—and proud of who I became. Not who I could have been. Not who she once imagined. Who I *actually* was.

This is the first Christmas without my parents. There is a strange mercy in that sort of timing. It does not erase the years of misunderstanding, but it clarifies them. She saw, finally, that I was not a failed version of their hopes and dreams. I was a successful version of myself. Solid. Capable. Intact.

I think about that often now. Success is not always the thing people point at. Deviation is sometimes the only honest path. Being unclassifiable is not always the same as being lost.

I did not become what they planned. And at the end, that was enough.

December 31, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

There are nights when I sit in the quiet and feel every unfinished sentence inside me shift like unsettled dust, and I realize how much of my life has been spent carrying things I never had the language for. Not secrets, per se, just simple truths no one ever asked to hear. I think about the people who walked away without looking back, the ones who left mid-sentence, the ones who stayed long enough to remind me what leaving looks and feels like. Some losses don't arrive all at once; they seep in slowly, the way cold finds its way into the bones in late December. You don't notice at first. You just move differently, quieter, think slower—aware of how fragile certain parts of you have become. I still hold conversations in my head with people who would never survive the weight of the real words. I apologize to myself for the years I spent pretending nothing hurt. And sometimes, in the middle of the night, when the world softens into that familiar darkness, I feel the old ache settle beside me—not hostile, not dramatic, just ever-present. A reminder. A witness. And in that moment, I understand that healing was never about forgetting; it was about learning to sit with the memory without letting it claim the whole room. I've outgrown versions of myself I swore I'd die with, and I miss them the way people miss childhood homes—painfully, privately, and yet with no desire to return. But I keep going, one quiet breath at a time, because there's still something in me that refuses to bow out early. Something steady. Something stubborn. Something mine.

Some days I move through the world with the heavy calm of someone who's seen too many endings to be startled by another one. Loss trained me early—taught me that people leave for reasons that rarely match the stories they tell, and that closure is something you build, not something you receive. I still carry the softness I had before the damage set in, but now it's layered with the kind of caution that comes from living through promises that didn't keep pace with reality. There are moments when I look out across the fields, the pines standing tall against the sky, and I feel every old version of myself gathering behind me like shadows that never quite grew tired. I don't chase them away. They earned their place. They remind me who I was when I didn't know how to stay, when running felt safer than staying. I've learned that grief doesn't announce itself—it settles gently on the shoulders, light at first, then unmistakable. But even in the worst seasons, I kept a part of myself intact, a quiet determination to live a life that didn't apologize for being mine. And now, when the wind slips through the pasture and the last hours of 2025 slip by, I feel something settle in my being—not hope, not peace, but a new kind of patience. A clarity that doesn't need permission. A soft, steady certainty that I've survived enough, lost enough, loved enough, to finally understand the weight and the value of staying.

January 3, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

Today I was thinking—quietly, sideways, the way thoughts arrive when there's no one demanding conclusions—that a lot of the worst damage in my life did not happen evenly. It concentrated. It arrived in specific stretches, did its work, and left. Out of forty-six years, only two of them carried most of the weight. 1998, and now 2025.

I've come to the conclusion that I am tired of speaking about my life as if it were a series of never ending traumas. It wasn't. Most of it was work, movement, building resiliency, and learning how to hold things together without breaking. Most of my adult life was simply *living*. The devastation did not stretch across everything—it showed up in defined periods and then receded, leaving aftermath that took a lot of time to sort through.

I think I have always used time as a container, even before I had language for it. I learned early that if you let pain sprawl, it will claim territory it never deserves. So I learned to mark the borders. This happened here. That happened then. The rest of my life gets to stay intact.

Last year was one of those years that demanded immediate containment.

My mother died. That alone would have been enough. But death has a way of stripping away politeness. It does not create character—it exposes it. Grief reveals who is present out of care,

and who was only ever orbiting for convenience, access, or relevance.

I let go of most of my friendships this year. Not dramatically. Not with speeches or ultimatums. Just accurately. Some people wanted access, not relationship. Some wanted proximity to grief without the responsibility of truly holding it. Some wanted to be seen as supportive while quietly extracting what they could—information, validation, narrative, the opportunity to have moms things. Some disappeared the moment I said that nothing was available to take.

I did not chase any of them, and that surprised me. Older versions of me would have explained, over-explained, tried to repair things that were never mutual to begin with. This year, I watched. I noted the patterns. I paid attention to who showed up without needing an audience and who vanished when the room got quiet.

Time contained the truth. The truth was plain to see—this time, I did not have to interrogate it. What remains now is a much smaller circle. Quieter. Less impressive on paper. Weaker in social metrics. Stronger where it counts. These are people who did not flinch. People who did not require performance. People who did not confuse my finite resources for endless capacity.

Letting go did not feel like loss the way I was taught loss should feel. If anything, this past year sharpened me. It taught me that friendship is not proven by history but by behavior in

the present tense. That longevity without integrity is just inertia. That absence, when someone needs you most, is an answer even when it arrives quietly.

January 4, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

I used to think stillness meant nothing was happening. Now I know it's where everything begins. It's the pause before kindness, the breath before understanding. Empathy, I've learned, isn't about feeling what someone else feels—it's about remembering what it was like to be unseen, and choosing to see anyway. The art of noticing saved me. The chipped edge of a plate. The curl of steam from a cup left too long. The quiet way light folds itself against the wall and waits to be named. Maybe that's what survival really became—a practice in simply paying attention.

I was hurt recently by someone I once considered a friend. Not because of something sudden or dramatic, but because he refused to accept who I have become. In his mind, a version of me is still standing somewhere in the woods of Upstate New York, fixed in time, untouched by everything that came after. He liked referencing who I was at work, the role I played, the version of me that felt useful, impressive, or familiar to him. It became clear that what he valued were certain traits, not the person those traits belonged to.

He called me nearly every day, and I gave him an hour of my day each time, because I believed that was what friendship looked like—showing up, listening, holding space. Toward the end of last year, while my own mother was actively dying, he began spending those calls complaining at length about his parents, unaware or unwilling to notice the imbalance. I don't

think he meant to be cruel. But there is a particular kind of harm that comes from someone who insists on being centered in your life while refusing to see the gravity of what you're carrying. Eventually, I realized that he wasn't interested in meeting me where I am—only in keeping me where he remembered me. And I couldn't keep giving time, care, or attention to someone who only recognized me in fragments.

Every generation thinks it's the first to feel misunderstood. That's how you know history still works. We spend the first half of life gathering meaning and the second half realizing it was never hiding. People aren't afraid of dying—their real fear is being forgotten by the people still living. Most of what we call purpose is just the patterns that keep us from unraveling.

I sometimes wonder what I'll be remembered for—the years I spent as a Firefighter and Paramedic, the photographs that caught what words couldn't, or the story I've been writing all along just by surviving it. People are too quick to call someone special for *how they died*, when the real measure is in *how they lived*.

I worked with him for more than a decade, long enough to share the kind of moments that don't leave you once you've seen them. We stood together in situations where lives sometimes ended abruptly, where decisions had weight, and where survival often came down to timing, luck, and restraint.

In December, something shifted. He began talking about those years as if the worst parts had softened with time and

distance, as if the residue left behind once the tragedy receded was something beautiful—something worth admiring.

He reframed scenes that nearly destroyed me emotionally into stories of awe and endurance, turning what I survived into spectacle. It felt less like remembering and more like rewriting. Early in my career, I had been directly involved in the response to September 11th in the months following the tragedy, and served in the New York City metro area for a little over two years. Those moments weren't heroic to me; they were costly. They took pieces of me I never got back.

I realized his nostalgia wasn't about honoring what he or I had lived through—it was about trying to pull me back into a life I had already left for a reason. I didn't walk away from that work lightly. I walked away because I in two decades, I had seen the unthinkable one too many times, and because staying would have meant losing whatever was left of myself.

I don't romanticize survival anymore. I respect it. And I refuse to let someone else turn my scars into an argument for returning to the fire.

There are days when I look at the life I built with my own two hands and think, against all odds, I managed to become an adult that even I would have trusted as a child. That matters to me more than

anything else. I didn't grow up with dependable adults. If they were there at all, they were unpredictable—angry one minute, vacant the next.

Memory is unforgiving. You don't get to choose which moments stick. Sometimes the smallest scenes haunt you—the sound of a slammed door, the tone someone used when they thought you wouldn't remember, the night you cried alone and realized nobody was coming to comfort you.

Those are the things that shape you, not the big tragedies but the slow, quiet injuries that accumulate until one day you look in the mirror and understand why you flinch the way you do. The quietest moments are the ones that tell you who you are. Every decision you've ever made still exists somewhere, living out its own alternate ending. I don't think humans fear oblivion—we fear irrelevance. Maybe eternity isn't endless time. Maybe it's the instant you finally stop resisting it.

I think enlightenment, if it exists, is just the moment you stop arguing with reality. You stop demanding that pain come with an explanation or that love make sense in the ledger. The universe doesn't run on fairness—it runs on persistence. Stars die, dirt renews, hearts break and still beat. Maybe the goal was never peace—it was endurance with grace.

The world runs on follow-through. Everyone swears they'll show up until it's inconvenient. Until it no longer benefits them in some way. The ones who are dependable actually *do* don't need to say it out loud. They keep promises and just keep

showing up when they say they will. Every system relies on a few quiet people who still take that seriously. If you want to know who someone really is, watch how they behave when they're inconvenienced or exhausted.

There's a difference between being loved and being used, but you don't always see it until you're already neck-deep in the damage. I used to think that loyalty was always noble, that staying was what made me strong. The true measure of strength is walking away while your hands are still shaking, leaving behind the memories of who you used to be because it's killing you to keep pretending that the past can be revisited like movie sequels that come after the premise became irrelevant.

You can tell a lot about someone by the excuses they offer. People who hurt you always rush to *explain*, but the ones who truly care rush to *repair*. And I've learned that an apology, especially ones frequently repeated without change is nothing but a rerun of the same old pain. The more you forgive someone who doesn't value you, the more they teach you to accept the scraps they throw. Scraps start feeling like meals when you've been starving long enough. I don't starve anymore.

I keep learning that you don't owe anyone the version of yourself they remember. People say, "you've changed" like it's an accusation, but what they really mean is, "you stopped letting me cross your lines." And that's fine. Let them think what they want. Opinions don't outweigh experiences, and nobody can rewrite the chapters they never lived with you.

I've learned that the hardest part of growing up is realizing how much you tolerated because you were lonely, scared, or too used to chaos to recognize peace when it finally showed up. It's wild how long you'll stay in places or in relationships that drain you just because leaving feels like admitting the truth you've avoided for too long. The truth being that some people never loved you for who you are—only for the parts of you that made their lives easier.

Everyone I've ever known has wanted to be understood, but no one really wants to be truly known. Being known is invasive. It strips away the stories you tell yourself about who you are. It's standing under a light that shows everything—your contradictions, your evasions, your soft spots. Most people think love means being accepted. I think it means being recognized and not edited. The difference is small, but it's the line between comfort and intimacy.

I was known, fully, accurately, and completely, to mom during the last 5 years of her life, and it was only because Amelia came into my life at the right time, allowing me to finally bond with my mother and accept that she loved me, even though dad clearly did not.

Love, for me, has always looked like friendship at operational level—shared silence, practical tenderness, a code between two people who don't need translation. I never wanted fairytales. Romance wasn't something I understood. I simply wanted someone who could handle constant companionship,

quote a line from a song I forgot, and understand that sometimes, “I’m fine”, means *I need an hour alone in the rain*.

I don’t need closure. I need the freedom to stop rereading the same chapter. I’ve never been someone who believes in revenge, or in grand gestures meant to publicly humiliate someone after the damage is done. I don’t announce exits. I don’t keep score out loud. When someone hurts me enough times, I simply leave their life quietly and without spectacle.

This wasn’t a first offense—it was already a second chance. I had named the pain plainly, more than once, and made it clear that the relationship had shifted into something that was costing me more than it gave back. When those reminders were ignored, when my boundaries were treated like background noise instead of information, I chose silence. Not as punishment, but as self-preservation. Silence was the only response left that didn’t require me to keep explaining myself to someone who had already decided not to listen.

January 11, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

I am now forced to sell my mother's house in Upstate New York[1]. It is an obvious decision, and yet that is the sentence I keep circling without wanting to land on it.

Amelia and I took the long drive to the house where I grew up in the first week of January 2026. Winter had settled in the way it does up there—heavy, unapologetic, bitter cold, and not interested in nostalgia or sentiment. When we walked in, the house was cold in that particular way that tells you something mechanical has already failed and has been failing for a while. Of course, yet again, the furnace was not running.

It did not take long to figure out why. No oil had been delivered. The tank was empty. My friend Angie—the one who had been staying there on and off and was supposed to be keeping an eye on the place while probate dragged on—had somehow neglected to check the level. We have been lifelong friends and were a couple for nearly two decades, so I do not think it was malicious. I think it was human. That does not make the cold any less real.

I stood there and did the thing I always do. I called the local heating company and asked for help. I did not explain the backstory. I did not explain the weight of the house, or whose it had been, or why it mattered. I just asked for oil. I called the same company my parents had used for nearly thirty years. The

1 78 Main Street, Stamford, New York 12167

person who answered the phone was someone I knew from childhood. He said he was sorry to hear of my mom's passing, said that she was truly great, and told me not to worry—he would send someone over shortly.

While we waited for the truck to arrive, Amelia said—quietly, carefully—that I need to start thinking about selling the house. That caring for it has become a burden. The same burden I carried for decades until March of last year, when I sold the family business and no longer had to maintain the apartment building in New York City that I had been born into.

That the long drive, the nights spent there twice a month, the constant vigilance—all of it will eventually start to take time and energy away from the projects I have here at the farm. It is already starting to pull me away from the life in Vermont I am actively building with Amelia.

As much as I want to preserve my mom's house, she is right. I know she is right. I have known it for a while, actually. Though my original plan was to conserve it historically and keep it as a time capsule I could visit whenever I wanted, following probate, plans to save my mom's house became hope, followed by the realization that I was using denial as a means to avoid selling the place. Sometimes in life, even correct decisions come with hesitation, especially when it comes to selling one's childhood home.

I went back into my childhood bedroom and sat in my favorite chair, the one my mother had professionally

reupholstered in an ugly mustard fabric that I hated at first and somehow grew to love. I did not bother to take off my hiking boots or my brown Carhartt jacket. I sat there fully dressed, feeling the same cold settle into the room as the night my father first kicked me out of the house at sixteen. Different stage of life. Same kind of cold.

I realized that sometimes an entire life path hinges on a single decision—a single moment where everything quietly tips and life moves forward down one direction instead of another, without ceremony, without permission, and without any real chance of turning back.

My parents moved me here from Greenwich Village in New York City[2] forty years ago—not because of a job, or a dream, or some pastoral longing for space and quiet, but because a pediatrician asked me a question so basic it barely registered as a choice… *Was I a boy or a girl?*

I said *girl*—because of course I did, because to me it was simply obvious and free of conflict. My father heard something different in that answer. He heard defiance, or threat, or failure as a father, and *his solution was erasure*. He uprooted my mother and me and planted us in the small upstate village of Stamford, New York, where he thought isolation might finish what force could not—where he could try, methodically and stubbornly, to raise me as a boy. He tried and failed.

[2] 11 Bank Street, New York, New York 10014

This is the house where my father told everyone I was *a boy*—despite what my birth certificate clearly said, despite what I had already said for myself. On paper, in school records, and in places where state-funded authority liked things neat and unquestioned.

At home, in quieter rooms, in the spaces that mattered, I was *Emily*—to my mother, and to the very small handful of friends who were close enough to be trusted with the truth of how I was born. Those were the only people who actually knew me. Everyone else knew a version that had been constructed for their comfort, their certainty, and their need for order.

My best friend was a girl who lived next door, and we sat next to each other in class starting in third grade. She knew my life story up to that point in full, but none of the adults in our lives knew. I learned early how to live split down a fault line—one name for survival, one name for breathing—and I understood, even then, which one was real.

At twelve, my father paid a sketchy doctor to put me on testosterone. It did not do what he wanted it to do. It did not change who I was. The only real effect was that it slowed down what my body would have done on its own anyway—my natural, eventual female development.

My father then forced me into joining the local Boy Scouts chapter. I won the Pinewood Derby one year. Dad said it was a requirement for me to participate. I told him that if I was going

to participate in the event, I wanted to participate in making the car like everyone else.

Instead of saying yes, my father said that I could simply watch him do it and that way I would learn. He told me to watch as we stood in the basement of my childhood home while he cut the car out of the wooden block, shaping it with a hand saw before drilling several large holes to hollow out the body.

I then watched my father pour molten lead into holes I had drilled into the wooden block in our kitchen. At the time, I did not fully understand what was happening. I only understood that something was being done to me—quietly—and that it was meant to push me in a direction of lies and self-erasure I was never going to take.

Dad then painted the car bright red with model paint and gave it several coats of gloss. My participation was limited to the decorations of the car itself, and according to my father, *they could not be the girly bullshit I usually created*. He handed me a sheet of adhesive-backed paper and told me to make the decorations out of it. I made Ghostbusters decorations.

The car my father had created and I had merely decorated won, naturally, because he had engineered it to do so. At the end of the evening, I was told to stand between two other boys who had won second and third place respectively. I held up the car and stood stoic through the flashbulbs of several film cameras.

I went home and put the car in my dresser drawer, along with the gold-plated medal suspended from a blue and gold nylon ribbon, then threw my scout uniform in the laundry pile. Winning first place and beating out boys was a topic of discussion among my friends for a very short time afterward. After that, I almost never thought about it and never had a reason to bring it up in conversation. It simply existed, rent free, as an ever-living ghost of what my father dreamed would have been my destiny.

Sometimes nostalgia is unrequited love with nowhere left to go. And in life, whatever path we choose to walk, inevitably, in the end, we walk alone.

January 17, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

Forty years ago, my parents bought my childhood home. I say that number out loud sometimes—forty years—because it still feels strange that something can stand that long and still be treated as disposable in the end.

For most of my life, it was simply understood that one day the house would be mine. Not as a gift. Not as a prize. Just the continuation of things, as if the past grievances could be undone. The house sat there like a held breath for decades, waiting. It outlasted arguments, silence, family mythology. Then my mother died, and that future—the one that had stood quietly and intact for most of my life—was dismantled by other people in a matter of months. No warning. No acknowledgment of how long it had stood. Just the faint, unmistakable smell of smoke over scorched earth.

I keep circling back to the town that raised me, and how it eventually became the same town that refused me. When I was a kid, adults loved to warn me about leaving. They talked about the outside world the way people talk about rough water—cold, punishing, unforgiving, full of hidden currents. They said my life would be harder if I left. They said I would regret it. When I finally did leave at sixteen—after my father kicked me out for being a lesbian—it *was* hard. Hard in ways I did not have language for yet.

But after that first brutal stretch, something shifted. My life cracked open and moved in a direction no one had prepared

me for. The suffering they promised me for leaving never really arrived. The deeper damage was always associated with staying.

In the summer of 1996, I showed up at the camp I had gone to as a kid and asked for a job. I had no plan beyond survival. They put me in the kitchen washing dishes. Steam. Noise. The dull ache of repetition where every day is the same.

A few days before the campers arrived, I went down to the lake early in the morning and sat on the dock. The water was still enough to hold a reflection. I remember looking down and seeing myself—not as a child, not as a runaway, not as a problem that needed solving—but as someone on the verge of making decisions that would hold. That moment has stayed with me. It was quiet. It was not dramatic. But it was the first time my future felt like something I could reach toward without asking permission first.

From that point on, my life moved into compression. Everything accelerated. I fell in love with a girl for the first time. I left boarding school without graduating. I went through the fire academy. I put myself through college. It felt like I was folding entire lifetimes into smaller and smaller spaces.

For years, I lived as if time itself was a limited resource that had to be used efficiently or not at all. My full-time career became the fire department, but on my days off I wrote, took photographs, or worked as a commercial electrician. There was no empty space. No waiting. Just one thing pressed tightly

against the next. Time on top of time. Pressure turning everything denser.

At work, the pressure never eased. Results were expected and required. And most of the time, I delivered. That is not pride. It is just the record.

By the time I was forty, I had already retired. My father had died of natural causes. I was taking care of my mother. Later that year, I would marry and buy a farm in Vermont. By forty six, both of my parents were gone, and I was fully retired. I had reached the quiet end of things early. Most people are still running at that age—still accumulating, still planning, still assuming there will be more time. I was standing in the aftermath, trying to understand how a life built under sustained pressure learns how to come to rest without collapsing inward.

It was also when I was forty that I met Amelia on Twitter. Of all places. We spent two weeks in Maine on a road trip, moving without urgency for once. No compression. No proving. Just miles, weather, conversation, and long stretches of quiet that felt earned. I remember writing her a love letter. It was almost empty. The page held only three words.

I love you.

That was it. No defense. No elaboration. No attempt to impress. After decades of effort, complexity, and pressure, the truest thing I had to say took up almost no space at all.

Today was the day I promised Amelia that I would never speak of home as being anywhere except the farm. Not as a correction, and not as a comfort—just as a fact that finally settled into place.

The other place—the one that was supposed to hold for decades, the one that carried so much assumed permanence—does not exist anymore. It has been dismantled thoroughly enough that continuing to name it feels dishonest, like insisting on a landmark that disappeared years ago. The farm is not a replacement. It is not symbolic. It is simply what remains when the past is no longer available for return, and pretending otherwise begins to feel like self-betrayal.

January 24, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

I grew up assuming that staying was a kind of contract. That if you remained in a place long enough—paid attention, learned its rhythms, caused no trouble—it would hold you in return. Not sentimentally. Practically. The way someone learns where to settle long enough to know how a house sounds just after midnight, when the heat kicks on and no one else is awake. I believed belonging was cumulative, something you earned by presence and time, by knowing when to speak and when to stay quiet, by learning how not to be a problem.

The town helped raise me. People say that about places like this, usually with pride, usually as a way of claiming responsibility without having to examine it too closely. For a long time, I said it too. It felt accurate enough. I knew the roads. I knew which adults watched me carefully and which ones decided early that I would be fine on my own. I learned quickly how to be readable without being loud, competent without being threatening. That was the deal, as far as I could tell.

I was the autistic, intersex, queer girl, though no one used those words out loud—not then—everyone who knew me called me Emily. Difference was handled indirectly. You were categorized by behavior, not identity. I was quiet. Observant. Capable. Smart in ways that made adults comfortable as long as I did not demand too much attention or care. I learned early that being low-maintenance was a form of safety. I learned how to make myself easy to manage.

We moved there for a reason that was never framed as one. In third grade, my pediatrician asked me if I was a boy or a girl. I said girl. There was no hesitation. No confusion. It was not a moment I experienced as revelatory. It was simply an answer.

What came next was unexpected. The doctors treated this as confirmation that it was time for what they called a "little operation." They spoke in diminutives, as if scale could soften intent. It took me a moment to realize they were proposing the immediate, planned, surgical removal of my penis. When I did, I started screaming. I did not stop until I was sent to my bedroom.

My father came home early that afternoon. He quit his job shortly after. We moved into what was supposed to be our summer house. He blamed me for having to move.

No one explained the connection, but none was required. The sequence was clear enough. A question was asked. I answered it honestly. The ground shifted.

I did not understand then that this would be the first in a long series of medical interventions I would be expected to defend my body against. Each one was framed as urgent—either a medical necessity or a social emergency—neither of which matched my lived reality. Nothing felt broken to me. Nothing felt unresolved. I did not need to be fixed or redirected. I wanted what I had already been doing without incident: to be left alone to grow up as a girl, the way my mother had raised me from the beginning.

There was never a single moment where I was told I did not belong. That would have been honest. Instead, I was slowly raised and educated elsewhere.

First came summer camp at age eleven—far from home. It was framed as normal, wholesome, good for me. It removed me from the town in a way that required no explanation. Absence, when it is seasonal and sanctioned, does not count as loss. It counts as growth. Whatever I became there did not need to be reconciled locally. I could return sunburned and quieter, changed just enough to be praised, not enough to be questioned.

After eighth grade at age fourteen came boarding school. Again, it was described as opportunity. Advancement. Something privileged and earned. I learned how to accept it with gratitude, even as I noticed how efficiently it removed me from the daily life of the place that claimed to have raised me. The town did not push me out. It simply redirected me. That distinction matters. Redirecting allows those around me to still feel reasonable.

At sixteen, I was kicked out with nowhere to go. Doctors had finally told me I was intersex and XX female. They spoke carefully, as if delivering bad news, as if being labeled female required consolation. By then it was blatantly obvious what was happening. I had already started growing breasts, and had my first period a few summers earlier. I told the doctors I had identified as a female my entire life, and that I had been socialized as such. I had previously told my parents that I was bisexual to try and soften the inevitable reality that I was

actually a lesbian. I told everyone I I knew that I was gay. Nobody seemed even remotely surprised.

I still had to return for boarding school. Home was withdrawn, but obligation remained intact. I learned then that belonging and usefulness are separate categories, and that you can be discarded personally while still being required institutionally. I showed up. I performed. I did not make trouble. I learned how to function without being held. I ran away in my senior year after I turned eighteen. The school demanded me to walk down the aisle at graduation but when I was handed my diploma, it was a blank sheet of paper.

By the time college arrived, distance no longer felt accidental. West Virginia was not nearby. It was not intended to be. My life would continue to happen elsewhere. Staying was never the goal. Leaving had become the imposed structure. I stopped expecting continuity. I learned how to live out of suitcases and duffel bags, build myself in pieces, and carry them with me.

None of this was described as exile. That is important. Each move could be justified on its own. Each decision made sense if you refused to look at them in sequence. But sequence is where meaning lives. Proximity was withdrawn at every moment when staying would have required reckoning—when I would have needed to be fully seen, fully integrated, fully accounted for.

I grew up anyway. I did well. Better than expected, according to some. I became successful in ways people like to reference, beautiful in ways they feel comfortable commenting on from a distance. I did not disappear. I did not break down publicly. I did not return asking to be saved. I came back intact. That was the problem.

Small towns that have a population of two thousand people know how to support wounded children. They later struggle with adult women who no longer require supervision, gratitude, or containment. Survival is acceptable. Self-possession is destabilizing. I had outgrown the version of myself the town knew how to contain.

When mom died and it came time to keep my mother's house—to remain tethered in a way that was practical, grounded, undeniable—the answer was already written. The town had practiced my absence for decades. Letting me go was not new. It was simply the final step.

People keep telling me it is just a house. That houses come and go. That I should be pragmatic. They misunderstand what houses mean in places like this. Houses are proof. They are permission. They are evidence that you were meant to come back and stay.

I did come back. I just came back whole. This is not about blame. It is a story about how a girl can be raised by a place and still never be offered continuity once she becomes too autonomous to manage up close. About how exile does not

always arrive as rejection—sometimes it arrives as opportunity, as distance, as a series of reasonable decisions that add up to removal.

There were people I called friends. I had a crush on one of my female friends for years, and she never knew. That feels important to say plainly, without quotation marks or revision. At the time, I meant it. We shared classrooms, summers, hallways, summer vacations, and inside jokes that made sense only because we were young and standing in the same places at the same time. We knew one another's rhythms well enough to recognize footsteps, moods, silences. I assumed that counted for something durable.

Some of my friends left early. When I was sent away, they faded cleanly. No rupture, no confrontation, no final conversation. Just absence. I did not hear from them again. Not later. Not eventually. They did not follow the thread forward. I learned, without being told, that certain relationships are built only for proximity. Once distance enters, they dissolve without protest.

Others stayed. These are the ones who confuse me more. They remained in the town. Built lives there. Married people whose names I had known decades earlier, only to find out years later, if at all. A few of my friends had children who grew up entirely outside my awareness, and became fully formed adults by the time I heard about them. They speak about these lives

casually now, as if the continuity were obvious, as if I had simply been standing slightly off to the side the whole time.

They are surprised by *my* surprise. They tell me about their children—college graduates, parents themselves sometimes—and pause when I do not immediately know where to place that information. They mention a spouse they married twenty years ago and wait for an immediate recognition that does not come. There is a brief moment where something does not line up, and then they smooth it over, as if the misunderstanding is minor and on me.

What they do not understand is that these omissions are not details. They are evidence. Decades passed without a single phone call, letter, message, or update. Entire lives unfolded without intersecting mine in any meaningful way. And yet, when we speak now, there is an expectation of familiarity, of shared history still intact, as if time simply paused in my absence and resumed when I returned.

I am not offended. That would suggest I expected something else. What I feel instead is dislocation—the recognition that I was never inside the version of friendship they were maintaining. I was preserved as a memory, not a participant. Someone from before. Someone optional.

They lived parallel lives that did not require my presence, and I learned about them only retroactively, as if being briefed on a completed project. The surprise on their faces when I admit I did not know is almost genuine. It seems not to occur to them

that staying in one place creates a different kind of continuity—one that quietly excludes those who were educated away from it.

This is the part no one names when they talk about people, "growing apart." That phrase implies mutual drift, equal distance, shared forgetting. What actually happened was asymmetrical. Their lives continued in a tight radius. Mine was routed outward. Information flowed one way, if at all.

Friendship, it turns out, was also conditional on proximity. I do not fault them for building lives. That would be absurd. I fault the assumption that I should somehow have remained adjacent to them without access, without invitation, without updates—like a background character expected to recognize plot developments I was never ever written into.

When they speak now, there is often a faint confusion underneath the conversation, a sense that I am not responding correctly. I am warmer than a stranger, but far less informed than a friend. I occupy an in-between space they never had to define because it only exists for people who leave and still remember. *I remember everything*.

This is what exile looks like at the interpersonal level. Not cruelty. Not rejection. Just long stretches of unacknowledged absence, punctuated by moments where the distance briefly becomes visible and no one quite knows what to do with it.

I am expected to understand their lives as continuations. They do not understand mine as a series of enforced departures.

Summer camp and boarding school were presented as different experiences. One was seasonal, the other academic. One was supposed to be carefree, the other rigorous. In practice, the outcome was identical. Both removed me from home for vast stretches of time. Both taught me how to adapt quickly, perform acceptably, and disappear without protest. Both reinforced the idea that my life would be managed at a distance.

The environments differed. The function did not. At camp, I learned how to read a room and adjust before being corrected. At boarding school, I refined the skill. Neither place was interested in who I was becoming. They were interested in whether I could comply, blend, and succeed quietly. I did. That competence was noted. It was never mistaken for belonging.

What makes this harder to name—and impossible to separate from the larger pattern—is that my father intentionally enrolled me as a boy in both institutions. This was not confusion. It was not a bureaucratic error. It was a decision. His, and his alone.

I was required to perform a role that had never belonged to me, in institutions that rewarded obedience and punished deviation efficiently and without spectacle. I learned how to hold myself carefully, how to manage presentation, how to endure the dissonance without comment. Survival required precision. I supplied it.

That role followed me everywhere those institutions reached. Camp. School. Paperwork. Introductions. The

occasional confused look in a therapist's office. I became practiced at living inside a fiction that other people insisted was real. Correcting it was not an option. Refusing it was not possible. I did what I had already learned to do well—I endured.

This was not a temporary inconvenience. It was a structural condition of my childhood and adolescence. One more way proximity was made unsafe. One more reason distance was framed as opportunity. Being away allowed the role to persist without challenge. It insulated the decision from scrutiny.

I did not become free of that imposed identity until I was legally free of my father's estate. That sentence still surprises people. It shouldn't. Control does not always end with death. Sometimes it lingers in documents, in estates, in expectations, in the quiet understanding that certain truths remain inconvenient until all administrative authority has been exhausted and the courts surrender. My autonomy arrived not with adulthood, but with clearance.

Looking back, it becomes difficult to argue that summer camp and boarding school were neutral experiences. They functioned as containment. They enforced a version of me that was never mine while training me to tolerate erasure as long as it was orderly.

This is why the pattern matters. Distance did not protect me from harm. It made the harm easier to maintain. It kept the story clean. It allowed adults to feel reasonable while a child learned how to split herself for survival.

When I say I was educated elsewhere, I do not only mean geographically. I mean I was taught—systematically—that who I was could be overridden, that compliance would be rewarded, and that safety came from not insisting on being seen.

That lesson worked. Too well. By the time all of this was underway, my family was already gone. Not dramatically. Not in a single argument or rupture that could be pointed to later. They peeled away over time, quietly, until there was no one left to account for. Distance handled what confrontation did not. Silence did the rest. Decades passed without repair, explanation, or interest in return.

My mother was the exception. She was the only constant in a system that specialized in removal. When everyone else stepped back, she stayed. When proximity became inconvenient, she did not outsource it. She did not reroute me, or recategorize me, or explain my absence as growth. She remained present in ways that did not require interpretation.

That matters more than people realize. She did not always understand me perfectly, but she did not withdraw. She did not require me to be smaller, quieter, or easier to manage in order to keep her place in my life. Whatever the rest of the family decided to relinquish, she held.

Which is why the house was never just a house. It was the last physical expression of someone choosing to stay.

When the rest of my family abandoned the work of knowing me, she did not. When distance became fashionable, she did not participate. When silence would have been simpler, she kept a line open. The house carried that continuity forward after she was gone. It was proof that at least one relationship in my life had not been conditional on convenience.

Losing it is not about nostalgia. It is about the final confirmation of a pattern I have been documenting this entire time. Everyone else left early. The town practiced my absence. Friends became ghostly silhouettes of memories. Institutions managed me at a distance. And my mother stayed and protected me as best she could.

She was not perfect. That is not the point. She was *present*. And in a life structured around being sent elsewhere, that presence mattered enough to anchor everything that came after. Letting go of the house feels like the last piece of that being dismantled—not because I need it to survive, but because it represented something that was otherwise rare. A place that did not require me to perform, explain, or adapt in order to remain.

I am not grieving a building. I am acknowledging that the only person who ever truly held ground for me is no longer here to do it. Everything else I learned to live without. That is why this ending is clean.

The town did not betray me suddenly. My family did not disappear all at once. I was trained early to live without permanence, without continuity, and often without return. My

mother was the one remaining interruption in that pattern. The house was the echo of her choice to stay.

Now that is gone too, and I am still standing. That has never been the question. The question was whether staying was ever real, or just something I believed in because she made it so for as long as she could. Knowing the answer does not undo anything. It simply completes the record.

I am letting go of the house now. Not dramatically. Not angrily. With the same clarity I learned early on. The contract I thought I was honoring was never mutual. Staying was something I believed in, not something that was ever fully extended to me.

Knowing that changes nothing about who I am. It just explains why leaving feels so familiar.

January 26, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

Maybe in another lifetime, or some half-forgotten dream, the difference would not feel so loud. Maybe it would pass unnoticed, like weather moving through, like something that never needed explaining. I imagine a version of time where I am not an exception, not a footnote, not something to be interpreted. Just present, intact, unremarkable in the best possible way—and left alone because nothing about me needs correcting.

Hidden language—like trespasses against what we were rumored to want—has always moved quietly, never announcing itself, never needing permission. It lives in what goes unsaid, in expectations assigned secondhand, in the small, unrecorded moments where wanting the wrong thing is treated like a breach of contract. Nothing dramatic ever happens—just a look, a pause, a subtle rewriting of the story. Still, the message lands. I learned to read that language early, not because I agreed with it, but because knowing where the edges are has always mattered more than pretending they do not exist.

The last few years taught me impermanence the hard way—and with it, the quiet obligation to do right by people while there is still time. Words blur, places fade, timelines collapse into a handful of impressions, but the feeling remains exact. What stays is how safe someone felt, or unseen, or steadied for a moment when everything else was slipping. I have learned to measure my days less by what I built or said, and more by

whether I left anyone lighter than I found them—because that is the part no one forgets.

Maddie and Andrew came up to the farm and stayed the night, the kind of visit that settles into the house without ceremony. We drove to Five Guys in Rutland, talked, let the hours stretch the way they only do when no one is rushing anywhere. By Sunday morning the snow had already started, thick and deliberate, the kind that erases edges and insists you stay put. I did not go outside at all.

After they left, Angie called. Late enough that the house had already gone quiet again. We talked for a while, the way people do when they know each other well enough not to perform. Somewhere in the middle of it, I realized something that had been sitting just out of reach for years—that she was my first real relationship. Nearly twenty years of shared life, which sounds impossible until I remember how much time can pass when you are busy surviving it.

She was the only woman I ever fell in love with where it was not built solely on friendship, not buffered by distance or detachment. That love was direct, unguarded, and real in a way I did not know how to name at the time. The snow kept falling outside while we talked, and I let that recognition settle without trying to fix it or rewrite it. Some truths do not ask for anything beyond being acknowledged.

Today I let the day close in, watched the light change through the windows, and spent more time than usual thinking

about how in the hell I made it this far. Forty-seven is coming whether I acknowledge it or not, and the strange truth is that I have no interest in slowing down, no instinct to ease off the throttle. If anything, the opposite. I think that refusal—to coast, to soften, to disappear quietly into some acceptable version of aging—is what keeps me upright.

I think that is what keeps me young—not optimism exactly, but the refusal to let life become too predictable. Lately I have been missing the sheer uncertainty of my childhood and early adult years, the way anything could happen anywhere at any time, and often did, whether I was ready or not. I miss my origin in that way—not the town that raised me, but the wider geography of belonging, the places my mother's side of the family once moved through as if the land itself knew our names.

Both the Adirondacks and Western New York keep coming back to me, not as nostalgia exactly, but as unfinished business, places I have not stood in for far too long. Time keeps slipping forward, and I keep realizing there are pieces of myself still waiting back there. I suppose I should go see it again—if only to remind myself where that restlessness first learned how to breathe.

February 4, 2026—Stamford, New York (Mom's House)

I have known my entire life that I was homosexual—not as a conclusion I reached, not as a rebellion, not as a phase, but as a baseline fact, as ordinary to me as breathing. There was no moment of discovery, no question waiting patiently for an answer. It simply was. Long before language, long before permission, long before anyone thought to argue with me about it, I knew who I loved. I knew it with the same calm certainty I knew my own name—even when others tried to rename me, redefine me, or insist that certainty itself was a flaw that needed correcting.

My father never wanted me to tell anyone I was queer—not once, not ever. To him it was something to be managed, contained, kept quiet, as if truth were a liability instead of a fact. Silence was his preferred tool, and he wielded it with the same confidence he used for everything else, insisting that discretion was virtue and secrecy was protection, when in reality it was just another way to control the narrative and erase what he did not want acknowledged.

I never understood why other people were so consumed by things that had nothing to do with them—sexual orientation, gender, the private architecture of someone else's interior life. It always struck me as a strange misuse of time and energy, like standing around monitoring a stranger's pulse just to feel involved. Who someone loves, how they move through their own body, what name they answer to when no one is listening—none

of it ever felt like public property to me. I have always believed that being concerned with other people's relationships is useless and wasteful, a distraction dressed up as morality, a way to avoid the harder work of minding one's own life.

My father was a controlling and abusive man—a father without a face and without a name, a man of golden words who understood presentation better than truth. He knew how to sound reasonable, how to appear generous, how to construct a version of himself that other people found convincing. What happened behind closed doors never matched the language he used in public. He governed by confusion and fear, by rewriting reality until it bent to his advantage, and by ensuring that the version of events that survived was always the one that protected him.

My father took my childhood and shattered it. He took the reality that I was a lesbian and dismissed it as something temporary, inconvenient, or negotiable. He took my young, instinctive sense of being female in the world and taught me to be ashamed of it, to second-guess it, to keep it small. He took reality itself and bent it until it no longer resembled the truth, hiding what he had done behind legal trusts, nondisclosure agreements, and carefully engineered silence. Nothing about it was accidental. It was deliberate, methodical, and designed to ensure that the damage would never be spoken aloud, only lived with.

I spent two days at my mother's house, and I still have not come to terms with the fact that both of my parents are gone. Every room holds time a little differently, as if it has been waiting for me to notice how much of it slipped past while I was busy surviving. Where did the years go? I want to smile without regret. I want to laugh without judgment.

I told the world I was going to sell the house, said it out loud like a plan, like closure, but something in me refuses to let go. I have always tried to do right by people, even knowing that eventually they may hurt me anyway, and standing in that house I understood how much of my life has been shaped by that instinct.

In the days after my mother died, people began circling the house almost immediately, like gravity had shifted and pulled them in. Letters showed up first, then phone calls, then offers that arrived far too early and far too confidently, as if grief were merely an administrative delay.

Everyone seemed invested in helping me move on, which in practice meant helping me liquidate the remnants of a life that had once lived there. I told them what they wanted to hear. I said I would sell the house in the spring, said it cleanly and out loud, knowing even as the words left my mouth that they were provisional. Sometimes a promise is just a way to buy silence.

As time passed, that promise began to feel absurd, like agreeing to sell something irreplaceable while still emotionally standing within it. The truth is, I had long since decided to keep

the house for as long as I live—not because it is sacred or sentimental, but because it exists. Because it remains. Because in life, the two things that can never be replaced are time and ones childhood home. Reality crept up my spine and I came to terms with the fact that I was once forced out of a home at sixteen and taught how easily belonging could be revoked. Keeping this one feels corrective, almost mathematical, as if the equation finally balances. If there is spite in it, so be it. Spite can be a form of memory that refuses erasure, a quiet insistence that I am no longer required to disappear for anyone's comfort.

And in this case, *I made a promise simply to break it*. And yet, breaking that promise did not feel dishonest. It felt correct. It felt like choosing my own needs over politeness, like finally refusing to participate in the fiction that closure is something you owe other people on their timeline. I grew up in a broken home. I am not keeping the house to preserve the past. I am keeping it because I am no longer willing to abandon myself to make things easier for anyone else.

I do not know if I will ever be able to forgive my late father—and some days I am not even certain what forgiveness is supposed to look like—but the house does not ask that of me. I feel almost guilty for hoping that maybe in another lifetime, I will grow up in a supportive household. As for moms house, it simply stands there, holding everything at once—what was taken, what survived, and what I was never allowed to name out loud. Staying feels less like attachment and more like a new beginning.

In the end, I invited Angie stay as a guest at moms house. I gave her her own bedroom, because it felt honest. We were a couple for nearly two decades, and had known each other since childhood, and are not pretending otherwise. Some boundaries are not walls so much as proof that growth actually happened. One of the days we drove into Albany, stopping first at the Chuck Wagon Diner in Duanesburg, the kind of place that still believes in unprompted coffee refills and laminated menus.

We sat at a booth while the older folk complained about the winter. Angie and I spoke quietly over classic American fare, the air between us charged in that familiar, careful way, our lips trembling just slightly as we talked about going back to places we once roamed for nearly two decades. It was not a plan so much as a thought experiment, a way of acknowledging that history still exists even when it no longer governs. Back then we were young, full of rumor and longing, convinced answers were just ahead of us somewhere. Now we know better. We know that sometimes what survives is not the life you imagined, but the friendship that outlasted it—and that this, too, is a kind of arrival.

The night stretched longer than I expected it to. We stayed up talking with music playing low in the background, the kind of sound that does not demand attention but fills the empty spaces anyway. I slept in my old bedroom, surrounded by the leftovers of a life that once belonged to a much younger version of me, and at some point before morning I found myself moving through the house on quiet feet. I caught myself tiptoeing down

the hallway, almost half expecting my father to storm out of his room to yell at me for being awake too early, for being somewhere I did not belong, for simply existing as a child too loudly.

Before finally heading to bed, I turned off all the lights in my bedroom, pulled the white lace curtain back, and took a long, steady look at the pine tree that has stood outside that window for as long as I can remember—for forever and a day. It rises from what used to be the neighbor's property, back when there was still a house there, before the fire, before it burned to the ground one night while I was still in high school.

My mother bought the lot almost immediately, as if she understood that empty spaces have a way of attracting the wrong kind of ghosts if you do not preemptively claim them first. The pine stayed. It kept growing, quiet and unmoved, outlasting the house that once stood beside it—and watching all of us pass through the years anyway.

Grief does that—it reaches back and flips switches you forgot still worked. For a moment the house felt suspended between decades, as if nothing had ended and everything had, all at once.

Everything dies. I have learned that much simply by paying attention. People, houses, cities, entire empires, versions of ourselves—we lose them all, eventually. And yet some things refuse to stay gone. They return altered, quieter, stripped of illusion, but unmistakably present. What comes back is never

what you expected, and it is never the thing you mourned most, but it carries the same weight in a different shape. I am old enough now to understand that survival is not about preservation—it is about recognition. About knowing what still stands, what still speaks, and what is finally safe to name.

February 8, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

I remember being a small child and my mom saying to me, "if you can't trust your own parents, then whom can you legitimately trust."

I was just old enough to understand what she meant, and what she was implying is that I should place my trust in my parents, first and foremost. In her I trusted, sure, of course I did. Mom was my best friend first, and my parent second. My father, however, was abusive, and it created a dichotomy where I'm supposed to love and trust the person who abused me the most.

That sentence lodged itself somewhere permanent. Not in my mind—close to my body. It became a rule I carried without agreeing to it, like a law passed before I had language. *Trust your parents. Parents are the first contract. Parents are where safety begins.* And when that equation breaks, it doesn't shatter cleanly. It warps everything that comes after.

I trusted my mother because she earned it. Quietly. Daily. In the way she showed up without requiring translation. With her, trust was not a concept—it was operational. It lived in shared jokes, in knowing looks, in the way she let me be myself without interrogation. She did not ask me to prove anything. She did not correct my instincts. She simply stood beside me and treated that as enough.

My father demanded trust as an entitlement. That difference matters more than people like to admit.

He demanded loyalty without safety, obedience without care, proximity without consent. And the world around us—schools, doctors, neighbors, institutions—helped enforce that expectation. Fathers are to be respected. Fathers know best. Fathers are authority. If something feels wrong, the child is mistaken. If harm is present, it must be reframed, minimized, or explained away. My father made absolutely certain that his way was to be followed.

I learned early how to split myself. Love became a performance. Trust became conditional, theoretical, something discussed but never actually practiced. I learned how to comply without surrendering internally, how to stay alert while appearing calm, how to survive inside a relationship that required me to deny my own experience in order to keep the peace.

My father was abusive toward me from a very early age. My first clear recollection is being forced to sleep on the living room floor of our Greenwich Village apartment with nothing but a blanket. Dinner that night was a single slice of bread and a glass of water, measured and deliberate, as if deprivation itself were the point. I was not allowed my dog, which mattered more to me than the food.

I had been accused of lying about something so mundane and insignificant that, even now, I cannot understand why it was escalated to the principal at my private school at all. It was the kind of non-event children forget by dinner, except it did not end

there. As far as my father was concerned, we did not have liars in our family, and the accusation itself mattered more than its truth. The facts were irrelevant; what mattered was the threat to the image he guarded so obsessively. That belief—rigid, punitive, and absolute—is what ultimately triggered the punishment, as if discipline were required not to correct behavior, but to preserve a version of reality he refused to question.

There would be subsequent nights spent in the living room, again under the piano, as if that space had become a designated margin where I could be placed when I was no longer tolerable. My father told me I was lying when I told a therapist that I was a girl. I was six years old. He kept the paperwork from that appointment in a file until the day he died, preserving it like a trophy rather than a record.

Over time, he used those psychological reports as "evidence" to support his outrageous claim that I was incompetent, selectively presenting fragments of context as proof while ignoring the reality of the child they described. For a short time, that strategy worked. My father managed to keep me within a blind conservatorship, one more administrative mechanism that allowed control to masquerade as concern.

I wrapped myself tightly in the blanket and curled up beneath the piano in the living room, choosing the smallest, darkest space I could find, because even then I understood that making myself unobtrusive was safer. My mother could not stop it. She was not complicit—she was constrained. My father beat

her for years, and that violence set the limits of what she could protect and what she could not.

That is not trust. That is management.

The real damage wasn't only the abuse itself—it was the instruction that followed. The insistence that love and harm could occupy the same space without conflict. That I was supposed to reconcile those facts inside myself. That I should override my own perception in order to preserve the idea of family. That if I felt afraid, confused, or small, the problem must be me.

My father set very clear expectations for me from a very early age—I was to be a doctor or a surgeon, I was to graduate from Cornell, and I was to be a next-generation student there, as if destiny were an assembly line and I had already been placed on it without consent. These were not hopes or aspirations; they were mandates, delivered as inevitabilities rather than possibilities.

My father expected grandchildren before he died so that he could have a say in how they were raised, as if control were something that could be inherited along with a last name. He stated, without irony or hesitation, that the firstborn was to be named Harvey and that it was to be a boy. There was no curiosity in that declaration, no room for reality or biology or consent—just entitlement extending itself forward in time. Even hypothetical children were drafted into his version of the world,

assigned roles before they existed, claimed as proof of continuity rather than regarded as lives of their own.

None of it happened. Not because I failed, drifted, or lacked ability, but because those expectations were never about me to begin with—they were about control, legacy, and the insistence that my life exist as proof of something he needed to believe about himself.

It teaches a child a very specific lesson: your instincts and choices are negotiable. Your safety is secondary. Adults have your best interests at heart and they know better—your role is to adapt.

That lesson doesn't stay in childhood. It migrates. It shows up later in friendships where you overextend, in work where you tolerate far more than you should, in relationships where you stay longer than is reasonable or healthy because leaving feels like betrayal. Not of them—of the rule. The rule that says love requires endurance. The rule that says trust is something you owe, not something that must be earned.

For a long time, I believed that being able to trust no one was strength. Independence as protection Distance as safety. I told myself I was fine like that. Capable. Self-sufficient. Unimpressed by sentiment. But underneath that posture was something simpler and harder to admit—I never learned what safe trust felt like in the place where it was supposed to be taught first.

Except I did. Once. With my mother.

That is the part people miss when they flatten stories like mine into slogans. I did not grow up without trust. I grew up with a *contradiction*. One parent who showed me what it meant to be seen, and one who taught me what it meant to be erased.

I don't struggle with trust because I don't understand it. I struggle with it because I understand it too well. It is knowing that you do not have to disappear in order to be loved.

My mother knew that. My father did not. And I have spent a lifetime learning the difference—first as a child who had no choice, and later as a woman who finally does.

February 11, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

My father had millions of dollars when I was born. I was raised in the heart of Greenwich Village, at 11 Bank Street, in a building that carried itself with the quiet confidence of old money and older expectations. From my bedroom window, I could see the glow of Ye Waverly Inn at night—the steady traffic of adults who believed they understood the world because they could afford dinner inside it. The corner of Bank Street and Waverly Place became my first geography lesson, my first map of permanence. That intersection was my origin.

I was born into wealth, which meant I was born into infrastructure. The house was solid, the floors polished, the expectations unspoken but absolute. There were social systems in place for everything—money, appearances, conversation. From the outside, it suggested safety. From the inside, it functioned more like containment.

My father raised me on fairytales. He believed in the architecture of a story—the arc, the reward, the triumph granted to the obedient protagonist. He spoke in golden language that sounded permanent. But every promise carried conditions that were never named outright. Approval required compliance. Affection required performance. I learned that security tethered to obedience is not security at all.

When he ultimately decided we were leaving New York City, my foundation shifted. Until then, the grid of streets had functioned like bedrock—predictable, loud, stabilizing. Bank

Street, Waverly Place, the steady hum outside my window—those were constants. The move was presented as strategy, as progress, as something inevitable and wise. I understood it later as displacement.

I believed the relocation was for a better life. That is how it was framed—more space, a big back yard for me to play, more opportunity, something larger waiting just beyond the skyline. What I could not comprehend at the time was that the move was not designed around my stability or growth. It served my father's ambitions. His comfort. His narrative. I mistook direction for care.

My father was Dr. Harvey L. Slatin, one of the original scientists from the Manhattan Project. His name carried weight long before I understood what it meant. He was the last surviving member of his Special Engineering Detachment relating to the Manhattan Project. In certain rooms, it shifted the temperature. People stood straighter. Conversations adjusted themselves. He had helped build something that altered the trajectory of the twentieth century, something engineered with precision and consequence. I grew up aware that his work had split atoms and history alike. At the time, I did not yet understand that men who learn how to harness immense force sometimes struggle with restraint in smaller, quieter spaces.

He carried his doctoral title like a credential that extended beyond academia. "Doctor" preceded him into rooms and altered their geometry. I remember dinner parties where

women would register the title before they registered the man, their posture shifting as if proximity itself conferred something.

The attention followed him easily. He understood how to receive it. Whatever loyalty existed in theory did not extend into practice. My father was never faithful to my mother. The affairs were not singular mistakes or rare lapses—they were patterned, repetitive, geographically isolated, and conducted with the same quiet confidence he applied to everything else. It was not scandal in our household. It was routine.

My father believed that by moving out of the city, he could escape the attention that followed him. In New York, his name carried context. There were introductions that lingered a beat too long, conversations that shifted when he entered a room, recognition that moved ahead of him like a shadow. He did not enjoy being known in that way. So he chose a place where anonymity was possible in theory, where his credentials would not precede him, where no one would recognize his face or attach it to history. He framed it as privacy. In practice, it was retreat.

We moved when I was eight years old. My father enrolled me in public school as a boy and informed the administration that this was the direction that would be followed. It was not presented as a question. Forms were completed accordingly. Names were adjusted. Expectations recalibrated. I did not yet have the language to argue the decision, only the awareness that something essential was being overwritten. In a new town

where no one knew our history, he believed the designation would hold. He treated identity as something administrative—something that could be assigned, corrected, enforced. I understood it differently, even then.

As I grew, it became clearer with each passing year that his daughter would not conform to the shape he had chosen. His daughter would be gifted and misunderstood, intelligent enough to see the fracture lines and young enough to be punished for naming them. His daughter would be bullied mercilessly, corrected publicly, and passed from one set of unfamiliar hands to another as though proximity could solve what he refused to confront.

Rather than examine his own intolerance, my father distributed it. He outsourced his discomfort with every facet of my being—to teachers, to administrators, to institutions—allowing them to enforce what he could not reconcile.

At age sixteen came the final ultimatum. I could stop being queer and stop being honest about it with my friends, or I could learn what it meant to be on my own. It was presented as a correction, as an opportunity to reconsider. In reality, it was an eviction disguised as guidance. I understood the terms clearly. Silence in exchange for shelter. Denial in exchange for stability. I chose honesty. I left the house with a duffel bag full of clothes, my dog Penfold, a hand-me-down 1991 Honda station wagon, and $600 in cash. All without spectacle and without negotiation, and I did not return.

When I think about origin, I do not think about money or geography. I think about decision points. The quiet forks in the road where a single different choice might have altered the architecture of my life. I can trace them now with adult clarity—moments where protection could have been extended instead of withdrawn, where understanding could have replaced control. None of those choices were made. What remained was fact.

Survival, for me, became non-negotiable. There was no alternative path waiting in reserve, no family safety net, no quiet return available if things became difficult. I had one directive: remain standing. I worked. I learned. I adapted. I calculated risk the way other teenagers calculated social hierarchies. Endurance stopped being reactive and became strategic. Over time, it acquired an edge. Every year I stayed alive, every credential earned, every system built without assistance carried a subtext. I would not collapse to validate his prediction. If I could not change his decisions, I could outlive them.

As time went on, people gravitated toward the idea of the money my late father had amassed and assumed that I had inherited ease along with his name. They mistook association for access. The narrative was convenient: wealthy origin, famous father, invisible safety net. It was tidy. It was wrong. By the time I was old enough to understand the myth forming around me, I was already living outside of it. I left high school just before graduation and entered the workforce because survival does not wait for diplomas.

I slept in my car when there was nowhere else to go. I rotated through the couches of friends who were kind enough not to ask too many questions. I slept in the woods in a tent during the warmer months. My first apartments were temporary in every sense—thin walls, unstable leases, empty spaces where furniture would be acquired one piece at a time. My first car was not a symbol of independence so much as shelter with wheels. Whatever wealth had once surrounded my childhood did not accompany me. What followed me instead was the necessity of self-sufficiency.

My family dismissed every woman I brought home as though rejection were standard operational policy. It did not matter who she was, or what she brought with her—intelligence, steadiness, loyalty—all of it was examined and quietly deemed insufficient. Angie was not a stranger. We had known each other only by name for years, growing up in overlapping social circles, aware of one another long before we understood what we would become.

I finally built up the courage to ask her to be my girlfriend. Once our relationship became visible, the scrutiny intensified. My father did not welcome her. He negotiated her. Mom was instructed by my father to hate her. Before she was permitted proximity, he required her to agree to certain conditions, including nondisclosure of what he considered family secrets. Even intimacy, in his world, required contractual silence. She agreed because she loved me, and because loving me meant navigating him. We were together for nearly two decades. What endured between us did so in spite of the machinery that attempted to regulate it.

When my father died in 2013 at the age of ninety-seven, the mythology ended and the paperwork began. Whatever distance had existed between us in life did not prevent the transfer of responsibility in death. I became solely responsible for the family business, for its continuity, for the decisions that kept it solvent. I also became financially responsible for my mother. There was no ceremony to the shift, no gradual easing into it—just signatures, accounts, obligations. The daughter and only child who had once been told to comply was now expected to stabilize what remained. I did.

It was not until my mother allowed me to sell the family business and step away from New York City entirely that the cycle of constant struggle began to loosen its grip. And she didn't even agree for my benefit—Amelia and I had been together for five years by then, and she agreed to let it go for Amelia's sake. For years, I carried the weight of what had been built before me

—out of duty, out of expectation, out of a sense that holding it together was proof of something. The business tied me to history, to obligation, to a version of myself forged in survival mode. When she finally agreed to let it go, the shift was immediate. Selling it was not an act of escape; it was an act of release. Leaving the city was not surrender; it was a deliberate choice to stop living in reaction. For the first time, I could afford a life that was not defined by endurance alone.

February 14, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

This morning I woke up with a sentence already formed in my head, as if it had been waiting for me to catch up to it.

Emily… What are you waiting for?

This summer will mark thirty years since my father kicked me out of the house. Thirty years since a door closed behind me without negotiation. I do not dramatize it anymore. I do not soften it either. It happened. I left. Life went on.

Thirty years is long enough for a girl to become several different women. Long enough to acquire skills, scars, titles, land, and silence. I have lived lifetimes inside that span—firehouse years, big city years, exile years, farm years. Some of them feel compressed, as if they overlapped. So much has happened in those thirty years that it sometimes feels like it came from another lifetime entirely.

My Decembers tend to be retrospective. I let them review the record. January tends to be introspective. I turn inward and examine what it means to truly live. This year's winter ignored that boundary. December's retrospection bled into January without pause. January's introspection carried itself into the middle of February, much like the cold refusing to release its grip.

This winter has been one of the hardest. Not catastrophic. Not cinematic. Just steady. The kind that deserves acknowledgment, not witnesses.

What are you waiting for, Emily?

I keep circling that question the way I circle land I am not ready to sell. Am I waiting for the anniversary to mean something ceremonial? For thirty years to sound like closure? For someone to acknowledge that exile at sixteen rearranges the nervous system permanently?

Or am I waiting to stop measuring my life against that moment at all?

There are chapters of a woman's life that do not sit inside memory—they live in the body instead. That summer lives in mine. Not as an open wound. As a fixed coordinate. As the first time I understood that stability is not granted. It is built.

Thirty years ago I was expelled. The girl who stood in that doorway did not know what would come next. She did not have a plan beyond surviving. She did not have an inheritance waiting. She did not have guarantees. She had willpower.

I left home with an Army duffel bag full of clothes, my dog Penfold, six hundred dollars in cash, a copy of *Illusions* by Richard Bach, a Canon AE-1, two blank college-ruled composition notebooks, a worn copy of *The Tao of Pooh*, and a 1991 Honda station wagon that ran well enough not to ask questions. No contingency plan. Just paperbacks about belief and

balance, a camera to document what I could not yet explain, blank pages waiting for whatever I survived next, and a car that doubled as shelter when it needed to. It did not look like a future. It looked like departure.

I think that is what the question is asking now. Not what I want. Not what I lost.

In the thirty years since I was forced to leave, I have lost more than a home. I have lost the illusion that parents are permanent. I lost my father to death without reconciliation, and my mother to time just when we had finally learned how to speak plainly to one another.

I have lost colleagues to fire, to accident, and to the quiet attrition of a profession that sometimes consumes its own. I have lost friendships that could not survive distance or my refusal to stay small. I have lost my family. I have lost entire versions of myself that once felt necessary for survival.

When Mom died, I finally let go of the firehouse identity that raised me, kept her proud, and nearly ruined me. I lost my childhood home twice—first by exile, then by inheritance. I lost the belief that loyalty guarantees return, and the idea that permanence can be secured with effort alone.

I have buried people I respected, buried Penfold, buried expectations, and buried grudges. I have watched money change nothing, institutions fold, love shift shape, and towns practice my absence until it became routine. I have lost time to endurance,

softness to vigilance, and sleep to memories that never needed witnesses.

And yet, what remains is not vacancy but continuity—the proof that loss did not finish the story. It only clarified what was never built to stay.

February 16, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

This morning I woke up in a crummy mood—thinking about Mom, and how I've slowly been moving pieces of her life here to the farm. The last bed I used at Mom's now sits by my living room window. The pottery we made together when I was a kid, chipped from decades of wear, now rests in my childhood dresser drawers.

It's strange how objects travel more easily than people do. They don't argue. They don't defend themselves. They just arrive, and suddenly the room feels rearranged in ways you weren't prepared for. I stood in the kitchen longer than necessary, looking at the box under my childhood bed that holds our memories from New York City, and realized I've been carrying her in boxes instead of sentences.

That does not mean she was perfect. It does not mean she was always brave in the ways I needed her to be.

She tried to protect me from my father's abuse. I believe that. I saw it in small ways—how she redirected him when his voice rose, how she softened his edges when she could, how she stood between us without announcing that she was doing it. But protection in that house was rarely absolute. It was negotiated. It had limits. There were moments when she had to relent to his demands because the alternative was escalation, or divorce, or violence that would have cost more than either of us could afford. Sometimes she chose the lesser explosion. Sometimes she chose stability over defiance.

And sometimes she simply was not there for me at all. There were days when I needed her to step forward and she stayed quiet. Her loyalty to me and her loyalty to the marriage were in constant tension. Some days I won that tug-of-war. Most days I did not.

When I was eleven and wanted to attend summer camp, she agreed with my father that if I went, I would be enrolled as a boy. The camp was co-ed. There was room for me to exist honestly. But honesty was not the condition placed on my attendance. Compliance was. Mom could have said no. She could have refused the terms or demanded I go as myself. Instead, she accepted them, and I went under a designation that was never mine. I knew who I was. The paperwork did not change that.

Boarding school came later, and that compromise became heavier. Summer camp was seasonal, almost framed as harmless. Boarding school was permanent and all male. The paperwork was not temporary. The sign at the entrance stated plainly that it was a school for boys. The identity assigned to me followed me into dormitories, classrooms, locker rooms, and faculty meetings. And my mother allowed it to happen. She did not enroll me in secret. She did not fight publicly. She signed what needed to be signed and sent me away.

I have spent years trying to hold those truths together. The woman who felt like my best friend. The woman who laughed with me, protected me in quiet ways, and later told me she was proud of who I became. And the woman who agreed,

more than once, to systems that required me to live as someone else in order to remain contained.

That is the rollercoaster. Not love versus hate. Not ally versus enemy. It was love braided with concession. Protection braided with surrender. There were nights she chose me and nights she chose peace. I learned early that adults are not singular. They are collections of decisions made under pressure. My mother loved me fiercely, and she also allowed things to happen that shaped the rest of my life. Both are true. I do not need to flatten either one to survive them.

Boarding school never felt like a chapter in my life—it felt like a controlled experiment. The campus was built out of brick and certainty, long hallways that echoed with shoes and expectation, dormitories that smelled faintly of detergent and adolescence. The main study hall building had an oversized bathroom that looked like it hadn't changed since the 1980s. Fluorescent lights hummed overhead. The tile floor was always a little too cold. And the handicapped stall—enormous compared to the others—had become the unofficial message board of the entire school.

Every inch of the inside of that stall was layered in Sharpie ink and scratched initials. Gossip. Allegations. Rumors written like headlines. The kind of information boys didn't say out loud but needed somewhere to put. It was a confessional booth without absolution. I learned quickly that if you wanted to know what

the school really thought, you literally read the writing on the walls.

Earlier that year, I made myself deliberately late to study hall, stepped into the bathroom I only ever used for the stall, and wrote above one of the urinals, “Too bad you’re looking here. The joke is in your pants.”

One afternoon I walked in, closed the heavy metal door behind me, and saw it written across the tile in uneven black ink: “Thomas is a girl!”

There was no insult attached. No slur. Just the sentence. Outside of those institutions, I was Emily. I stood there longer than I meant to. Not because I was afraid, and not because I was angry. I felt relief. After years of paperwork, administrators, and adults insisting on social categories that never fit, someone inside that institution had simply stated what was true.

It didn’t stay contained. Of course it didn’t. I was called to the principal’s office within a day or two. The hallway smelled faintly of fresh paint that week; maintenance had just repainted several corridors, and the signs identifying offices had been removed and reattached with strips of sticky tape that were already curling at the edges. My biology had been documented long before this, and it was the first thing they reached for.

The principal talked for a long time about how I was being “too effeminate,” about presentation and perception and discipline. He told me to get clothes that fit right. He told me to

cut my hair short. He spoke as if tone could correct biology. To me it seemed unnecessary—why were we discussing this incident and blaming the victim? I sat still and let him finish.

He asked if I had any comments. I replied, "Yes. I think this school sucks, and I think my education would be better served if I were allowed to go home and be given a pre-determined budget for overdue library books."

He told me the meeting was done. There was no reaction. No response to what I'd said. Just a canned, prewritten dismissal that felt like I had interacted with a dial-up automated system.

I stood up, thanked him politely, and closed the door behind me. The adhesive holding the sign that read "Director Of The Middle School" peeled off with almost no resistance. I carried it down the hall and pressed it firmly onto the door of the boys' bathroom, smoothing it flat against the wood as if it had always belonged there. Then I walked away.

It didn't take long for the administration to notice. At lunch, the assistant headmaster approached me as I was walking in. He didn't raise his voice. He didn't summon me back to the office. He leaned in slightly and said, "I know you did it. I can't prove it. Nobody can. But we know it was you." There was something in his face—barely restrained humor, a flicker of recognition that he understood the precision of it. I knew he knew. He knew I knew. He kept it brief, nodded approvingly and moved on.

That moment has stayed with me longer than the lecture did. Not because I got away with something, but because for once, an adult authority figure saw the joke embedded in the structure. Saw that I was not chaotic or confused. I was deliberate. In a school that insisted on filing me incorrectly, I had simply relocated the label.

February 21, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

Today I finally admitted, without drama and without theatrics, that this winter was the hardest one I have ever endured. Not the coldest in temperature, though Vermont certainly tried its hand at brutality, but the coldest in spirit. There is a particular fatigue that settles into the bones when grief and winter overlap—it is not theatrical grief, not the kind that demands witnesses, but the quiet, grinding kind that erodes you in increments. This season felt like that. Erosion. Attrition. A slow persistent stripping down to essentials.

In some ways I am still recovering from last year. I do not mean that in the shallow, motivational-poster sense. I mean it in the feelings of the heart sense. Last year was tumultuous in ways that rearranged the entire path of my life. The ground shifted, and I am still testing my footing. There were days when everything felt provisional, unstable, and edged with uncertainty. I survived it, yes—but survival is not the same thing as restoration. Recovery is slower. Recovery is uneven. Recovery has its own seasons.

I lost Mom last year, and the sentence still lands like something foreign in my mouth. I can write it now without my hands shaking, which is progress of a kind, but I am not over it. I suspect I never will be—not fully—not in the clean, resolved way people like to imagine grief concludes. It lingers. It ambushes. It arrives in small, everyday moments when I least expect it. I find myself wanting to tell her something trivial, something sharp,

something only she would appreciate, and there is nowhere for that impulse to go. The silence that follows is vast and deafening.

There is a part of me that feels permanently altered by her absence. Not diminished, exactly, but reconfigured. Losing a mother is not simply losing a person—it is losing a reference point, a history keeper, a witness to the earliest version of yourself. There is no replacement for that role. There is only adaptation.

And in the midst of that, there is Amelia, and god, do I love her.

I love her with a steadiness that feels almost defiant in the face of everything else that has been taken. I love her in the ordinary moments, the quiet ones, the unremarkable ones that would be unremarkable to anyone else. I love her in a way that she has an emotional presence every day of my life, even when we are apart. The thought of the universe taking her from me is almost too large to contemplate. It feels like a cruelty I would not survive. If it ever did, it would take from me that which I love most, and that truth is not hyperbole. It is fact.

Perhaps that is the other reason this winter has been so hard. When you lose someone essential, the fragility of everything becomes obvious. The illusion of permanence dissolves. You begin to understand how little control you truly have over who stays and who goes. Loving someone deeply becomes an act of courage, because you now know the cost of losing them.

I used to believe, in some quiet and unexamined way, that if I worked hard enough, loved hard enough, stayed vigilant enough, I could outrun loss. As if discipline could negotiate with the universe. As if competence—my old religion—could insulate the people I love from harm. Losing Mom ended that illusion cleanly. It was not dramatic. It was final. And it left behind the kind of silence that does not argue.

There are moments—when I sit by the window watching the light shift over the snow—when I feel the echo of her absence as something physical. The pain is subtler now. Not sharp. A hollowing. A missing weight. I am still calibrating to it. I suspect I always will be, like an emotional half-life that never quite reaches zero.

I know full well how swiftly the universe can rearrange a life, and my love for Amelia has always felt both fiercer and more vulnerable by extension. I catch myself looking at her sometimes as if memorizing her—her hands, the way she occupies a room, the particular gravity she brings with her. I do not say this out loud. I do not want to place that fear in the air between us.

If the universe ever took her from me, it would take the axis of my days. That is not dependency. It is devotion. It is the simple recognition that she is the person I have chosen, again and again, in the aftermath of everything else. I have lost before. I have endured before. I know I would survive again. But endurance and survival are not the same thing as wholeness.

This winter forced me to confront the limits of control. It forced me to sit still with grief instead of outrunning it with work, or discipline, or competence. It forced me to admit that loving someone is not a guarantee—it is a risk. And I am still choosing it.

I am still choosing her.

February 24, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

There are years that pass like calendar pages—clean, perforated, forgettable. And then there are years that swallow you whole. This was the year I lived inside something enormous and dark. Not dramatic-dark. Not cinematic. Just the kind that rearranges oxygen.

Mom got sick first. Not in a way that announced itself. No thunderclap. Just small recalibrations—hospital appointments and emergency admissions multiplying, her voice thinning at the edges, the quiet arithmetic of decline. Illness does not rush. It leans. It presses. It waits for you to notice that something essential has already slipped past the point of return.

I tried to outwork it. I have always believed in competence the way other people believe in prayer. If something is wrong, you organize it. You label it. You respond. You figure it out and make it right again. This was not that kind of wrong.

Money thinned out the way late October light does—gradually, then suddenly all at once. I found myself hopping freight trains back to New York City to sell my childhood home because I was broke enough to be practical and stubborn enough to be ashamed of it. There is nothing romantic about hanging your legs off steel before sunrise. There is just the rattle of tracks and the knowledge that you are moving toward something you once thought could never disappear.

The house on Bank Street had held every version of me—birth, childhood, exile, and return. Signing those documents felt less like selling property and more like quieting a past that still had a pulse. The brokers talked square footage, zip codes, and commissions. I thought about pencil marks on doorframes and how ghosts do not get line items in contracts.

Somewhere inside all of that, Amelia left for a month—the strain of my mother's illness carrying its own gravity. A month is nothing on paper. Thirty days. A clean unit of time. But absence inside grief multiplies. The house grew larger. The bed expanded into something unmanageable. Silence pressed against my ears until it felt deafening.

I functioned. I answered emails. I made calls. I figured things out. But the whale had already closed its mouth.

Mom's death was not loud. It was administrative. A narrowing. A final breath that did not negotiate. I have stood in rooms where endings arrived abruptly. This one arrived like paperwork. After she died, the world simply went on without her. The sky remained operational. The mail still arrived with her name on it. That offended me more than I expected.

And then there were the friends. Or the idea of them. They did not leave in a single argument. They evaporated. Messages unanswered. Invitations that dissolved before they formed. Grief makes people uneasy. It requires proximity without performance. Many prefer distance. I watched the shoreline recede and understood, finally, that some of the

relationships I thought were mine had been anchored to my mother all along.

Inside the whale, sound is muffled. Time bends. You start to question whether you wandered in or were taken. There were nights I sat in Mom's house—ours, mine, history's—and felt the walls and an old blanket wrapped tight around me. The same hallway where I once tiptoed. The same pine outside the window that outlived the fire next door. Everything still standing. Everything altered.

And then came Angie. Reconnecting with her in the days after Mom died did not feel nostalgic. It felt inevitable. Nearly twenty years of shared life does not vanish because a chapter ends. It compresses. It waits. We sat in diners. We drove old roads. We talked without trying to fix anything. There was no romance to it. No rewriting. Just recognition. She had casually known the girl before the whale. She had known Dark Horse before boarding school, before exile, before translation was required. She did not need translation.

At some point—between the train tracks and the hospital corridors, between Amelia's absence and her return, between losing the house and deciding to keep Mom's—I made a choice that surprised even me.

I kept Mom's house. Not because it was practical. Not because it was easy. Because I have already been forced out of one home. Because exile once rearranged my nervous system. Because keeping this one felt like balancing an equation that had

been tilted since I was sixteen. Spite can be a form of memory. Staying can be a form of correction.

The whale did not consume me. It showed me which friendships were conditional, which loves could survive distance, and which parts of me were scaffolding—not bone. It took my mother. It took illusions. It took the fantasy that permanence can be engineered if you are competent enough. But it did not take me. There were moments—small, almost invisible—when I realized I was still breathing inside it. That the dark was not erasure. That survival, again, was not the miracle. Continuity was.

Finally alive and somehow we made it through together—even if "together" looks different now. Even if together means memory, land, Amelia's steady presence, Angie's voice on the phone, the pine tree still standing outside a window that has watched everything.

February 26, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

There is a pine tree outside my bedroom window, and the longer I live here, the more I realize it isn't a detail—it's a continuity line. It stands in the same spot every morning I wake up, the same way it stood there last winter, and the winter before that, and the winter before that, holding its shape against the dark like time is a nuisance rather than a threat.

I have built a life that finally feels like mine—wife, land, work that makes sense, quiet that doesn't demand performance—and still, when I'm honest, the pine is the first thing my nervous system recognizes as familiar. Not because it's pretty. Not because it's sentimental. Because it has never required anything from me except that I exist nearby, breathing, thinking, surviving, and then—eventually—living.

I think the origin of my trust in pine trees is simple, and it's almost embarrassing how long it took me to say it out loud. Pine trees have been present for my entire life in the Northeast.

My grandparents owned a farm in Williamsville, New York—hundreds of acres of pine trees, the kind of scale that makes a child feel both protected and appropriately small. When I was in my birth years, visiting that farm, I didn't have language for "constant," or "witness," or "stability," but I had sensation—needles underfoot, the sharp green smell of pitch, the hush that falls in a stand of pines like the trees have decided not to repeat what they've overheard. Adults talked, made plans, made pronouncements, and did what adults do, which is pretend

they're in charge of time. The pines didn't participate. They just stood there, indifferent to narrative. That indifference wasn't cold—it was clean. It was the first place I can remember where nothing asked me to be different in order to remain safe.

Later, in Stamford, there was a pine tree outside my window, and I did what kids do when the world feels too big and too loud—I watched it. I watched it in rain, in snow, in those upstate nights when the cold comes down like a verdict.

I watched it bend under wind and then return to itself. Over and over again. No drama, no collapse, no announcement. It didn't pretend the wind wasn't there. It didn't posture. It yielded, and then it reset. That was my first real education in resilience—resilience that wasn't theatrical, and didn't require anyone's permission. I didn't understand at the time that I was building my own internal model of what "safe" looked like. I just knew that the tree never lied to me. Wind was wind. Winter was winter. The branches moved because physics demanded it, not because someone wanted to punish me for existing wrong.

Summer camp in the Adirondacks came later, and the pines were there, too—crowding the edges of the world in that particular way those mountains do, as if the forest is both boundary and guardian. Camp is supposed to be about growth, or confidence, or whatever brochure language adults like to apply to children they're sending away for a few weeks, but for me it was something quieter and more precise.

I remember how the air smelled at dusk, how the light would drain out of the day in stages, and how the pines didn't react to any of it. The world shifted, the sky changed, people changed, friendships formed and dissolved in the way they do when everyone is young and desperate to be understood. The pines remained exactly what they had been before anyone arrived.

There's a particular cruelty in a life where other people keep trying to narrate you—relabel you, reinterpret you, file you into categories that make them more comfortable. I grew up inside other people's certainty, and I learned early that certainty is often just control wearing a nicer outfit. Pine trees never did that. They have been the one and only constant in my life besides who I am as a person.

People left. Places changed. Institutions rewrote the rules mid-game. Adults made decisions that altered the architecture of my childhood and then acted surprised when the structures they put in place didn't remain stable. Even love, sometimes, came with conditions—spoken or implied, explicit or buried under polite language.

I think I became *Dark Horse* because I had to—because when you're raised in an environment with ever changing aspirations that never appealed to you in the first place, you learn to be the outlier on purpose. You learn to build a self that doesn't depend on applause. You learn to stand alone without

collapsing, and you learn how to look calm while your entire nervous system is conducting an audit of exits, risks, and lies.

That skillset kept me alive. It also cost me things. It cost me softness for a while. It cost me trust. It cost me the easy kind of intimacy other people seem to stumble into without thinking. But the pines were the one place where my vigilance could stand down, even slightly, because nothing in that system was trying to recruit me into someone else's story.

It's strange, too, how often I have framed my life in windows. I can map major chapters by what I could see from a bedroom at night—the glow of New York City, the darkness of upstate roads, the silhouette of hills, the way snow turns a landscape into negative space. I've always been someone who watches, not because I'm passive, but because observation is how I stay accurate. And in so many of those windows, there was a pine tree somewhere in the frame—quietly doing what it has always done, refusing to be hurried, refusing to be rewritten. That isn't a coincidence. That's the only kind of faith I've ever trusted—the kind that doesn't ask to be believed, only witnessed over time.

Rescue Girl is a name that was given to me later at work. But the pines were rescuing me long before I knew to rescue others. When you grow up with adults who change the story to suit themselves, you start to crave anything that can't be bullied into revision. A pine tree cannot be guilted into a different version of events. A pine tree cannot be persuaded to pretend

winter didn't happen. A pine tree doesn't offer forgiveness because it never took offense in the first place. It just endures, and that endurance is not spite—it's design.

There's an irony here that I can't ignore: I have spent my life being told, in a thousand ways, that I am too much—too direct, too certain, too capable, too unwilling to play along. Too female in the wrong professions. Too queer in the wrong towns. Too honest for people who prefer their discomfort anesthetized.

And yet pine trees, which are literally built for harsh conditions, have never treated me as excessive. They are not delicate. They don't require careful handling. They don't need the world to be kind in order to remain standing. They grow where the soil is thin, where the wind is mean, and where winter returns like it owns the place. That is not romantic. That is instruction.

Sometimes I wonder if the pines are the only reason I can tolerate the concept of time at all. Time is a thief when you've lost people, and it's an insult when others pretend that it can fix what it broke. But the pines don't treat time like a moral force. They treat it like weather—something that happens, something you adapt to, something you survive without turning it into a sermon. They grow rings quietly. They shed what they need to shed. They keep going. They don't ask the past to justify itself. They don't require closure. They don't negotiate with regret. They don't stand there inventing meanings to make themselves

feel better about entropy. They simply remain in the present tense, which is something I've had to learn the hard way.

People like to say you can't count on anything. That isn't true. You can count on what has already proven it can hold. You can count on what doesn't require your disappearance in exchange for proximity. At night when I go to bed, I can see the pine outside my window as a darker shape against darker sky.

It's still there. It will be there in the morning. It will be there when the next storm rolls in, when the next season turns over, and when whatever comes next tries to convince me that permanence is a myth. The pines have outlasted every argument ever made about me. They will outlast the last one, too. And if there is any mercy in that, it's this: I have never had to earn their steadiness. I have only had to notice it, and then—eventually—trust it enough to stand still beside it.

March 3, 2026—Stamford, New York (Mom's House)

Once again, I've come back to spend two days at Mom's house. I say it that way on purpose—Mom's house—even though the deed now sits in my name. Paperwork does not erase the past. That house raised me. It disciplined me. It shaped me with rules, and silence, and the constant sense that I was being measured against a standard I never agreed to. And then, at sixteen, it expelled me. Cleanly. Efficiently. No ambiguity.

Pulling into the driveway now feels less like trespassing and more like standing on a reclaimed border. Three decades later, the deed legally defaulted to me, as though time itself shrugged and said, "Fine. You win." There is irony in that, and also a strange calm. Ownership does not rewrite history, but it shifts the emotional weight distribution substantially.

Angie[3] is coming back to the farm for a few days. Even typing that lands heavy in my chest, in that quiet place where old seasons still hum. My history with her is the definitive lifetime arc. Not a subplot. Not a footnote. The literal arc. We have since worked past our grievances—I've come to accept partial responsibility for the breakup, and accepting that while it's wasteful and useless to assign blame, we remained lifelong friends.

I first met her when I was eleven years old at Minekill State Park, at the pool one summer. Chlorine and sunburn and

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[3] Angie Lynn Conklin

the sound of kids screaming for no reason other than being alive. We didn't know it then, of course. We were just two kids in proximity. But small towns have long memories. Over the years, our paths crossed in brief flashes—parking lots, quick conversations that felt incidental at the time.

When I was twenty-two, Angie was working here in town at the local delicatessen across the street from mom's house. I seized the opportunity with the kind of blunt certainty that has always been my style. I asked her if she wanted to be my girlfriend. No orchestration. No soft launch. Just a question placed directly on the table. She said yes. We dated. I was awkward. We were together for nearly twenty years. For nearly two decades, she was the one person whom I promised that no matter what happened at work, I would make it home safe after my shift. That is not casual time. That is shared rent, shared grief, shared inside jokes, shared early adulthood when everything feels both impossible and inevitable.

Returning to this area always pulls the past forward whether I invite it or not. For her, it brings family memories, friendships that drifted apart without drama—just time doing what time does. For me, it brings my childhood history along with the story of Angie. Our early adulthood was spent roaming these back roads and woods like we owned them. We were feral in a way that felt pure—driving nowhere in particular, parking in fields, talking about futures we assumed would bend around our plans.

Mom's house was the place that helped raise me, and then that same place exiled me. When Angie and I first got together, we lived in a tent in the backyard for a couple of months. We were technically on the property, but not in the house. That detail has always felt symbolic—close enough to see the windows lit up, far enough to know we were not invited in. And now, decades later, the deed defaults to me.

I spent the last two days with Angie. Slow days. We made plans to go see all the places we used to roam all the places where we once believed our entire future was unfolding. There was no rush in the conversation. No attempt to rewrite what happened or assign new meaning to old decisions. Just two people who shared a lifetime arc, standing on the other side of it, steady.

And I noticed something else—something small, but revealing. Twice in the same day, two different people referred to me as male. Years ago, that would have sliced straight through me. It would have felt deliberate, personal, accusatory. I would have sharpened in response. Instead, I found myself calmly correcting them. Politely informing. Moving on. No spike. No giving into debate. Just a clean adjustment.

I cannot entirely blame people who have been socially conditioned to believe that a woman must be soft-spoken, uninvolved, physically slight, deferential, and small in presence. I am none of those things. I am five foot eleven. I do not shrink. If

someone's framework for "woman" cannot hold that, that is a limitation of their framework, not my existence.

And here is the part that surprised me—I did not need to defend myself internally afterward. I did not need to replay it. I did not need to win anything. I corrected, and I continued. And even though it still feels like exposure, at the same time, it still feels like a new kind of patience.

March 9, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

Last week I did something that, for most of my adult life, would have felt impossible. I brought Angie to the farm.

For nearly twenty years she was the center of my daily life—shared apartments, shared spaces, shared arguments, shared quiet mornings when nothing needed explaining. Then the chapter ended the way chapters sometimes do: not with a single event, but with time doing its quiet work.

Life moved forward. Eventually Amelia came into my life, and with her came the farm, the land, the strange calm that only shows up after you stop trying to outrun your own history. For a long time I assumed those two timelines would remain separate systems. Angie belonged to one life. Amelia belonged to another.

The farm belonged to the version of me that arrived after everything else had already burned down and been rebuilt. And yet last week the three of us were here together. Angie stayed for a week. No drama. No careful choreography. Just three people sharing the same house, the same kitchen, the same slow rhythm that the farm insists on once you're here long enough.

Mornings developed their own routine almost immediately. Angie and I would be standing in the kitchen with coffee mugs warming our hands while Amelia moved through the room not understanding the entire concept surrounding coffee. Amelia dislikes coffee with a kind of dismay I've never quite understood. She once told me that coffee used to be

enjoyable until she dealt with health problems and ever since, the acidity of coffee upsets her stomach. Angie and I, on the other hand, drink it almost every morning.

So most mornings it was the same quiet arrangement: two coffee drinkers at the counter, one coffee skeptic somewhere nearby, all of us talking about ordinary things while the light came in through the windows. What surprised me wasn't the conversation. It was how natural it all felt. The sun still rises, even through the pain.

At some point during the week I caught myself watching Angie and Amelia talking in the living room about something completely unrelated to me—history, I think—and realized they had started bonding in their own way. Not forced. Not polite. Just two intelligent people discovering they had more in common than either of them expected.

Years ago I would have assumed that situation had to contain tension. That past relationships and present ones were supposed to exist in separate rooms. That everyone would be carefully managing the emotional weather. Perhaps it was a product of social conditioning—that any logical person should anticipate and expect conflict.

None of that happened. Instead the house just absorbed it the way old houses absorb everything—footsteps, laughter, arguments, weather, time. The farm has a way of flattening unnecessary drama. The pines do not care about the timeline of

your personal life. They just hold witness to whatever part of your life happens to be standing in front of them at that moment.

And standing there watching the two of them talk, it occurred to me that the life I once thought had broken into separate chapters has started speaking to itself.

Angie belongs to the years when everything still felt open and unfinished. She saw the fire department years up close—the long shifts, the exhaustion, the stretch where I started drifting toward alcohol because it felt easier than carrying the job home every night. Our relationship even survived the loss of both of our fathers.

Amelia belongs to the life that came after I finally stopped trying to prove anything to anyone. And somehow both of those timelines spent a week under the same roof without contradiction.

Thirty years ago I was a kid being thrown out of a house and learning how to survive. Twenty years ago Angie and I were driving back roads thinking we understood the future. Now I'm standing on a farm in Vermont watching the woman who once shared my life and the woman who shares it now talking like they've known each other for years.

Time does strange things when you give it enough room. What surprised me most about the week wasn't nostalgia. It wasn't closure. It was how calm it all felt.

The past didn't argue with the present. It just sat down at the kitchen counter, poured itself a cup of coffee, and stayed for a while.

March 11, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

Amelia and I spent a few days at Mom's house. Just writing that sentence still feels strange, like saying the name of a place that exists both in the present and somewhere behind a pane of glass.

There are so many things on my mind this evening. It is one of those nights where the thoughts stack up quietly, one behind the other. I suspect grief works this way. It does not arrive as a single moment. It arrives in waves that appear weeks, months, sometimes years later, when you find yourself standing in a familiar room and realizing the person who made that room what it was will never walk through the doorway again.

I am still coming to terms with the loss of Mom. Mom was not perfect. Nobody is. For all the ways she loved me—or tried to—there was another side to her that was harder to name. She was distant in a way that never quite closed the door, but never really opened it either. Emotionally unavailable is probably the closest phrase for it.

When I needed help—especially in my teenage years—the response was usually the same: figure it out yourself. She had a few lines she returned to so often they almost sounded rehearsed. "Call and explain." "Oh well." "How weird."

They were said with a kind of shrugging detachment that made it clear the problem belonged entirely to me. And more often than not, my parents chose to believe other people over

their own daughter. I learned early that if something went wrong, I was expected to stand there alone and sort it out.

Something else shifted while we were there. Angie and Amelia are friends now, which is a sentence I could not have predicted years ago. At some point during one of our conversations, Angie told me something that caught me off guard—not in a cruel way, just in that blunt, clear way the truth sometimes arrives. She told me that when I left her in 2020, I did so abruptly. No warning. No slow fade. Just gone.

And in some ways, she said, it felt like abandonment. I have been thinking about that a lot tonight. Because the uncomfortable part is that she is probably right.

I did leave quickly. I just did what I have done my entire life when something begins to feel like a cage—I ran. That is the way of the Dark Horse. She cannot be contained. The moment the walls start to feel too close, she bolts for the open field without looking back to see who is still standing in the dust behind her.

That instinct has saved me more times than I can count. But it has also cost me in ways that can never be replaced. And Angie did not deserve that.

Returning to Mom's house always brings another strange layer of reflection. It is impossible for me to walk through that area without remembering the years when my name started traveling ahead of me. By the time I made lieutenant, people in

the region knew who I was. Not in the way celebrities are known —but in the practical, local way someone becomes recognized when they are consistently the person showing up when something goes wrong.

A wreck on the highway. A building fire in the middle of the night. A technical rescue nobody quite knew how to handle. A mayday. People started to associate my name with outcomes.

But I never saw that role the way other people sometimes imagined it. There was never anything glamorous about it to me. No sense of fame, and certainly no sense of popularity. What I felt was pressure. The kind of pressure that sits quietly behind your eyes while you are putting on your gear, the kind that reminds you people are depending on you to get it right the first time. There are no second chances.

Because when you wear that title, the expectation is simple. Get results. That is all anyone really wants from you.

The town remembers the now retired lieutenant. The firefighter. The medic. The person who stepped into chaos and somehow made it function. But moms house remembers the girl.

The one who grew up there, long before the uniform, before the reputation, before anyone in the county knew her name.

People lose direction all the time. Years pass, relationships change, entire chapters of life slip quietly out of

memory. We forget the names of towns we once passed through without stopping, the addresses of places we lived for years, even the exact sequence of events that carried us from one life into the next. Memory edits things that way—it focuses on the beginning, and the present, and lets the middle blur.

And somewhere in that blur of the middle, something else happened that I did not fully understand until recently. It took the passing of my parents, and the quiet shunning that followed from the rest of my family, for me to finally feel something I had never quite felt before—freedom. Not the loud kind people talk about when they are young, but a quieter thing that arrived slowly, almost cautiously. For the first time in my life, at forty six years old, I realized I was no longer living inside anyone else's expectations.

Nobody ever forgets the place where they grew up. That place stays with you in a way that exists deeper than memory. The streets, the air, the way the light looks at the end of a long afternoon—it all settles somewhere permanent inside you. You can leave it for decades, build another life entirely, and still feel it there, quietly waiting to welcome you back.

March 15, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

This afternoon Amelia and I drove into town for the annual Maple Festival. No ceremony about it. Just the two of us in the truck, the road doing that familiar slow curl through the hills toward the center of Middletown Springs. Late winter still had its grip on the air, that thin Vermont sunlight hanging over everything like it wasn't entirely convinced it wanted to stay. The kind of afternoon where the snow is mostly gone but the ground still remembers it.

The annual Middletown Springs Maple Festival is one of those small town rituals that somehow manages to be both ordinary and slightly mythological at the same time. Folding tables. Paper plates. Metal silverware washed meticulously by volunteers. The smell of sap boiling outside while people in flannel jackets stand around the fire explaining the process just as generations did before us.

I was hesitant at first about attending. It's a social gathering, I have always been different, never truly fitting in anywhere. It was on my calendar as a suggestion—most things are written on the kitchen calendar here with the understanding that there is a 50% chance of being scratched out.

Amelia said she wanted to check it out, and I said if she was going, then I'd drive her, and so we went. I drove in half expecting the same thing I have always expected in life—the quiet feeling of being the outsider standing just beyond the circle of the firelight.

I have been that person most of my life. For six years now Amelia and I have lived here. Six Vermont winters. Six mud seasons. Six cycles of watching the hills turn green and then gold and then white again.

Six years is a strange amount of time. Long enough to know the rhythm of the place, but not long enough to feel like the ground itself has learned your name.

Or so I thought. We parked, stepped out of the Bronco, and walked inside like anyone else would. Just two women wandering into a sea of people, most of whom I had never seen before.

That was the first thing that struck me. The crowd. Faces everywhere, and the overwhelming majority of them were unfamiliar. Not in a bad way. Just new. New families. New people. New lives quietly settling into this valley while Amelia and I were busy living our own.

Apparently time had been moving forward for everyone else too. For years Amelia and I have carried the quiet label of *the new people in town*. It is one of those rural designations that can last indefinitely if the social gravity never shifts. You can live somewhere ten years and still be the newcomer if no one newer shows up.

But standing there today, surrounded by strangers who had arrived after us, something subtle clicked into place. We

were no longer the newest story in town. We were now just… part of it.

And then something happened that caught me completely off guard. Out of nowhere, through the noise and the laughter and the shuffle of boots on hardwood floors, someone looked straight at me and said—“Hey, you’re Emily, right?”

Just like that. No hesitation. No confusion. No polite Vermont squint trying to place me. Recognition. I stopped for a second, because it takes a moment for something like that to land properly when you have spent most of your life assuming invisibility. You learn that belonging is temporary. You learn that things change, cities change, people change, and sometimes the ground disappears out from under you without warning.

But here, in the middle of a maple festival in a small Vermont town, someone knew who I was. Not as a stranger. Not as a newcomer.

Just… *Emily*.

March 19, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

Today didn't arrive with any urgency. It just showed up. Quiet. The kind of morning where the light takes its time deciding what it wants to be. The air had that early-spring edge to it—not warm, not cold, just undecided like my mind tends to be. The last few days it has been in that in-between state—winter not fully gone, spring not fully here. Vermont does that. It doesn't rush into anything. It lingers in between seasons like it's thinking things over, never in any particular hurry to commit.

I stood in the kitchen longer than I meant to, not doing much of anything except for trying to decide what to eat. Nothing appealed to me that early in the morning, so I simply grabbed some juice out of the refrigerator and checked my email. I didn't feel the need to fill the silence much anymore. That's new, or at least newer than I intend to give it credit for.

There was a time when silence felt like something I had to outrun—like if I stayed still too long, everything I'd been carrying would catch up and sit down beside me. Now it just sits there. And I let it. There's no sense in fighting the feeling anymore. I've built a life where most things make sense if you just stay with them long enough.

Time does not move in a straight line the way we pretend it does—it folds, it loops, it collapses entire years into a single moment, and then stretches a single moment into something that feels like it will never end.

Most of our lives are spent trying to reconcile those distortions with the idea that time is something stable. Time doesn't move the way we describe or quantify it—it doesn't pass, it *accumulates*. There's an asymmetry in how we experience time—we remember the past, we anticipate the future, but we rarely occupy the present without distortion.

The present is filtered immediately through interpretation, through expectation, through prior experience. In that sense, pure presence is almost inaccessible. What we call "now" is already partially constructed by what has been and what we think will be. We like to believe that we are defined by our biggest moments—the obvious ones, the ones that make sense when you tell the story back.

Most of what shapes a person happens in the quiet, repetitive spaces where no one is watching. The small decisions. The things you quietly tolerate. The things you refuse. Over time, those accumulate into something far more permanent than any single event.

You can tell how much someone has lived by how quickly they stop reacting. Not because they don't feel things, but because they've learned that not every signal deserves a response. There's a discipline in letting something pass through you without turning it into a story, without assigning it meaning it hasn't earned. That restraint is where clarity begins.

When I was young, I reacted to negative stimulus with a kind of intensity that always seemed just beyond what the

moment required. It likely grew out of the abuse I survived, and more specifically, from being raised by a father whose narcissism turned ordinary moments of life into something unpredictable.

It wasn't until I became a firefighter that I was finally confronted with true emergencies—real disasters, real stakes, real loss—and that experience gave me something I had never had before: *scale*. The experience taught me what actually matters—and just as importantly, what never did.

At work, I saw more than I ever expected to see—things that were incredible in ways that didn't feel real, things that were horrible in ways that didn't leave you unchanged, and things that simply didn't make sense no matter how many times you turned them over in your mind. Some of it went against every moral belief I held.

It wasn't long until I was the one making decisions that altered the course of other people's lives in ways I couldn't take back. The human condition is defined less by what happens to us and more by what we continue doing after those things happen. In high-intensity careers, a kind of exhaustion quickly sets in that comes from carrying too much context—holding every variable in your head at once, anticipating outcomes, calculating consequences before they happen.

Most authority is simply confidence combined with persistence. Entire systems continue functioning because the people within them assume someone else knows what they are

doing. Occasionally a person walks in who actually does—and the difference is immediately visible.

None of it leaves you clean. It settles in, quietly, and stays. And then there are nights like last night, where sleep doesn't come, and I'm left sitting with all of it—trying, in a way that never quite resolves, to make it mean something.

Most people think clarity arrives as a breakthrough, something loud enough to notice. In practice, it tends to accumulate quietly—through small corrections, repeated observations, and the slow refusal to ignore what keeps showing up the same way.

People often believe they are searching for meaning, when what they are really searching for is *permission*. Every person carries a private narrative explaining why their life unfolded the way it did. There is a particular humility that arrives when you realize how many events in your life occurred simply because circumstances lined up in a certain way. People talk about destiny as if it were a plan, but it often looks more like a series of decisions made under imperfect information.

There is a misconception that I am difficult, or guarded, or somehow intentionally inaccessible. The truth is much simpler, and far less dramatic.

I am open, but only to what is real. I do not respond to performance, or to carefully constructed versions of sincerity, or to conversations that are designed to arrive at a predetermined

conclusion. If someone experiences that as distance, it is usually because they are clearly accustomed to being met halfway by people who are willing to pretend. I am not.

A person who has endured enough chaos eventually reaches a point where they become suspicious of anything that promises permanent stability.

March 28, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

It was never the things that mattered. It was who stayed—and the feeling that something in your chest was still alive, even when everything else went quiet. Amelia knew that kind of alone, too. I didn't know two people who fell in love could share something like that—and still be alone in it together.

I eventually formed friendships later in life with people some two decades younger. It feels good to actually be seen for once in my life—not in the sense that I'm observed, but actually seen by people I consider my closest friends who know me for who I really am. People are considered lucky to have one person in their life like this. As for me, I have a handful of people in my life whom I know still love and care for me and will be there for me no matter what. Amelia, Maddie, Angie, Cate…these people are my inner circle *and* family.

One of my friends asked to see old pictures of me from childhood—I haven't opened the albums in many years, perhaps the last time was when I first brought Amelia to meet my mom in Stamford. Pictures from that time in my life when I was still allowed to be free and curious about how the world works—long before I was forced to grow up too fast, and whenever I look at them it breaks my heart.

I spent a long time believing that belonging was something earned by staying long enough in one place. I eventually discovered that some places never intended to keep you—they only intended to raise you just long enough for you to

leave. The people who knew you when you were young during this time often believe they still understand you, even decades later. What they usually remember is a version of you that existed before your life became complicated.

April 2, 2026—Stamford, New York (Mom's House)

Human beings are strange creatures. We spend years trying to understand one another, and then entire lifetimes trying to be understood ourselves. We confuse proximity with connection. If someone is present—physically, socially, consistently—we default to alignment. True connection requires shared and consistent understanding, not just shared proximity over time. I had such a relationship with my mom.

There's a point where you realize that being misunderstood is not always a problem to solve. Sometimes it's simply a condition of operating at a level of complexity that not everyone shares. There is a difference between being alone and being unaccompanied. Alone carries weight—it implies absence, lack, something missing. Unaccompanied is neutral—it just means you're moving through something without someone next to you. That shift in language changes the experience more than most people expect. It removes the idea that something is wrong simply because it's solitary.

Amelia and I spent a few nights at moms house along with Angie. Each of us now have our own rooms—mine is my childhood bedroom, Angie has claimed the room adjacent to mine, and Amelia has chosen the smallest guest bedroom adjacent to where my parents slept. The purpose of the trip was to tie up the remaining loose ends of moms estate and to start cleaning up the mess that mom and her unchecked hoarding left behind.

I stood in the back yard and cried—I had apparently made the mistake of remembering being small and playing with my friends in the back yard. Things were simpler then—life had a slower pace and people knew each other for who they really were, not the summarized narratives of categorization for modern convince. I miss the little details.

I have noticed that most people are far more comfortable with the idea of depth than with its reality. They will say they want honesty, complexity, nuance—but when those things actually appear, unfiltered and intact, there is a hesitation, a subtle retreat. Depth requires participation. It requires the willingness to sit with something that does not resolve quickly, to engage without immediate reward. And many people, even very intelligent ones, are not prepared for that kind of sustained attention.

When mom died, bank managers came and wrote things down on paper, contractors told me I need to overhaul mom's house, my doctor spoke of circadian rhythms. I felt relieved when they all went away.

Some things in life appear misaligned only because they are being measured against the wrong standard. Not everything that deviates is damaged. If something continues to function across time, across pressure, across change, then it is already sound. The error is not in the system—it is in the expectations placed upon it.

There were many things I wanted to change, though not in the ways they were proposing. If anything, I would have given anything to change things back to the way they were before the years turned over. Nostalgia is less about the past itself and more about how you felt within it. You don't miss the exact circumstances—you miss the version of yourself that existed inside them.

April 4, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

I don't experience most conversations the way other people do. I listen to what is said, but I am also tracking what is avoided, what is softened, what is rehearsed, and what is offered too quickly to be real. It creates a strange kind of distance—not loneliness, exactly, but a persistent awareness. Having the ability to understand the pattern beneath the words, it becomes very difficult to pretend that surface-level honesty is anything more than a social convenience.

There is power in observation. People who speak constantly rarely learn anything new. Institutions prefer predictable people. The moment you become difficult to categorize, the system starts looking for ways to relocate you somewhere less visible.

Those who listen, however, begin to notice patterns. Who interrupts. Who waits. Who apologizes unnecessarily. Who assumes their voice will always be heard. These patterns tell you almost everything you need to know.

And there is a moment, somewhere in every relationship, where the truth quietly presents itself—not dramatically, not with conflict, but with a kind of stillness that most people overlook. I have learned to recognize that moment, to pause there, to observe without interfering.

It's usually small—a shift in tone, a hesitation where there used to be certainty, a detail that doesn't quite align with

the rest. Most people move past it, eager to preserve what they believe they have. I don't. I stay with it long enough for it to resolve into something clear, and once it does, I don't argue with it. I adjust accordingly, even if no one else realizes anything has changed.

While my friends worshiped celebrities, the people who were counted on to be there when it mattered, those that others trusted to do the right thing, became my ultimate heroes growing up.

My heroes were the ones who arrived without being asked and stayed without needing recognition. The ones who understood, instinctively, that being counted on was not a performance. It was a decision made long before anyone was watching.

I learned early that trust is not something people talk about—it is something they hand you in silence, usually at the worst possible moment. It looks like a set of keys silently passed across a kitchen table. It looks like someone standing in a doorway at two in the morning, already dressed, already ready. It looks like a voice that does not shake when everything else does.

No one applauds that. There are no cameras for the person who does the right thing simply because it is the right thing. No audience for the one who carries the weight without announcing it. No ceremony for the one who keeps showing up, long after it stops being convenient, long after it stops being fair. But I saw them. I saw the way people leaned on them without

hesitation—the unspoken understanding that if something went wrong, that was the person you called. Not because they were the most impressive, but because they were the most reliable.

April 5, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

There's a fundamental difference between truth and usefulness, and most people conflate the two because it's more comfortable. Truth is indifferent—it exists whether or not it serves you. Usefulness is selective—it prioritizes what helps you function. The tension between those two forces is where most human conflict lives. And most people will choose usefulness every time, even when they know better.

People often mistake intensity for depth. Something can be loud, emotional, overwhelming—and still lack structure. Depth is different. It has layers, continuity, internal logic. It holds together even when examined closely, even when pressure is applied.

I don't trust intensity anymore. I trust *consistency*. Intensity burns bright and disappears. Consistency stays long enough to be measured. If something can't survive repetition, it was never stable to begin with. I learned that by believing in things that felt overwhelming and realizing, eventually, they left nothing behind.

People rarely argue about facts. They argue about the meaning attached to those facts. Two people can agree on what happened and still experience it completely differently, because the interpretation carries more weight than the event itself. I stopped trying to correct the interpretation once I understood that it wasn't designed to match reality—it was designed to protect it.

You can spend years learning how systems behave, how people behave, how pressure moves through both—and still miss the one variable that never stabilizes: the moment someone decides they are done pretending. That decision does not announce itself, it does not negotiate, it does not soften on the way out. It is quiet, almost administrative in nature, like a switch flipped in a room you forgot still had power. After that, everything that once required effort becomes automatic, and everything that once felt permanent reveals itself as conditional. The cost of reaching that point is not visible from the outside—but it is always paid in full.

There is a particular kind of strength that comes from doing everything yourself for long enough that help begins to feel theoretical. Not unwanted—just unnecessary. You learn the exact weight of things, the tolerance of materials, the sound a system makes right before it fails. You also learn the sound of your own mind under load, and how to keep it from breaking. The consequence is subtle but permanent—you stop waiting. Not for people, not for outcomes, not for permission. And once you stop waiting, the world rearranges itself into something sharper, less forgiving, and far more honest.

Most people assume command looks like volume—more radios, more loud voices, more paperwork, more involvement—like control is something you scale up until it feels convincing. That was *never* how it worked for me. Hours of operational

reality—rescue units, scene conditions, shifts in fire behavior, who was inside, who was out, what changed—and when—lived on the front and back of a single sheet of paper. Not because there was less to track, but because I learned early that most of what happens at a scene is noise unless you know exactly what you're listening for.

The paper wasn't the system—it was just a place to contain information so nothing critical drifted out of reach. Everything else lived in my head, already organized, already prioritized, already moving. When you've carried that kind of responsibility long enough, you stop writing everything down—you write only what can't be trusted to memory under pressure, and you trust yourself to hold the rest. And when that trust is broken—even once—you don't forget it.

There is a kind of intelligence that has nothing to do with knowledge and everything to do with attention. Where you place it, how long you hold it, and what you choose to ignore determines the quality of your experience more than any information you could acquire.

Most people are overwhelmed not because there is too much to know, but because they haven't decided what is worth knowing. I learned that the hard way—by trying to track everything until I realized the majority of it didn't matter.

Where you stand, how you present yourself, when you act, and when you decide that it is better not to engage—all shape outcomes far more than brute force ever will.

Memory does not preserve events—it preserves the structure around them. The temperature of the air, the angle of the light, the grounding texture of a wall under your hand while something irreversible is happening just out of frame.

Over time, the facts degrade, but the architecture remains intact. That is why certain places never really let you go. You are not remembering what happened there—you are re-entering the conditions that made you who you are. The body recognizes it immediately, even when the mind pretends it does not.

There is a moment, sometimes years after the fact, when you realize that what you survived did not just pass through you—it reorganized you. Not in a dramatic way, not in a way that invites attention, but in small, structural shifts that change how you interpret everything that comes after. You do not become harder, exactly. You become more exact. More selective. More aware of what matters, and more willing to let the rest fall away without ceremony.

There was a large oak tree set just far enough from the center of the schoolyard that supervision became almost theoretical. It offered shade, but more importantly, it offered distance—distance from noise, from expectation, from the steady, low-grade insistence that attention should be directed outward. I used it the way some people use locked doors.

Every recess, I returned to the same spot, not out of routine, but out of precision. It was the only place where my mind could move at the speed it wanted without interruption.

The teachers described the problem as inaccessibility. They said they could not reach me, as though I were somewhere else entirely, as though I had gone missing in plain sight. What they meant was that I did not respond to the mechanisms they understood—instruction, correction, engagement through participation.

The truth was simpler, and far less interesting to them: I was not lost. I was occupied. From an early age I had accepted the flaws of western industrialized education. I had asked to test out early. Asking if it would be possible to test out early was misinterpreted as me being difficult. There is a difference between absence and disinterest, and they never learned how to measure it.

By the time I was sitting under that tree, the structure of school had already revealed itself as redundant. The material arrived too slowly, the pacing assumed a kind of cognitive latency that did not apply, and the reward system felt abstract compared to the immediacy of the world outside it. I had already discovered something they had not accounted for—that life itself could be studied directly, without mediation, without permission, without curriculum. On my own terms, and at my own pace. Once that door opens, it does not close again.

I built something else in its place. Not as an escape—escape implies deficiency in the present—but as an extension. A parallel system where scale, time, and consequence could be adjusted at will. Under that oak tree, I constructed a version of

myself that operated without constraint, a version that moved through pine forests instead of hallways, that understood love as something hidden, protected, chosen carefully rather than assigned.

The details mattered—the texture of the forest floor, the density of the trees, the way light filtered through pine needles instead of glass. It was not fantasy in the way adults use the word. It was a controlled environment for thought.

The idea of being a fairy princess was never about status. I would never have embodied such a role in real life—in my dreams I was a female knight. It was about autonomy. It was about existing in a space where the rules were internally consistent and did not require justification to anyone outside of it. The maiden love was not a person so much as a concept—something private, something that could exist without being observed, measured, or evaluated. Something that could just be without being spoken of in a family that didn't tolerate homosexuality. Even then, there was an understanding that some things lose integrity when exposed too early, or to the wrong system entirely.

From the outside, it looked like withdrawal. A girl sitting alone, not participating, not integrating, not responding to prompts. From the inside, it was the opposite. It was full engagement with a system that actually held my attention. The schoolyard was finite. The oak tree marked a boundary. Everything beyond it—the imagined forests, the lives not yet

lived, the versions of self not yet constrained by expectation—was effectively infinite.

What they called boredom was not the absence of stimulation. It was the presence of something larger than what was being offered.

Once you've seen that—once you've understood that your imagination is not only sufficient, but expansive—you don't abandon it just because someone with a clipboard can't find you in it. You learn, instead, how to move between worlds. Quietly. Without explanation. Without justification. Keeping one foot in the expected system, and the other in the place where your real life is already unfolding, just out of reach of anyone who insists it should look smaller.

April 6, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

It took me a long time to understand that people do not always want solutions. Solutions require change, and change requires people to abandon the stories they have been telling themselves. What many people actually want is confirmation that their existing narrative is still valid. The moment a solution threatens that narrative, it becomes unwelcome.

People will say they want honesty, but what they want is confirmation. Honesty introduces variables. Confirmation maintains control. Once you understand that, most conversations become predictable. The part no one says out loud is that once you start telling the truth anyway, the conversations don't just become predictable—they start getting shorter. Not because there's nothing left to say, but because you've stopped offering people a version of reality they can comfortably stay inside.

You can tell who someone is by how they behave when there is nothing to gain. Not when things are good. Not when they are being watched. When it costs them something to show up—and they do, or they don't. I learned to pay attention to that after watching people disappear at the exact moment their presence would have actually mattered.

I no longer measure relationships by history. Time does not create depth—behavior does. Someone can be in your life for decades and never once meet you where you actually live. Knowing that doesn't make leaving easier, but it does make

staying impossible. I don't need people to stay forever. I need them to be real while they're here. Permanence without integrity is just extended disappointment.

There's a difference between being patient and being passive, and most people blur the two because they look similar from the outside. Patience is active—it's a deliberate choice to wait while maintaining awareness. Passivity is disengagement—it's what happens when you stop paying attention entirely. One maintains your position while the other erodes it. I've done both, and the difference only became obvious after I realized how much I had let slide under the name of patience.

At some point, you realize that understanding someone does not automatically mean they will understand you back. There is a particular kind of satisfaction in alignment—when intention, action, and outcome match closely enough that nothing needs to be adjusted after the fact. It does not happen often, but when it does, it is immediately recognizable. Mostly because of how rare it is.

Loneliness is not the absence of people—it is the absence of being seen in a way that feels real. There is a moment in every life where you understand that no one is coming to save you, and if you are lucky, that realization feels less like abandonment and more like permission. It took me a long time to stop waiting anyway.

We learn early which parts of ourselves are acceptable, and then spend the rest of our lives negotiating with the parts

that are not. Eventually, the negotiation stops—not because everything is resolved, but because you get tired of asking permission to exist.

Consistency is the only trait that holds under pressure. Everything else—charm, intensity, intelligence, intention—can be situational. Consistency is what remains when conditions change. I learned to measure people over time instead of in moments, because moments can be curated. Patterns can't. Once you see the pattern clearly enough, you stop needing explanations.

I never graduated high school. I entered college through placement exams, didn't stay, and moved on. On paper, that leaves me with roughly an eighth-grade education.

Freedom didn't arrive as safety or permanence—it arrived as motion; a life carried in suitcases, where nothing stayed long enough to trap me and nothing held long enough to define me. Somewhere between the leaving and the arriving, between the cardboard boxes and the strawberry milkshakes, I learned that instability wasn't just something I endured—it was the only place I was ever truly unconfined, the only place I could breathe without asking permission.

There is a quiet confidence that develops when you have built your life without relying on stability as a given. You stop fearing disruption, because you understand reconstruction. You stop relying on promises or permanence, because you have seen how little of it is actually guaranteed. What replaces that fear is

not recklessness—it is competence. The knowledge that whatever shifts, you will adapt accordingly.

Most systems fail in predictable ways. Not because they are inherently flawed, but because they are designed around assumptions that do not hold under stress. The same is true for relationships, careers, identities.

There is a quiet shift that happens when you stop expecting life to be fair and start seeing it as something indifferent, something that does not punish or reward, but simply continues.

Fairness is not an inherent property of the world—it's a human construct, an attempt to impose balance on systems that are indifferent by default. Life does not distribute outcomes based on merit or intention. It distributes based on interaction, probability, and constraint.

Effort and outcome are not cleanly linked, no matter how much people want them to be. Effort increases probability, it improves positioning, but it does not guarantee result. Knowing that doesn't make things easier—it just makes them clearer.

There is a final kind of clarity that arrives when you understand that not everything needs to be resolved. Some things are simply observed, understood, and left alone. Not because they are unimportant, but because they no longer require intervention.

April 7, 2026—Stamford, New York (Mom's House)

I didn't come back here looking for answers. That's the first thing that became clear—standing in the driveway, with the same quiet, the same arrangement of things mom left behind pretending nothing had changed.

Philosophy teaches you that most of what feels urgent isn't actually urgent—it's just poorly framed. The house used to feel like a question. Now it feels like something else entirely. Not an answer—something smaller, sharper, and far less negotiable.

This place used to define me in ways I didn't consent to. When my father was alive, identity felt like something I was supposed to discover here, almost as if it were hidden somewhere in the walls, waiting patiently for me to catch up to it. It wasn't. It never was. Identity doesn't wait. It accumulates. It reinforces itself through decisions, through survival, through repetition that eventually feels like permanence.

Walking through the house now, I can see the structure more clearly. Not just the physical one—the framing, the load-bearing walls, the way the light moves through the rooms—but the other structure, the one that formed quietly alongside it. The version of me that existed here was under constant revision, even when I didn't have the language for it yet. Every choice I made reinforced something. Every silence did too. Over time, those patterns started to look inevitable. They weren't. They were just repeated often enough to feel like they couldn't be interrupted.

Owning the house doesn't change what happened inside it. It changes the framing. And once the framing shifts, a lot of things that used to feel enormous collapse down to their actual size. Not small enough to ignore—but small enough to see clearly, without distortion.

Truth here is different than I expected it to be. I thought it would feel fixed, like uncovering something buried and finally being able to point to it and say, "there." It doesn't work like that. Truth in this house is relational. It depends on where I'm standing, what I remember, what I'm willing to look at without looking away. The closer I get to it, the less it feels like certainty and the more it feels like tolerance—how much ambiguity I can hold without trying to resolve it too quickly.

Mom had collected everything to the point where she had been diagnosed with compulsive hoarding. Every room of moms house contained something from my childhood. Something I thought was lost and gone forever has returned like a ghost from my past. Photographs surfaced as well—snapshots of times so long ago that they feel like they belonged to someone else's life.

And then there's the friction. That's what I feel most clearly now—not as something to avoid, but as information. Suffering always had a signal embedded in it, even when I didn't want to hear it. The mismatch between what was happening and what should have been happening. The tension between who I was and who I was expected to be. Ignoring it didn't make it

disappear. It just delayed the moment when it would demand to be understood.

Meaning doesn't come from the house itself. It comes from the contrast—the version of me who lived here then, the one who stood up for herself and suffered the consequences. Now thirty years later, and the one still here. Without that distance, without that friction, it would all flatten out into something unremarkable. But it doesn't. The difficult parts define the edges. They make everything else legible. Even the quiet moments—the ones that didn't seem like anything at the time—stand out differently when you can see what they were sitting next to.

Control was never really the point, even though it felt like it at the time. I thought if I could just manage everything—myself, the environment, the outcomes—I could make it stable. That wasn't possible. It still isn't. I know where my influence ends. I know where randomness begins. That boundary used to terrify me. Now it's where the stability actually comes from.

There's a pine tree outside my bedroom window—taller than it used to be, or maybe I just notice it differently now. It doesn't measure time the way I do. It holds it internally—rings stacked on top of each other, good years and difficult years compressed into the same structure. You wouldn't know the difference unless you cut into it, and even then, you'd only see the pattern, not the experience.

The moon still passes over the house the same way it always did—predictable, cyclical, indifferent. It measures time externally, in phases you can watch, count, rely on. The tree and the moon don't negotiate with each other. They don't adjust to make the relationship easier. They coexist—aligned without dependency, interacting without control.

What this feels like now is not reconciliation—it's something cleaner than that. Coexistence perhaps. The past doesn't change. I don't need it to. I don't need the house to become something it wasn't in order to stay here.

Some of the most interesting people lead meaningful lives that looked more like annotated drafts—cross-outs, marginalia, brilliant sentences next to absolute chaos. And honestly, the people who seem "put together" are usually just better at curating what they show. The house doesn't ask me who I am anymore. It never really did.

April 8, 2026—Stamford, New York (Mom's House)

Matt was my best friend since the first day of school in Stamford in 1986. He was there as the best friend I've ever had until he wasn't, and the line between those two states never announced itself.

The last time I saw him was June 1, 2002—the day Angie and I went out on our first date—and nothing about it suggested it would also be the end of my first lifelong friendship.

There was no argument, no closing conversation, no reason to mark it as final. A few months later, I was living in Long Island with Angie, and working in New York City, watching time divide itself without asking permission.

Somewhere in the aftermath of that, this quieter division took hold. He disappeared from my life—I haven't seen or heard from Matt since.

In the decades that followed, his family sold the house and moved to different states. The general store on the corner closed. The road that used to connect the two is now paved. The farm on the corner has been replaced with a full-service post office. Both the general store and the house where Matt grew up are now abandoned.

I didn't expect the place to feel this quiet. Not empty—quiet. The kind that comes from things continuing without needing you to be part of it. I left years ago with the assumption that leaving would register somehow, that there would be some

visible shift in the system when I was removed from it. There wasn't. The town kept its pace. The road kept running. The seasons rotated without interruption. Whatever I thought I was to this place was never structural.

There's a strange compression that happens when you return. Decades collapse into a single overlay. The version of me who lived here doesn't feel like the past—she feels concurrent, just no longer active. I can see exactly where she would stand, what she would notice, what she would expect from the people around her.

And then there's the smaller realization, the one that doesn't announce itself right away but settles in once you've been there long enough to notice patterns: there are only a handful of people who know your name. Not recognize you—not place your face or remember a fragment of context—but know your name in a way that carries history with it. Five, maybe fewer.

Places do not hold meaning independently; they hold it conditionally. The same structure can represent safety, constraint, loss, or neutrality depending on the version of the person encountering it.

This is why returning to a place can feel like stepping into multiple timelines simultaneously—the physical environment remains constant while the internal context has shifted. The result is not reconciliation, but coexistence of interpretations that no longer require resolution.

Time is experienced through two parallel systems—internal accumulation and external measurement—and they rarely align. Internally, time compresses and expands based on intensity, repetition, and significance.

Externally, it moves at a constant rate, indifferent to experience. The tension between these systems is what creates the feeling that certain years disappeared while others remain disproportionately present. Neither system is incorrect—they are simply measuring different variables.

Endings are often mischaracterized as conclusions when they function more accurately as boundary conditions. They define where a particular structure no longer applies, not because everything within it has been resolved, but because it no longer governs what comes next.

Closure, in this sense, is not the elimination of ambiguity—it is the recognition that ambiguity no longer requires action. Recognition is a quieter force than validation, but it has greater durability. Validation depends on external agreement and can be withdrawn, revised, or contradicted. Recognition occurs internally when something aligns with an existing pattern of understanding, even if it has never been articulated before. This is why certain sentences remain while others disappear—recognition integrates, while validation merely confirms.

Survival is often framed as endurance, but it is more accurately described as continuity under constraint. It is not the absence of damage, nor the presence of strength in any

conventional sense. It is the maintenance of a throughline—the decision, repeated enough times, to continue despite conditions that do not support continuation. Over time, that repetition becomes indistinguishable from identity, not because it defines the person entirely, but because it reveals what was consistently chosen when alternatives were limited.

April 9, 2026—Stamford, New York (Mom's House)

You can measure a life not by what it accumulates, but by what it refuses to abandon. Most people are trying to become something—very few are trying to remain something, and that difference changes everything about how they move through the world.

Not everything that breaks needs to be repaired. Most people rush to restore what was—very few question whether it should have even existed that way at all, and that hesitation is where real change begins. There's a kind of discipline that has nothing to do with motivation. Most people act when they feel ready—very few act because it's required, and that separation determines who builds systems that actually function. You can tell who has faced real consequences by how they make decisions. Most people optimize for comfort—very few optimize for durability, and that difference shows up long after the moment has passed. You don't learn much from outcomes alone. Most people focus on results—very few analyze the process that produced them, and that difference determines whether success is repeatable or accidental.

Most people think being a paramedic changes you in obvious ways—louder, harder, sharper around the edges. That isn't what happens. It's quieter than that. You stop reacting to noise and start reacting to patterns, to the way a room feels half a second before it goes bad, to the tone in someone's voice that

tells you whether they want to live or not. The real shift isn't in what you see—it's in what you no longer need explained.

The same system carries over—it just changes scale. As a firefighter, the patterns aren't inside a person, they're inside the environment itself—heat moving where it shouldn't, a structure telling you what it's about to do before it does it, time compressing until every decision has to be made before it feels fully formed.

Most people think fire is chaos—very few recognize that it follows rules, and that those rules are always speaking if you know how to read them. You learn to listen with more than your ears. You feel the building through your hands, through your stance, through the way the smoke moves. It's the same half-second recognition, just stretched across a wider field, with more at stake and less forgiveness.

There isn't a clean separation between the two. The same mind that reads a patient reads a structure, the same command that directs a scene directs a crew, and neither of them ever fully powers down. Most people believe the incident ends when the scene clears—very few understand that for some of us, it just changes form.

The calls don't line up neatly behind you. They stay threaded through everything—through reflex, through tone, through the quiet moments where nothing is happening and your mind is still running sequences, still adjusting, still preparing for something that isn't there.

I stayed longer than I had to. The memories stayed forever and a day. When my father died, control of the family business transferred to me, and with it came the quiet understanding that I no longer needed the job for income, or stability, or anything practical that could be measured on paper.

That should have been the exit point. For most people, it would have been. But I didn't leave. I stayed because the work had already rewritten the way I understood purpose, and at that point in my life, it was the only system I knew how to operate inside without hesitation.

The promotion to Lieutenant didn't change that—it clarified it. Command wasn't a title, it was a continuation of the same pattern recognition, the same decision-making under pressure, just carried with more weight and fewer degrees of separation. The responsibility became less about what I could do and more about what I was accountable for, which is a different kind of gravity entirely. I served a few more years like that—fully aware that I could walk away at any time, and equally aware that I wasn't going to. Not yet. Then a voice inside my head told me *I should leave today*. And then I did.

Retirement didn't feel like a clean break. It felt more like stepping out of a system that continued running without me, which is exactly what it does. I miss it—of course I do. How could I not miss it? It was the most exciting, dangerous, and

unpredictable thing I have ever done, but that's not the real reason.

I miss it because it was one of the very few places where everything made immediate, undeniable sense. The stakes were clear, the outcomes mattered, and the work—no matter how difficult—always had a direction. It was also the most rewarding thing I have ever done, not in a sentimental way, but in the way that comes from knowing, without question, that what you did in those moments actually counted.

April 10, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

For a long time I didn't think to question it—I just loved the way I always have and let it be enough. The job had already stripped life down to what mattered and what didn't, and I carried that same reduction into everything else without realizing it.

I didn't chase the kind of relationships people talk about when they say the word out loud—I wasn't building toward anything, wasn't trying to arrive somewhere. I kept my circle small on purpose, close to the people who already understood me without needing explanation. It wasn't distance, exactly—it was containment. I learned early on that not everything needs to expand to be real, and not every connection needs to be defined to be significant, so I stayed inside that understanding, inside that circle, and let it be what it was without asking it to become something mainstream.

I was only ever monogamous once in my life—with Angie—and I stayed committed for nearly twenty years. Outside of her, I never lived my life around that kind of structure.

What I had instead were relationships that lived in a different space entirely—women I already knew, women I trusted, friendships that held their shape and remained, at their core, entirely platonic, even when they crossed into something physical. It never felt like I was searching for a partner in those moments, and it never felt like something was missing that needed to be replaced.

It was quieter than that—more contained, more understood without being spoken. The relationships were always based in friendship, always the familiarity, and everything else existed around it without demanding to become exclusive.

Angie and I first met when I was eleven—at Mine Kill State Park, the kind of place that stays the same even when everything else doesn't. For years after that we moved through the same part of upstate New York, crossing paths in passing, never quite intersecting—just two moons holding their distance in the same sky.

It went on like that longer than it should have, familiar without ever becoming anything more, until June of 2002 when I finally asked her out on a real date. After that, there wasn't any drifting—we stayed.

I asked her to marry me without a plan for how it was supposed to look—I just knew I wasn't leaving. There wasn't a performance around it, no audience, no need to make it into something larger than it already was. I asked, and she said yes, and that was enough to set the direction of everything that followed.

We settled into it the same way we had found each other in the first place—quietly, without forcing it into a shape that didn't fit. The word "engaged" stayed with us for years, but it never felt temporary. It felt like a decision that had already been made.

We lived as a married couple in every way that counted, long before anyone would have called it official. Our lives folded into each other—routines, responsibilities, leases for apartments we would get kicked out of, and the ordinary weight of time passing side by side.

We were there for her nieces as they grew, not as visitors passing through, but as something steady they could rely on, part of the structure of their lives whether anyone named it or not. Nearly two decades went by like that—committed, consistent, real—and the marriage itself never came. Not because it was missing, and not because it was avoided. It just never became necessary for what we already were.

There was a day in 2020 when I told Angie that our relationship was over, got in my car and left without telling her why. At the time, I didn’t have an answer I could give her, and even if I had, it wasn’t mine to say.

My father had already forced me into signing a blind conservatorship and trust—something written in plain language that made it clear I was never to discuss my intersex condition with anyone, anywhere, at any time. It wasn’t framed as control. It was framed as protection, as management, as optics, as a secret that needed to be kept within the family. I signed it because I was forced to, because by then that pattern was already in place.

Angie had signed it too, without knowing what it actually was. Dad presented it to her as paperwork tied to the family

business, something routine, something connected to inheritance and long-term estate planning. She trusted the explanation because there was no reason not to.

Neither of us were told the truth of what it meant, only that it needed to be done. So when I left that day, it wasn't just distance I was putting between us—it was the weight of something I couldn't explain without breaking the very thing I had been forced to agree to. The documents all listed me as his son, and clearly stated acceptable pronouns and legal sex markers. And standing there inside it, I didn't yet know how to choose between telling the truth and keeping what little stability I had left intact.

My birth certificate listed me as female at birth—my father's attempt to deny that he had an autistic lesbian daughter only made the underlying reality more visible.

The record—according to my father—said one thing. I lived another.

April 11, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

There came a point where I stopped assuming that every past relationship would eventually require separation to make sense. Not as a belief—more like a pattern I had observed often enough that it feels natural. People come in, something forms, something shifts, and then the human social system eventually removes them. That had been consistent across most of my life. Cleanly defined breaks followed by quiet disappearances. Roles reassigned without discussion which wasn't dramatic so much as it was procedural.

This year when Amelia met Angie, I didn't expect anything unusual. I expected some version of subtleties, something polite, something that would eventually require distance to keep everything from interfering with everything else. That's how it usually works. The past gets reduced to notes—usually mine to carry. The present gets protected. Nobody says it out loud, but everyone adjusts accordingly.

Angie has known me longer than almost anyone. Nearly twenty years of shared life, and everything that comes with that—apartments, routines, the kind of familiarity that doesn't require explanation.

Amelia knows me in the way that came after I stopped trying to prove anything—quieter, more exact, less willing to adjust for the sake of being understood. Those are not the same timelines. They weren't supposed to intersect.

The three of us spent a few nights at moms house. It was just three people occupying the same space without distortion. No one needed to be reduced. No one needed to be emphasized. Nothing was being corrected in real time.

Angie still lives in Upstate New York. I see her when I'm visiting my hometown, or when she comes to the farm in Vermont. It's social. It's familiar. It's clearly defined. There's no ambiguity about what it is or what it isn't. That part matters.

Amelia met her family not long after. That was another point where, historically, something would have shifted. Families tend to introduce variables—history, expectation, whatever version of the past they're still holding onto. I didn't expect resistance, exactly, but I expected some kind of adjustment. That's usually where it shows up.

She met them, and nothing changed. No one asked questions that needed answers. No one tried to reinterpret anything to make it more comfortable. There was no moment where the structure bent to accommodate the situation. It just… remained intact.

That's the part people tend to miss when they look at something like this from the outside. It isn't unusual because it's unconventional. It's unusual because it's consistent. There's no friction to resolve, no underlying contradiction waiting to surface later. It changed form and kept working.

Most relationships I’ve known didn’t survive life transitions. They required distance to maintain coherence. This one didn’t. It absorbed the change without losing structure, which is something I’ve only seen happen when the original foundation didn’t depend on ownership or exclusivity to begin with.

April 12, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

This morning I woke up with an all too familiar feeling already in place, like I had somehow missed something before I even opened my eyes. Not in a dramatic way, not in a way that demanded immediate attention, just a quiet, steady awareness waiting for me to catch up to it. I lay there longer than I needed to, not moving, not thinking anything particularly useful, just noticing that something felt off and that the feeling itself wasn't new enough to question. And in that moment, it didn't feel like an isolated moment—it felt like a continuation of something that has been repeating itself in my life for as long as I can remember.

I've spent years in environments that are built, at least on the surface, around the idea of connection. Summer camp, school, work, volunteer organizations post retirement—systems that are structured to bring people together, to create friendships, to give people a place to belong if they show up and stay long enough and do things the way they're supposed to be done. I did all of that. I showed up. I stayed. I learned the rhythm of each place, learned how to move inside it without causing friction, learned how to read people quickly enough to adjust myself in real time so that nothing about me disrupted what was already forming. I was never standing outside of those systems looking in—I was inside them, participating, contributing, doing the exact same things everyone else was doing at the same time they were doing them. And still, the outcome kept resolving the same way.

What I started to notice, slowly at first and then with a kind of uncomfortable clarity that made it impossible to ignore, was that I was almost always present at the beginning of things. I was there when people first met each other, when conversations were still open and unstructured, when connections were still forming and nothing had settled into permanence yet. I could move through that phase without any real difficulty. People would talk to me, include me, rely on me in small ways, share things, laugh, build something that looked, from the outside, exactly like the early stages of friendship. There was never a moment where I felt rejected at the start. If anything, I was part of what helped those early connections take shape. And then something would shift.

Not suddenly, not in a way that could be pointed to, named, or corrected, but gradually, almost quietly, like the social structure was forming in such a way that didn't include me. The same people I had been standing alongside would begin forming something more stable with each other, something that carried forward beyond the initial phase, and I would find myself no longer part of what continued. There was never an argument, never a falling out, never a clean break that would at least give the situation a defined edge. It was always just…absence. A subtle reconfiguration where I was no longer included in the version of things that lasted, even though I had been there from the beginning while it was forming.

That pattern repeated itself across years, across entirely different environments, across different groups of people who

had nothing in common with each other except for the fact that the outcome kept resolving the same way.

Different cities, different institutions, different stages of my life, and still I would find myself in that same position—present for the formation, participating in the early structure, and then, once the bonds between other people settled into something more permanent, I was no longer part of what remained.

It stopped feeling situational after a while. It stopped feeling like a series of unrelated experiences and started feeling like a consistent structural outcome that I could no longer explain away as coincidence. What makes it difficult to even talk about is that there is nothing to fix.

There's no single moment where something breaks, no clear mistake to identify and correct, no conversation that could be revisited and resolved differently. It doesn't fail in a way that produces evidence. It just…resolves on its own without me. And when something resolves without you often enough, you stop assuming the outcome will arrive differently next time, no matter how much you want it to.

Eventually, I stopped expecting continuity. I stopped assuming that proximity would convert into something durable simply because it was sustained over time. I learned to accept that outcome, which changes how you build a life whether you want it to or not.

When you start approaching connection with a different set of assumptions, you become more precise about where you invest your time, more aware of patterns as they form, more willing to step back before the shift happens instead of waiting for it to confirm itself again. You stop confusing access with belonging, and you stop negotiating for a place in systems that have already demonstrated, repeatedly, that they don't incorporate you into what lasts.

I've had a small number of people in my life who were real in a way that didn't require interpretation, who stayed in ways that didn't depend on circumstance or proximity or convenience. Enough to know that I'm not incapable of connection, enough to know that when the conditions are right, it works without effort or adjustment.

But the scale of that has always been *very* small, and the stability of it has never extended into the broader systems where most people seem to build their social lives without thinking about it.

The majority of my life wasn't built on that kind of continuity. It was built around a consistent pattern of being present without being integrated, of contributing to the formation of connection without being included in its continuation, of watching other people build something stable out of the same starting conditions that, for me, never translated into something that lasted.

This morning just brought that back into focus again, in the same quiet, factual way it always does. I woke up and recognized the pattern without needing to analyze it further. It wasn't new, and it wasn't confusing—it just lined up, cleanly and predictably, with everything that came before it.

At some point, you stop asking why something keeps happening and start recognizing that it simply does. And once you recognize that, the question isn't what went wrong. The question is what you build knowing that it never worked the way it was supposed to in the first place.

I didn't chase being good at the work I did—I locked onto it the way you lock onto a lifeline in cold water, because once you understand that nobody is coming and nothing is guaranteed, you stop treating skill like ambition and start treating it like the only thing that will carry you through—especially after everyone and everything else already proved it wouldn't.

April 13, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

There are ways a person is removed that never use the word fired—no accusation, no incident, no line item anyone can point to later—just a quiet correction of presence, as if the system has decided it can function without you and no longer feels the need to pretend otherwise.

I had been at one of my first jobs for over a decade, long enough to understand the structure better than most, long enough to carry what needed carrying without being asked twice, and long enough to notice that none of it was ever acknowledged in a way that meant anything. Not the cost, not the consistency, not the fact that I kept showing up when others didn't.

The place had a baseball diamond on the property—something meant for games, for order, for rules that everyone agrees to follow—a field that had been the constant backdrop of my childhood and my first jobs. In the end, even that structure made more sense than the way I was let go.

When it ended, it didn't arrive as a decision I was included in—it arrived as absence, as a kind of administrative silence that translated cleanly into one thing: *you are no longer required here*. No explanation offered, none expected, just the removal of a role that had quietly defined years of my life without ever once recognizing the person inside it.

I drove my car through the gate like it was already open, straight across the field without slowing, the tires cutting a clean line through dirt that had been kept level for years. I aimed for home plate without thinking about it, because there wasn't anything left to think about.

I hit it dead on, then turned and took the bases in order—first, second, third—tight arcs, controlled, deliberate, like I was finishing something that had already ended in my head long before that day. By the time I came back around, I didn't ease in—I drove straight through home again, fast enough that it felt like a slide, the whole thing over in seconds but exact in a way that only comes from knowing you're not coming back.

Then I jerked the car back, accelerating toward the opening, crossed the field, and drove out the same way I came in. No hesitation, no second pass, no looking back. Just gone.

Some exits don't require permission—they arrive fully formed, long before anyone else recognizes them as departures.

A place can hold you for years, teach you its patterns, literally depend on your presence, and still fail to understand the exact moment you've already decided it no longer fits. I didn't leave quietly, but I didn't leave chaotically either—I left in a way that matched the structure I had always operated within. The action itself was visible, deliberate, impossible to misinterpret, and still, no one intervened.

That absence of response carried more information than any confrontation could have. It revealed a system that had learned to accommodate my presence without ever fully engaging with it, a place where even the clearest signal could pass through without consequence.

In the end, the departure wasn't defined by what I did, but by what followed—nothing. No correction, no resistance, no acknowledgment that something final had just occurred. And in that silence, the truth settled cleanly: I had already left long before I crossed the boundary, and what remained behind was simply a structure continuing without me, exactly as it always would have.

April 13, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

I have learned that most people have a threshold for what they can look at directly. When something crosses it—too much damage, too much truth, too little control—they redirect. Not away, exactly. Sideways. Toward the person who hasn't broken yet. I learned early that in those moments, I become the reference point. Not because I'm unaffected, but because I'm still operational. Still readable. Still standing.

There is a difference between witnessing something and being used as the lens for it. When the room can't tolerate what's in front of it, attention shifts to the one person who appears to understand it. They watch your face, your posture, your voice, looking for calibration—how bad is it, what does this mean, what happens next. What they are waiting for is how you respond to it. You become the translation layer between reality and everyone else's tolerance for it.

In that moment, the event itself becomes secondary. It stops being the center focus of the room. You become the center instead—not because you asked to be, but because you are the only part of the system still functioning in real time. People don't always realize they're doing it. They think they're observing, when in reality they're simply deferring. Waiting for you to define the boundaries of what they can handle.

What they are reading is not your reaction—it's your capacity. They are measuring how much you absorb, how quickly you stabilize, how little you visibly fracture under pressure. And

once they see that you can hold it, they stop trying to. The responsibility transfers without discussion. It always does.

The distortion is subtle. From the outside, it looks like leadership, or composure, or strength. From the inside, it feels like compression. You are holding the full weight of something while presenting only the portion that will keep everyone else steady. The rest stays internal. It has to. There is no space for it in the room.

Over time, you stop expecting people to look directly at what's happening. You expect the shift. You expect the moment where the room decides it cannot carry the truth on its own and redirects it through you instead. It becomes predictable—almost procedural. A system response rather than a personal one.

The problem is not that people look. The problem is that once they do, they rarely look back at the thing itself. They rely on your interpretation long enough that it replaces their own. And when that happens, you are no longer just present in the moment—you are responsible for shaping it in a way they can survive.

That is not the same as being supported. It is possible to be the most stable person in the room and still be the least accompanied.

That position is often mistaken for strength. It isn't strength in the way people like to frame it. It's containment. It's holding the full weight of a moment internally while presenting

something usable externally. The cost is quiet. While everyone is watching you, no one is actually with you. The function replaces the person.

Over time, the pattern repeats enough that it becomes the default. You stop expecting people to look directly at the thing. You expect them to look at you instead, and you adjust accordingly. You refine what you show, what you withhold, how much factual information a room can absorb without collapsing. You become precise, not expressive. Accurate, not loud.

There is a particular isolation in being the one who remains visible when reality becomes difficult. Not because you are alone in the situation, but because you are the only one fully inside it. Everyone else stands at a distance, using you as a measure. It’s efficient. It’s functional. It’s also incomplete.

People have a way of recognizing proximity to damage without understanding its cost. They see the outline—fire, emergency work, the kind of life that implies exposure to things most people avoid—and they draw the conclusion that you must have stories. Not memories. Not weight. Stories. Something structured, repeatable, consumable. Something they can ask for as entertainment over coffee.

What they are really asking for is access. Not to you, but to the edge of something they’ve never had to stand near. They want the version that can be told in a few sentences, the kind that lands cleanly and resolves before it becomes uncomfortable.

They call them "war stories" as if language can sanitize the reality, as if framing something correctly makes it safe to hold.

They don't realize that *nothing* about those moments was designed for retelling. They weren't constructed with an audience in mind. They were lived in real time, under pressure, without distance, without the option to step back and observe. What remains afterward isn't a narrative—it's residue. Sensory. Structural. Embedded in ways that don't translate cleanly into conversation.

They watch closely when you begin to answer. The same way people always do when they expect you to calibrate reality for them. There's a particular attention in their posture—a quiet anticipation. They want to see how far you'll go, how much detail you'll reveal, how close they can get without stepping into it themselves. It's curiosity, but not responsibility.

What they rarely understand is that the act of telling is not neutral. It costs something. Even when it's controlled, even when it's abbreviated, even when it's delivered without visible strain. The cost is internal. It's the reactivation of a system that experienced those moments under entirely different conditions. You're not recalling them—you're *interfacing* with them again, just enough to make them legible to someone who will walk away unchanged.

There's also an asymmetry in how those exchanges resolve. They get a story. You get a *reminder*. They file it under

something interesting, something unusual, something that confirms whatever idea they had about you. Something that they will likely forget about in the coming days. You carry the residual weight of having traumatic exposure brought it back into the present, even briefly. The transaction is not equal, even though it appears to be.

Over time, you learn to recognize the question before it's fully formed. The phrasing changes, but the structure stays the same. "What's the worst thing you've seen?" "You must have some crazy stories." "I could never do what you did." It's always framed as admiration or curiosity, but the underlying assumption is consistent—that these experiences exist to be shared, that they are part of what makes you interesting.

They don't consider that the most accurate answer is often the one you don't give. Not because you're withholding, but because there are things that don't improve by being translated. Some experiences maintain their integrity only when they remain unspoken. Not everything that was survived needs to be displayed.

There is a point where you stop explaining this. Not out of frustration, but out of efficiency. You adjust the response. Shorter answers. Redirects. Silence where necessary. You learn how to remain present in the conversation without allowing it to access parts of you that were never meant to be public.

It's not that you're unwilling to talk about your life. It's that most people are not fully prepared to hold it accurately.

They want proximity to the idea of it, yet are not prepared for the reality itself. And the difference between those two things is where the damage occurs.

The assumption that pain can be repurposed as entertainment is rarely intentional. People are conditioned to treat intensity as something to observe rather than something to sit with. They ask for stories because that's the format they understand. They don't consider what it cost, or what remained, or what never fully left.

One simply learns to carry a boundary that doesn't need to be announced. You decide, quietly, what stays internal and what can be translated without consequence. You stop offering access by default. Not as a defense, but as a correction. Not everything that happened to you exists for someone else's understanding. Some of it exists simply because it happened. Things don't happen for a reason. The reason is something you build afterward so it doesn't feel random.

What complicates it is that this role is not assigned—it is accumulated. It forms through repetition, through surviving moments that other people avoid, through developing the ability to process. Once you demonstrate that capacity, systems begin to rely on it. People do too. Not maliciously. Predictably.

The distortion happens when capacity is interpreted as obligation. Being able to hold something does not mean you were meant to hold it alone. It only means you can. Those are not equivalent conditions, even though they are often treated as if

they are. I have spent a significant portion of my life being the person people look at when they can't look at reality. It is not something I chose consciously. It is something that resolved over time. The consequence is a life where presence and participation are not always the same thing.

There are moments, even now, where I register the shift as it happens—the exact point where attention moves off the event and onto me. It's immediate. Measurable. Familiar. I no longer question it. I incorporate it into how I move, how I speak, how I decide what to do next. Understanding the pattern doesn't remove it. It *clarifies* it. And once something is clear, it stops feeling personal. It becomes a function of how people interact with difficulty, not a statement about your role within it.

Still, clarity does not eliminate the underlying truth. Being the reference point is not the same as being supported. It is possible to be central to a moment and still unaccompanied within it. That distinction remains, regardless of how well the system continues to function.

April 14, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

The birch tree behind the house changes every spring, not in any dramatic way—no sudden bloom that announces itself, no color shift that demands attention. It just becomes occupied. Ribbons and bows start appearing in its branches, one at a time at first, then enough that you realize it's no longer accidental.

The wind moves through them differently than it does through leaves—softer, quieter, like something is being acknowledged rather than disturbed. I don't question it. I let it happen the same way I let most things happen here. The tree holds them without preference. It doesn't choose which ones stay or which ones fade. It just carries them for as long as they last.

Penfold is buried at its base. I don't visit the spot the way people expect. I pass it. I notice it. Some days I stop. Most days I don't. Presence doesn't require ceremony. It just requires continuity.

Amelia and I have already decided that when the time comes, we'll be buried there too. Not as a statement, not as something to be interpreted later—just as a continuation of something that already exists. The decision didn't feel heavy when we made it. It felt obvious in the same way certain truths do. The land doesn't argue. It absorbs. It holds what is placed into it without needing explanation.

When I was a child, there was a maple tree in my mother's backyard. That was where I went to think. Not because it was quiet—though it usually was—but because it didn't interfere. I could sit there and build entire worlds without anything correcting them. It didn't require me to be anything other than present. At the time, I didn't know that was rare. I thought that was just how space worked.

There was also a pine tree outside my childhood bedroom window. It stayed the same in a way nothing else did. Winter didn't strip it down. Wind didn't rewrite it. The fire from the house next door didn't affect it. It bends when it has to and returns to itself without comment. I watched it long enough to understand that not everything needs to change in order to survive.

The birch tree doesn't function the same way. It isn't a place I go to disappear into thought. It's a place where things accumulate. Not just ribbons, not just memory—the kind of weight that doesn't press down but settles in. It's the first place on the property that felt like it could hold more than one timeline at once without collapsing them into each other. Past, present, whatever comes next—they don't compete there. They coexist.

The ribbons aren't placed with any formal structure. Some are tied carefully. Some are barely secured, left to come undone on their own timeline. The wind decides what happens to them. Some stay for months. Some disappear overnight. It

isn’t a system designed for permanence. It’s a system that allows for presence without requiring it to last.

I don’t think about legacy when I look at that tree. I think about placement. Where things end up. What gets carried forward without needing to be named. The idea of being buried there doesn’t feel like an ending. It feels like staying in a place that already understands how to hold things without asking what they mean.

Most of what truly matters doesn’t arrive as a decision. It shows up as a pattern you recognize too late to question. The birch wasn’t planted with intention beyond what was practical at the time. It became something else through use, through repetition, through the quiet accumulation of choices that didn’t feel like choices when they were made.

April 16, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

There is a particular kind of exhaustion that comes from managing things that never quite resolve, from paperwork that breeds more paperwork, from obligations that replicate themselves the moment you think you have completed them.

I am still nowhere near finishing the details of my mother's estate, and somewhere in the middle of all of it, my system simply failed—cleanly, completely. Not dramatic, not loud—just a full autistic shutdown, fueled by my own overwhelm combined with the incompetence of others.

There is a specific kind of overwhelm that does not feel like chaos, but like too many rules, too many moving parts, too many expectations layered on top of one another until even asking for a moment to figure it out feels procedural.

By evening, I found myself looking back through old pictures, trying to trace the line of my life like a map I did not remember drawing. I am forty-six years old. That number sits differently than I expected it would—not heavy, not light, just chronological.

My career was not kind to my body, and it was certainly not kind to my mind. It demanded everything, and then it demanded more after that. And yet, if I am honest—fully, brutally honest—I would do it again without hesitation.

Someone had to do that work. I understood it. I was good at it. It was necessary work, and sometimes even I was recognized for it in the press.

The cost ended up being more than I could bear. It was a slow extraction over years, taken in hits and increments small enough to ignore until suddenly there was nothing left to give. And then it ended. Not gradually, not gently—just… done. Over. Retirement after that kind of intensity is not rest. It is absence. It is stepping out of a world that required everything you had and realizing that nothing else in life asks the same of you. There is nothing that compares—not in scale, not in urgency, not in meaning. And so you are left holding all of that capacity with nowhere to put it.

There is a moment that comes—quiet, almost unremarkable—when you realize you have had enough nonsense for one lifetime. Not in a dramatic, declarative way. Just a simple, internal acknowledgment. Enough. And for me, that feeling is never clean. Autism complicates it. It adds layers—sensitivity, processing overload, the constant negotiation between what the world expects and what my system can tolerate.

I recently got frustrated with how life outside of the structure I had become accustomed to at work somehow didn't exist in the "civilian world". Instead of accepting this, I got upset with my friend Maddie about how I'm always the one who arrives 90 seconds on time to everything, and nobody else does,

and it is really disappointing and tiring for me. She didn't deserve it. Maddie and I are close friends, and she has one of the biggest hearts I have ever known.

I try, sometimes, to trace the line from there to here—to understand how that version of me became the person I am today. The timeline is not clean. It loops, it doubles back, it disappears and reappears in places that do not make immediate sense. It has been a life of intensity, always intensity. A need to be inside things that matter, even when they cost me more than I can afford to give. A willingness to accept conditions that others would reject outright, because the experience itself felt worth it.

I used to talk about Vermont winters like they were proof of toughness. And maybe they were. I am allowed to admit that even the most perfect of places can sometimes exhaust you.

It looks like participation—fully, completely, sometimes recklessly. I have lived that version. I am still living it, in quieter ways now. And tonight, sitting here with the remnants of the day still scattered around me, I can feel both truths at once—that I have carried more than I should have had to, and that I chose much of it anyway.

Sometimes, late at night, when everything else quiets down and the world finally stops asking anything of me, I hear it—the outside. The insects, the wind, the subtle movement of things that do not care about human timelines or expectations.

And just like that, I think back to my many years at summer camp. Back in that strange, intense pocket of my childhood where everything felt sharper, more immediate. I can still hear my father's voice—matter-of-fact, immovable—telling me that if I wanted to go, I would be sent as a boy. And I did not care. Not even a little. It was summer camp. It was challenge, intensity, structure, fire. It was everything I craved without yet having the language to explain why.

April 17, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

I said yes before anyone thought to ask, and that realization has been sitting with me longer than the email itself, longer than the idea of a reunion, longer than whatever version of that place still exists in other people's memory. It didn't feel like a decision in the present tense. It felt like something already settled somewhere earlier, something that had been waiting quietly for the condition to appear so it could confirm what had already been decided.

The email came later, plain subject line, no ceremony—Reunion—and I let it sit the way I let most things sit now. Urgency is rarely what it claims to be. The words don't change if you wait. Only your position relative to them does. I knew what it was without opening it. Summer camp has always existed in that hybrid category for me—a place, not exactly a memory, more of a contained social system that still runs somewhere in parallel with everything else.

When I think about that place, I don't think about activities or friendships or anything that would translate easily into conversation. I think about structure. Cabins, schedules, expectations, the quiet repetition of a name that didn't belong to me but was used often enough that it became the operational truth inside that environment.

I was there under a name that wasn't mine. Not symbolically, not as some metaphor I can reframe into something easier to carry or explain. It was written, recorded,

spoken, enforced in the same quiet administrative way everything else was enforced. Outside of summer camp, I was known as Emily. That was never a question. It was never something I arrived at or negotiated internally. It was simply accurate. Camp was the variable, not me. That distinction mattered even then, though I didn't yet have the language for it.

I didn't argue with it. That's the part people tend to misunderstand when they look backward and try to apply adult logic to a child's environment. Argument wasn't the function. Endurance was. You learn early which systems allow correction and which ones require you to move through them without altering your own internal structure.

Camp was something to be moved through. As a camper, they were some of the best summers of my life, and it was also consistency under incorrect conditions. Everything worked. Everything ran smoothly. Nothing matched socially for me. I adjusted in the only way that was available to me at the time—I remained intact internally and let the rest operate around me without interference. That skill has followed me into every system since.

A year later, everything changed, though not in the way people like to describe change. When I was fifteen years old and had spent the summer at my parents house, I finally told them I was bisexual because it approximated something I understood but could not yet state precisely. A year later, at sixteen, doctors finally informed me that I was intersex, and I removed the

approximation. Lesbian. There wasn't a moment attached to that. No realization, no event, no narrative turning point that makes for a clean story later. Just a correction. Language aligning with something that had been stable long before I had the words to hold it properly.

My father responded in the way he always did when something fell outside his model—he removed it. In this case, he removed me from the house. There was no escalation. No drawn-out conflict. Just an outcome. He told me to grab my things. I left in my car. That part remains one of the cleanest lines in my life. Not easy. Not soft. Just clear.

What followed didn't organize itself as neatly. I ended up back at the same camp under different conditions, not as a camper but as labor. Kitchen work. Dishes. Pots and pans. Heat. Repetition. The kind of work that does not require identity as long as output remains consistent.

It was the first time I occupied that space without the imposed structure that had defined it previously. It wasn't freedom in the way people tend to describe it. It was the absence of interference, which functioned more accurately. I remember going down to the lake early one morning before anyone else was awake, sitting on the dock while the water still held a flat, undisturbed surface. I looked at my own reflection long enough to confirm something I already knew—still there, still Emily, only here I would have to be known under the wrong name.

Now there is an email. Reunion. Thirty years later. The structure still exists in some form, though I have no reason to assume it resembles what I remember. Places don't persist the way memory suggests they do. People don't either. What persists is pattern. What persists is the recognition of that pattern when it reappears under different conditions.

I don't know what I will find if I go back, and I am not particularly interested in predicting it. Prediction has never been the point. Recognition is.

The question was never whether I would go. That part had already been answered. What remains is simply the act of stepping back into a place that once operated under incorrect assumptions and observing what, if anything, still exists. I said yes before anyone asked. That is the only part of this that has not changed.

April 19, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

This morning arrived without urgency, the kind of light that takes its time deciding what it wants to be, and I found myself standing in the kitchen longer than necessary, waiting for my morning coffee to brew, not doing much of anything except letting the quiet settle into something I didn't feel the need to interrupt. The house was still in that familiar way—and somewhere inside that stillness, a thought surfaced fully formed, as if it had been waiting for me to stop moving long enough to recognize it.

The best friends I've ever had were never the easy ones. Not the polished ones. Not the ones who moved through life without friction, without contradiction, without any visible evidence that they had ever been forced to rebuild themselves from something once broken repeatedly.

The people who stayed—the ones who actually stayed—were always the high-achieving misfits. The ones who came from complicated beginnings. The ones who learned early that stability is not something you inherit, it's something you build yourself with whatever pieces of your life you have left after everything else has been taken.

There's a reason those rare friendships hold. They aren't built on proximity, convenience, or shared experience in the way people like to describe it. They're built on recognition. Not admiration, not agreement—*recognition*. The kind that happens when someone sees you for who you truly are, not just

appearances, and doesn't ask you to adjust to make them comfortable.

There's no performance in those friendships. No need to impress, no need to maintain an image, no expectation that things will be softened or explained for comfort. You show up as you are, transparent, fully invested and present—not because it's ideal, but because it's genuine.

My theory is that I function at a high level not because life was easy, but because *it wasn't*. People learn to be exact because being approximate often carried consequences. Those who had to learn survival early are those who can carry responsibility without turning it into identity, who can step into intensity without needing it to define them afterward.

I have spent a lot of my life being present in systems that never quite incorporated me into what lasted. Friend groups, institutions, jobs. Environments that functioned cleanly enough on the surface but slowly and quietly reorganized themselves in ways that didn't include me once enough time passed. There was never a moment where it broke. It just…resolved.

I stopped expecting continuity from those places a long time ago. What I didn't realize—what I can see now with a kind of quiet precision—is that the people who remained were never part of those systems to begin with. They were operating outside of them. Building something else entirely. Something smaller, quieter, but structurally sound in a way the larger systems never were.

High-achieving misfits. That's the closest language I have for it. I think about Amelia in that context, and the thought settles without resistance. She and I started out as friends. Then I fell madly in love with her, married her even though I knew I would get my heart broken, and despite all this, she stayed.

Not in the way people say they stay, with declarations or reassurances or any of the things that are supposed to signal permanence. She stayed in the only way that actually matters—consistently, without requiring me to become something else to maintain it. No translation. No editing. Just her presence, a friendship so indescribable that it hybridizes social categorization.

It took me a long time to understand that the thing I was looking for was never ease. It was alignment. The ability to exist in the same space as someone without distortion, without the constant adjustment that most relationships seem to require.

Amelia and I share the small circle that remains. The ones who gravitate and are amused with the direct, the aware, and exact. The ones who don't interpret clarity as criticism. The ones who understand that attention is not something I distribute casually, and that when I give it, it's deliberate.

Those are not accidental connections. They're not the result of time or proximity or shared interests. They're the result of surviving enough to recognize what relationships truly matter. There's a kind of relief in that. Not the loud kind, not the kind that announces itself, just the quiet understanding that I was

never “missing” what other people seemed to have. I was just calibrated differently. Looking for something that operates on a different set of rules.

April 20, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

Amelia asked me what I wanted for my birthday and I said something that I knew would be exceedingly unlikely, bordering on impossible without even blinking, just to see her reaction. Coming from me, it was like it was the most sarcastic yet totally anticipated answer in the world. I don't ask for much—my requests are simple, and belong in the same category as cake and a card left on the kitchen counter. Card is optional. Cake presence is not negotiable. Skip the candles.

I told her I wanted to transition back into civilian life, to live as a regular woman for once in my adult life. It just sat there between us, heavy and honest. I've been thinking about that answer for awhile now. The way the words just trespassed on my lips without hesitation is the part that won't leave me alone.

It wasn't a joke. It wasn't exaggerated. It wasn't even dressed up. It was the simplest, most accurate sentence I've said in a long time, and it felt almost out of place in my own mouth, like I wasn't used to asking for something that didn't involve solving a problem or carrying something or getting someone else through a moment they couldn't otherwise survive on their own.

Civilian life. The phrase itself feels strange when I write it down. Too clean. Too organized. Too predictable. It almost assumes there's a version of me that hasn't already been shaped by everything that came before it. I don't think I want a new life, I think I simply want a quieter one.

I want the kind of morning where nothing is waiting for me except my morning coffee, maybe the radio low in the background, the same way it's always been, something steady and predictable that doesn't ask anything from me.

I've spent so much of my life being the person who shows up when everything else has already fallen apart that I don't know what it means to show up for social gatherings when nothing is broken. It's repetition combined with muscle memory that doesn't shut off just because the environment changes.

My body still expects the call, the shift, the moment where everything narrows and I have to make it happen. Out of habit, whenever I'm out to dinner with my friends, I ask to sit against the perimeter with a good view of the front door. I scan for exits before I sit down.

There's something almost disorienting about wanting peace after a lifetime of intensity. It doesn't feel natural at first. And then there's the other part—the quieter one—that given enough time away from intensity, you start to notice the way the sunlight moves across the floor in the late afternoon, the way the wind moves through the trees like it has somewhere to be, the way the crickets chirp at night when everything finally stops pretending it's holding itself up for someone else. I don't need much. I never did. I just never got to be the priority until now.

April 20, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

The best times of my young years were the ones spent in the Adirondacks—either living there, or working there, or just existing in that quiet, deliberate way that only seems possible when you are surrounded by trees that have outlived entire generations of people who thought they understood permanence.

I think it began the summer my parents sent me away to summer camp at eleven, which is a strange sentence when I stop and look at it, because it sounds like exile, but it felt like freedom. Those summers were not structured in the way the rest of my life was structured. They were not measured by expectations or outcomes or whether I was good enough at something I never asked to be part of.

Those days were measured in sunlight, in how long I could stay out before someone called my name, in the way pine needles felt under my hiking boots, in the smell of woodsmoke that settled into everything and never quite left. I learned very quickly that I preferred that version of time—the kind that doesn't announce itself or demand anything back.

Things were different back then—I was a child that adults trusted, or maybe a child they simply didn't know how to contain, and so they let me drift. I would sometimes disappear into the edges of the camp property for hours at a time without asking too many questions.

It was the summer of 1991, balanced right on the edge of something I couldn't name yet—the beginning of a decade that would go on to give me everything and take just as much back, though I had no way of knowing that then. At the time, it just felt like open space, like being allowed to move without explanation, with the quiet understanding that I would come back eventually, even if no one knew exactly when.

Since then, I've spent most of my life trying, in one way or another, to return to that state. Not the camp itself, not the cabins or the routines, but the feeling—the absence of pressure, the clarity that comes when there's nothing between you and the world except air and distance.

If I had my way, I would be outside almost all of the time, not because I'm running from anything in particular, but because outside is the only place that has ever felt honest to me. Inside, there are rules, expectations, voices that linger even when no one is speaking. Outside, there is just what is—wind, trees, weather, the slow and unarguable movement of seasons that do not care who you are or what you've done.

But it's not the location, and it's not the people I miss—it's the feeling, the specific, unrepeatable atmosphere of being who I was in those moments, before everything became measured and accounted for. It's the way time moved differently then, the way nothing needed to be justified or explained, the way I existed without the constant awareness of being observed or evaluated. You don't get that back—not because the places

disappear, or the people fade, but because you don't arrive there as the same person twice, and the version of you that felt it so fully only ever existed once.

People talk about freedom like it's mobility—as if it's the ability to get in a car and go somewhere else on a whim, or to change the entire direction of their life without consequence, or to wake up one morning and decide to move to a different city and start over again. I've been able to go places, to move, to rebuild, to walk away when necessary—and still, there is this persistent sense that I am not where I want to be, or maybe more precisely, that the version of me that belongs somewhere else, but that perfect place will forever be…just out of reach. My mind has a habit of leaving before I do. It drifts—backward, forward, sideways—into places where maybe I felt more aligned, more correct, even if they only exist as fragments from long ago.

Maybe freedom is simply the absence of the things that make choosing feel heavy in the first place. Constraints, responsibilities, expectations—those invisible social frameworks that shape everything without ever announcing themselves.

Maybe freedom is what's left when those things fall away, even temporarily. A clearing in the woods, not because someone designed it, but because nothing managed to grow there. A moment where nothing is required of you, and nothing is waiting to be evaluated.

I don't think I've ever fully had that—not in a sustained way—but I've come close. In the Adirondacks, in the spaces between assignments, reassignments, and obligations, in the quiet seconds where the world holds still long enough for me to notice that I'm breathing without thinking about it. Those are the moments that feel real. Everything else feels like a negotiation.

Maybe that's the truth of it—the kind that doesn't resolve cleanly. I've built a life that works, a life that functions, a life that, by most standards, would be considered solid and intact. But somewhere in me, there is still that eleven-year-old girl stepping out of her parents station wagon, and into a place that didn't ask her to be anything other than present. She didn't know it at the time, but she was meeting the only version of freedom that ever made sense to her—and she's been trying to find her way back ever since.

April 22, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

The deed paperwork for moms house in Upstate New York arrived in the mail over the weekend. I must have missed it. It sat there like everything else that matters—quiet, unannounced, not demanding attention, just waiting to be noticed when I was ready, or when I wasn't.

A plain envelope arrived in the mail as a form letter, serving as a receipt that the deed had been recorded in mine and Amelia's names. It's ironic how thirty years later, the same house I left thirty years ago is now the legal property of me and my wife.

The house has seen an entire lifetime—the small child who came to live here when she was a small child, all the way through adolescence, and now in midlife, as the owner. I keep revisiting that in my mind, not because I don't understand it, but because I understand it all too well—the way time doesn't move in a straight line, the way it loops and folds and quietly returns things to you without asking.

So much has changed, yet there are still some things that time didn't erase. Despite the decades, some things still remain in a state of suspended preservation. That's the part that stays with me—the idea that a place can hold its breath for thirty years and still feel like it's waiting for you to walk back through the door, like nothing essential has shifted, like the air itself remembers the shape of you even if the mirrors don't.

From now on I will be returning to the place where I grew up on a regular basis, often with Amelia. The plan is to keep moms house for numerous reasons—one of them being spite, as moms house is desired by some of the same people who gave me a hard time over the decades.

I won't pretend that isn't part of it. It is. It sits there, clean and honest, not dressed up as anything else. The house still holds the version of me who learned how to survive without language for it yet. It holds the rooms where silence did most of the talking. It holds the early calculations under my late fathers rules—what to say, what not to say, how to move through space without attracting attention, how to exist without being allowed to exist fully.

It's almost like being handed the keys to something that once had full control over you. There's no clean resolution in that, no cinematic moment where everything balances out. It's quieter than that. It's me standing in a place that once defined me, and realizing it doesn't anymore—not in the way it used to.

Coming back to the house that raised me three decades later has taught me something I didn't have language for when I was younger—that most things in life exist on a generational basis, not a personal one.

Places don't anchor themselves to you as tightly as you think they do when you're small and everything feels permanent. They move forward, quietly and efficiently, on their

own time, carrying new people, new routines, new versions of the same stories.

The place where I grew up saw me grow up as a bright young girl who dreamed of being a firefighter. That part is still intact in my mind—clear, uncorrupted, almost mystical in its precision. When I left home, the town went on without me in the way towns always do. There was no pause, no acknowledgment that someone had exited the frame.

Life went on as usual for those who remained in town. That's not cruelty—it's structure. And although I had lived my adult life in upstate New York, including much of it in the areas nearby, I would only visit my parents on occasion. Those visits felt temporary even when they weren't rushed. My father and I had a strained relationship from the start, and this caused discomfort between me and my mother. Over time, that distance stopped feeling like something to correct and started feeling like something to accept even if I never understand it.

Shortly following my assignment in Long Island/New York City, Angie and I had rented an apartment near Plattsburgh, New York, near where I had attended summer camp. At the time, I felt lost and felt a pull towards a part of New York that felt like the only version of home I had ever known.

At the time I was working as a Paramedic and rescue specialist, and my father would call on the phone and make plans to visit, sometimes giving me two weeks notice, sometimes only two days notice, expecting me to take off work from a

critical public safety role at the last minute. Dad would take Amtrak from Albany, New York to Plattsburgh, and I would then pick him up after my shift.

As soon as my father arrived at the apartment that Angie and I shared, he would immediately start complaining about my performance not meeting his expectations. Everything to my father was about his expectations and how I never met them. My weight was a prominent topic of contention, as my father would often lament that if only I lost some weight, I'd lose those damn female hips. He would sometimes tell me that I only grew breasts due to being overweight and that I needed to diet. Years of the same criticism didn't cause me to lose weight as my father had hoped—if anything, it triggered an eating disorder.

I much preferred it when my mom came to visit, although for whatever reason, mom absolutely hated the fact that Angie and I were engaged to marry, but we never did, even after nearly twenty years of being together. Angie and I were always convinced that my mom had a mental illness the way she carried on when she came to visit. Whenever mom came, she would always want to go to Vermont, specifically Rutland. And yet, there was never a reason for her visit.

The last time I was at moms house, Angie and I found a large envelope with the name *Emily* written across the front of it in moms handwriting. Inside the envelope were fire department patches from the handful of departments I had worked over the years. Every time I got hired somewhere, I'd send a patch home

to mom from my job. She apparently had collected them, starting with where I started my EMT training in Buffalo, New York.

Inside the envelope was a smaller envelope filled with old photographs taken the day my parents purchased the house in Stamford. A handful of shots that showed every outside view, some of which caught me playing in the back yard with my mom standing nearby. Hidden inside the stack of house pictures were several that showed me as a young girl living in the house—pictures that my father would likely have destroyed if he knew they existed as they showed me dressed as a girl.

And yet, most of the events captured in these photographs are ones that I don't remember. I don't remember the events of the day when we moved. I cannot recall the vast majority of my childhood. My teenage years were well documented and photographed, only for my father to throw out all my diaries, photographs, and letters from friends as a form of erasure. I have forgotten many of the adventures I had in life, yet I still haven't forgotten where I came from, and it's likely I never will. Some places just make you feel like you're coming home, even if it never felt like home until now.

April 23, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

I've been thinking about the nineteen nineties again—the way that entire decade feels like it happened just out of frame, like I was there but never fully documented, never pinned down in a photograph album in such a way that it could be proven later. There was no quiet trail of digital breadcrumbs, no automatic timestamps stitched into every movement, no invisible system keeping a tally of where I stood and when I stood there.

If I showed up somewhere, It was often by chance. I simply existed there, and when I left, the place closed behind me, most of the time, forever. Memory did the rest—uneven, selective, sometimes too kind, sometimes not kind enough—and now all I have is that strange, half-lit archive that lives in my head, where things blur at the edges but feel more real than anything I could scroll back to confirm. It wasn't absence, exactly—it was freedom with a cost I didn't understand at the time.

I remember going to the Ride Board at Marshall University in 1998—a literal cork board in the student center. Physical, imperfect, pinned with scraps of intention. People offering rides, asking for rides, looking for something, or someone, or just a way out for a couple of days. It was human in a way that doesn't exist anymore—handwriting, misspellings, urgency pressed into paper with a pen that may or may not have worked properly.

You could judge the urgency in their plans. Using bright colored paper, or highlighting specific dates or destinations, usually was the signal. You stood there reading it, not knowing if the person behind the note was reliable, strange, brilliant, or all three at once. You made decisions with less information and more instinct, and somehow it felt normal.

That was the same year I met Garbage backstage before one of their shows in West Virginia—one of those moments that now feels almost mythological because there's no digital residue, no post on the internet, no easy proof beyond the fact that I remember it with absolute clarity.

Shirley Manson stood there, exactly as composed and electric as you'd expect, but also human in a way that doesn't translate through screens. My gay friend Gerry and I got backstage passes from a friend—who had a friend—who knew somebody.

Gerry wore a shirt made with vinyl prism material, and Shirley came over, complimented it, and had a brief conversation with both of us. I didn't take a photo—I couldn't, not the way people would now—and that absence is exactly what makes it feel so intact. It lives in me instead of on a device, and there's something about that exchange—unrecorded, unshared—that feels almost sacred now.

And then there was the posting itself—the one I pulled from that same Ride Board without really knowing what I was stepping into.

"A weekend getaway in a remote stone cabin in the mountains of West Virginia, everything included, just keep the fires going. Need a few people to help."

It had been typed on a cheap laser printer and photocopied before making its way to the Ride Board. It sounded simple, almost too simple, and that should have been the warning, but I didn't think that way back then.

And yet because it was common for the era to accept rides from people you trusted through shared proximity, I simply showed up at the designated pickup spot along with a handful of other students.

I was expecting something small, rough, practical, hopefully nearby—and what I was faced with instead was a sprawling stone structure that felt less like a cabin and more like something lifted out of another century entirely. Not quite a castle, not quite a house—just this massive, quiet thing sitting in the mountains like it had always been there and always would be. Oh, and it was also well over an hour from campus, and there was no running water.

The task was simple enough—every fireplace in that place had to stay alive through the night, which meant you never really slept, not completely. We all slept in different rooms in the dark, feeding wood into old stone fireplaces, keeping the heat circulating, keeping the place from going cold. It became a rhythm—quiet footsteps, the sound of logs settling, the low crackle that followed you from room to room. Outside, nothing

but the mountains pressing in—the darkest of night skies that I had ever seen, and it was remote to the point where you couldn't see anything beyond that place. And in the mornings, some freshly fallen snow.

Somehow, it became one of the most memorable experiences I had in all my college years. Not because it was comfortable—but because it was so entirely present. There was no distraction layer, no second life happening in parallel. You were simply there participating, or you weren't.

You felt the cold creep in when the fire dropped, you felt the heat when it caught again, you felt time passing in a way that wasn't measured by notifications or clocks but by how often you had to move to keep everything alive.

In typical nineteen-nineties style, the decade held all of our experiences without allowing us to document any of it properly. The Ride Board, the band backstage, the stone building with fires that lasted through the night—it all happened, and it all disappeared into memory the moment it was over. Nothing followed me out except the feeling of it, and that feeling has outlasted anything more concrete ever could.

Obscurity wasn't a flaw in the system—it simply was the system. And now, looking back, I realize it didn't erase those moments. It distilled them. It left me with only what mattered, stripped of everything else. And maybe that's why it feels the way it does now—not like loss, exactly, but like something rare that can't be replicated.

April 27, 2026—Stamford, New York (Mom's House)

I learned how to stay by watching the pines—not in some poetic sense, not in a way anyone would ever write down in a clean notebook, but in the same way you learn anything that actually matters—by being there long enough to see what doesn't give. The pines never asked me what I survived. That is why I trusted them. People always want the story, the sequence, the explanation that turns damage into something they can file away. Trees do not need a narrative.

There is a difference between being tolerated and being understood. Tolerance creates space. Understanding removes the need for it. There is a moment in every life where you stop asking to be included and start deciding where you actually belong. That shift is irreversible. People will call you difficult when you stop accepting incomplete explanations. What they mean is you are no longer easy to manage.

The past does not disappear. It loses jurisdiction. What once controlled you becomes something you can observe without responding to. You don't lose your past. You lose your ability to live inside it. Time doesn't heal anything on its own. It just removes the urgency to respond. There are truths that arrive too late to fix anything, but not too late to matter. That is the strange mercy of getting older. You may not get the apology, the explanation, or the childhood you should have had, but you do get the final authority to name what happened.

People who never had to leave anything behind will never fully understand what it costs to stay gone. You don't become free all at once. You become free in the moments where you choose not to go back. You stop fearing loss when you realize how much of your life was built after it. There's a difference between being patient and delaying the inevitable. Some connections feel strong because they require effort. The real ones don't.

A childhood home is never just a house. You can own the deed, change the locks, repaint the walls, and still feel eight years old in the hallway when the light hits wrong. Some places do not haunt you because they are alive. They haunt you because some part of you still is.

I used to think survival meant making it out. Now I know that was only the most visible part. The harder work came later, when nothing was burning, no one was calling my name, and I had to learn how to live without needing disaster to prove I still had purpose. There comes a point in every woman's life when she stops asking whether the road she walked was fair, and starts asking whether it brought her somewhere honest. Fairness is a children's story adults keep repeating because it makes pain sound negotiable.

It has been my experience that most people do not lie outright; they adjust emphasis—they highlight certain facts, omit others, rearrange sequence, soften language, and over time

these adjustments accumulate into something that feels coherent but is no longer accurate.

There is a moment, often brief and easy to miss, where you realize you have been participating in something you do not agree with, and what you do in that moment matters more than any justification that follows, because it determines whether you prioritize alignment or continuity. I have learned that the closure afterward is rarely given—it is constructed, often without the participation of the people or circumstances you are trying to resolve, and waiting for it to arrive externally keeps you in a holding pattern that can last indefinitely, whereas deciding where something ends, even without full understanding, returns a level of agency that cannot be negotiated away.

April 28, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

We were sitting in my childhood bedroom—me in my mother's favorite chair, mustard yellow, the fabric worn in the places her body used to settle into without thinking. My room still held her in that quiet way objects do when no one has the authority to move them.

Angie had made some claims about our past together. Not dramatic ones. Not loud. Just statements delivered with enough certainty that they were supposed to stand. I told her she was mistaken. I didn't raise my voice. I didn't argue the way people expect arguments to look. I just corrected her—clean, direct, before ultimately resorting to evidence to support my version of events.

She didn't adjust. She stayed where she was, inside *her* version of it. It wasn't about me. Maybe it never was. My career required me to move. A lot. But there's a point where a conversation stops being a conversation and becomes two separate realities occupying the same space. That was the point.

I told Amelia what Angie had said. She had been hiding in her bedroom at moms, which is the one adjacent to where mom and dad stayed. I didn't dress it up. I didn't soften it. I just repeated it exactly the way it landed.

She already knew. Amelia didn't hesitate. She told Angie to *get the fuck out of her house*. No escalation. No negotiation. Just a boundary finally enforced for the first time. The room

went quiet in a different way after that. Not tense. Not chaotic. Just finished.

I drove Angie home. We didn't resolve anything on the way there. No final conversation. No attempt to repair what had already stopped holding. The road did what roads always do—moved forward whether anything inside the car made sense or not. She kept talking. Not louder. Not different. Just continuing, as if the shape of it hadn't already been decided. I listened to her. The radio shuffled songs from our favorite playlist.

I dropped Angie off at her house, carried her bag of belongings inside like it was just another ordinary visit—like muscle memory didn't know the difference between arrival and exit. I gave her a hug. It wasn't long. It wasn't dramatic. It didn't try to hold anything together that had already come apart. Just contact, and then separation.

And then I left. *Again*. No pause in the doorway. No looking back to check if she was still standing there. I already knew she would be. We haven't spoken since.

When I got to the corner of her road, I stopped long enough to send Amelia a text.

Dropped Angie off. Heading back now.

That was it. No explanation. No emotion. Just information—clean, complete, final, almost cinematic in the moment as I sat at the stop sign waiting for cars to go by. The car idled there longer than it needed to. The engine made that low, steady

sound it always does, like it was waiting for a decision I had already made. I watched the road without really seeing it—headlights passing, gaps opening and closing, the same quiet pattern that never asks anything from you except that you merge when it's your turn.

I didn't check my phone to see if Amelia had responded. I didn't need to. We have had this inexplicable connection since we met. The text status switched from *Delivered* to *Read*.

A car passed. Then another. And when the road finally opened, I pulled out without hesitation, like I had done it a thousand times before.

As I pulled away and watched the old road fade into the distance, it started happening before I even noticed it. Not all at once. Not like a movie the way people describe it. Just pieces, out of order, slipping in without asking. Short clips like a preview of an upcoming film about the moments you spent together.

Birthdays. Not the big ones—the small ones. The ones where it was just the two of us and nothing went wrong that day. Suitcases and moving boxes. The weight of them. Always more than we thought. Car accidents. The sound more than anything. The stillness right after. Old uniforms surfacing in moving boxes. Arguments that didn't make sense until years later. Apologies that came too late or too early to matter.

It wasn't linear. It never is. It's always just fragments—complete on their own—stacking on top of each other faster than I could place them.

I used to get asked about that all the time when I was a paramedic.

Do people really see their life flash before their eyes?

I never had a good answer for them. Not one I trusted. Now I do. It doesn't happen when you die. It happens when a lifelong relationship ends and there's no hope left in which to stabilize it.

That's how you know. Not when you say goodbye. When there's nothing left to come after it.

April 29, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

I never understood the concept of family—not in the way people say it, not in the way they seem to experience family like it's something automatic, something inherited. It always sounded rehearsed to me, like a line everyone agreed to repeat whether it was true or not. I learned early that "family" was a word people used when they wanted something to be true badly enough to pretend it already was.

My parents sent me places where connection was expected—where it was structured, scheduled, and insisted upon like it could be engineered if the conditions were right.

Summer camps, where the counselors spoke in softened voices and told us we were all a "family here," as if proximity and matching T-shirts could manufacture something real. I remember watching other kids lean into it—arms slung over shoulders, secrets traded like currency—and feeling like I had missed a class everyone else had attended.

Schools that called themselves communities, where connection was graded in participation and group projects. Sit in a circle. Share something meaningful. Participate fully. Trust the process. I remember the silence that lived inside me during those moments.

Therapy rooms with soft lighting and carefully chosen words, where I was told that connection was something we could build *if we tried hard enough*. As if effort alone could

conjure a feeling that had never been there to begin with. I watched professionals try to map something onto me that didn't match the terrain. They weren't wrong—they just weren't looking at the right landscape.

They sent me home with the worst kind of homework… Make a friend and then report back during my next appointment. I had one friend growing up. For me that was enough.

Moms house was supposed to feel like home. My bedroom was supposed to feel like mine. Weekends that were supposed to feel different from weekdays. They all had the same isolating quiet in them.

I kept waiting for the moment people described—the one where something clicks, where you feel held in a way that doesn't require explanation. It never came. Not then. Not in those places. Not with the people who were supposed to define it for me.

I was invited to slumber parties at the house next door to Mom's. It was grade six, and I remember having to slip out the back door to get there—quietly, like I was doing something that needed to stay small. Mom said it was okay as long as my father didn't know; I couldn't ask permission in his presence, so it became something understood without being spoken.

For a while, it worked. And then, eventually, it didn't. He caught on. One night, while we were all getting ready for bed, he

came next door and stood in the doorway and announced that I was a boy, as if it were something that needed correcting in real time.

No one believed him—not my friends, not their parents, not even me. He kept going, insisted on it, told them I had been born with a penis, like that would settle it. But my friends already knew me the way I knew myself. It had never been a secret to them. And it had never mattered. To everyone, I was still a girl.

All I ever wanted was acceptance, even if the full understanding was out of reach. What I got instead was observation. In my life, I typically only had one friend, and this person was the center of my world. I became very good at watching how other people did it—how they leaned, how they softened, how they stayed. I thought that maybe could replicate it well enough to pass. I knew the shape of connection long before I ever felt anything close to it.

And somewhere along the way, I stopped assuming it was something I was missing. It wasn't that I was broken. It was that the system I was placed into didn't produce what it promised. That's a different kind of clarity.

Growing up, I had *one* best friend, and it felt like different eras of my life were marked by who was holding that role. Not a group, not a community—just one person at a time. When one left, another would eventually take their place, but it never felt like expansion. It felt like a handoff. It was almost as if they were

passing a torch of responsibility with me, quietly, without ever naming it.

There was an unspoken understanding in it, even if no one ever said it out loud. I didn't spread myself across people. Everything I had—attention, loyalty, presence—went in one direction. Focused. Complete. And maybe that was too much for most people, or maybe it was just different from what they expected friendship to be.

And then, eventually, they were gone in the way people are gone long before they actually leave. Another name. Another era. Another person stepping into a space that had never really been designed to hold more than one at a time.

I don't think they realized what they were carrying when they were close to me. Not fully. It wasn't just friendship—it was continuity. It was stability in a system that didn't offer much of it anywhere else. And when it shifted, I didn't just lose a person. I lost the structure that had formed around them.

I learned to anticipate the ending while it was still beginning. I learned to hold things a little more quietly. To watch more than I spoke. To recognize the early signs that something was already in motion, even if no one had acknowledged it yet. It didn't make it hurt less, it just allowed it to make sense sooner.

People talk about having a "circle," about being surrounded, about always having someone to turn to. That was never my experience. Mine was linear. Singular. One point of

connection moving forward through time, changing hands, never multiplying.

When I was a small child, Mom would take me out on our many adventures together. She had a habit of pointing out families moving through the world in groups—parents, children, all of them orbiting one another—and she would call it pack behavior, reducing family structures to something closer to animal herd mentality. I remember the way she said it, half observational, half dismissive, like she was naming a pattern rather than participating in it.

I would watch those families as we passed them, trying to understand what she meant, trying to see what she saw, and wondering if what looked like closeness from the outside was just instinct dressed up as something more deliberate.

I remember being a small child and spending two weeks every summer at my grandparents' farm near Buffalo, New York. It was two weeks of family—connection by default, something I didn't have to question or construct. There were endless pine forests stretching out as far as I was allowed to wander, and for a while, that felt like something close to belonging, or at least the shape of it. But it didn't last. I turned 16, and the structure shifted without warning. Family dynamics changed in ways no one explained, and just like that, it was gone. I didn't see most of them again for decades—some of them never again.

April 30, 2026—Stamford, New York (Mom's House)

Mom's house didn't teach me how to belong—it taught me how to record what never held. That's where I decided to become a writer.

Whenever I go back to Mom's house, it doesn't feel like returning—it feels like stepping into a version of my life that no longer belongs to me. Not just earlier, but removed—so far back that it doesn't line up cleanly with who I am now. It's still mine in a factual sense, but it carries the distance of something lived by someone else, at a time that no longer runs in parallel with the present.

This time, Amelia told me that she was not going to return to Mom's house anytime soon unless it was absolutely necessary for her to be present. In some ways I don't blame her—she too had a family who rejected her simply because she is transgender. She also has autism. The last night she spent at Mom's ended in raised voices, broken promises, and broken hearts, and I had to drive Amelia home with me to Vermont.

There was nothing dramatic about the decision. She said it the same way someone decides not to take a road they already know doesn't go anywhere useful. No anger, no escalation—just a quiet refusal to re-enter a system that had already shown her how it resolves.

I didn't argue with her. There wasn't anything to argue about. I had seen the same thing, just from a different position.

What happened that night wasn't new—it was a pattern reaching its natural conclusion. Raised voices don't start where they peak. They build over time, through smaller moments that never quite settle.

Time can exist as a place where lessons are learned. It doesn't always move forward in a straight line. Some parts of it hold—fixed, contained, returning you to the same point until something resolves or stops trying to.

You don't always notice when you've left one of those places. There's no clear boundary, no marker that says *this is where it ended*. It just becomes something you no longer have to revisit in the same way.

Mom's house exists inside that kind of time for me. Not as it is now, but as it functioned when I was still learning what it meant. The lessons don't change, even if the structure does. They remain intact, waiting where they were first understood.

The deed to Mom's house arrived in the mail in Vermont as if it were nothing unusual—folded paper, county language, a plain envelope confirming what history had somehow failed to prevent. It stated, in the dry and efficient language of recorded instruments, that the house now belongs to me and Amelia. Mine. Hers. Ours. The same house I was forced out of thirty years ago. The same house my father treated as an instrument of control over my body, my name, my queerness, my survival, and every version of myself.

There are moments that should arrive like rumbles of thunder, and instead they arrive through the postal service, tucked between junk mail, bills, and the tired administrative scraps of ordinary life. I stood there holding the deed and realized, with a kind of cold realization that this is the first time in thirty years I will actually be allowed home.

Not invited. Not tolerated. Not permitted as an exception to someone else's rules. Not sneaking in through the side door, not sleeping there under conditions. Allowed. Legally. Finally. By deed, by title, by marriage, by survival, and by the simple reality that the people who once had the power to keep me out are gone.

This past year has been the hardest one for me, easily on par with 1998, and I do not say that casually. 1998 was the year I first understood how little protection the world offers to girls who refuse to become smaller just to remain housed. This year carried that same pressure, only older, stranger, and far more administrative.

I was unsure of every outcome. I had hopped trains to get to New York City to sell my childhood home, a decision I was forced to make because survival, even at forty-six, still occasionally arrives dressed as a signature line.

Then, a few months later, Mom died, and every remaining certainty acquired a question mark. Her estate. Her house. The cost of heat. The taxes. The maintenance. And the repairs that accumulated in my absence. I did not know how any of it would

balance out. I did not know if Amelia and I could afford both places. I did not know if keeping Mom's house would be devotion, denial, stupidity, spite, or some combination thereof, which is usually where my best decisions begin.

Mom had left everything to me and Amelia. That sounds like security until you are standing in the middle of it with envelopes on the table, deadlines multiplying, strangers offering advice, and no living mother left to call and ask, "Is this what you meant?"

The deed made it real. It did not heal anything, and it did not undo the exile. Ownership does not rewrite memory, it simply changes the balance of power.

I decided this place is mine now. So I marched straight into my parents' old bedroom, which still looks like a room waiting for two people who are never coming back. Their furniture is still set up there. The bed is still made. That detail unsettles me more than I want to admit—the bed made with the stiff optimism of people who thought their version of the world might outlast mine. I went to the side where Dad slept, sat down on the edge of it, and sparked a joint. Not because I needed the weed. Because the act itself felt like *defiance*. Because he would have hated it. Because the dead do not get house rules. I looked at the spot on the floor where dad died of cardiac arrest, and for every expectation I refused to meet I said, "Fuck you, Dad."

Rebellion and survival aren't opposites—they're often the same act viewed from two different distances. Up close, it feels

like defiance, like you're pushing back, making noise, refusing to be boxed in. He died years ago. It still felt necessary.

Dad forbade me from dating women, as if queerness were a conflict of appearances, as if lesbian desire could be handled with household policy and a stern look over bifocals. Fine for other peoples children, *not his*. His expectations were ridiculous, but ridiculous expectations can still do damage when they are enforced by someone with a talent for making cruelty sound like concern. He wanted silence. He wanted compliance. He wanted the version of me that existed only in his head, and I was never cooperative enough to become the son he wanted.

So, naturally, I brought women to the house when my parents were on vacation.That house knew I was queer long before most adults admitted it.

I lost my virginity to a girl my age in my childhood bedroom, in the very room where I had once learned how to survive by being quiet. There is something almost mathematically satisfying about that. The room that held my loneliness also held my first real proof that my body belonged to me, that desire did not require his permission, and that whatever he thought he was preventing had already happened in the place he believed he controlled.

I once had lesbian sex in my parents' bed while they were away. I am not dressing that up as anything other than what it was: *rebellion with decent aim*. It was not just sex. *It was an answer.*

It was a living, breathing contradiction to everything Dad tried to enforce. It was me placing my queerness directly into the room where his authority slept and letting the house decide which truth it preferred. The house, to its credit, kept the secret.

Mom was different. Mom was cool in the ways that mattered, even if she was complicated in the ways that still hurt.

I think she knew I was queer long before I told her. I think she knew because mothers notice the things fathers try to correct. She had a birds eye view to the feelings of my heart. She saw the way I stood near certain girls, the way my attention changed, the way I carried longing before I had language for it. She never made me explain it before I was ready. She did not perform acceptance. Nothing mattered more to Mom than my happiness, and she tried as much as she could.

She did not care that I smoked weed in my bedroom when my friends came over, as long as Dad was not home. That was Mom's real morality—practical, situational, and deeply aware. She knew the difference between harmless teenage rebellion and the kind of control that ruins people. She knew the difference between a girl smoking weed in her bedroom with friends and a father destroying a child's life through projected correction.

When Angie and I first started dating, Dad begrudgingly let me stay in my old bedroom for two weeks. Two weeks always seems to be the unit of time life gives me before it rearranges itself.

My *friend Angie* started spending the night in the guest bedroom that adjoined mine, which is one of those absurd family euphemisms people use when everyone in the room knows the truth and only the person with power insists on pretending not to. My *friend* Angie. The phrase still makes me want to laugh, except it was not funny at the time. It was exhausting. It was the old choreography of queerness under surveillance—doors, timing, footsteps, silence, and the constant awareness that someone else's denial could become your problem at any moment.

Once Dad caught on to what was really happening, he said we had to leave. Of course he did. That was always his answer when reality refused to obey him. Remove it. Expel it. Send it away.

Pretend that the son you expected is somewhere else because his successful daughter is no longer standing in front of you.

Angie and I spent the next few months in a tent in the backyard of my parents' house with Penfold.

There is an absurdity there that I still do not know how to fully hold. I was not allowed to sleep inside as myself, but I could exist on the property. Close enough to see the windows lit at night, far enough to understand we were not welcome. Penfold was there, steady as always, because dogs understand exile better than people do. He did not care whether we slept in a

house, a car, a tent, or under some half-collapsed version of the future. He knew where I was, and that was enough for him.

Eventually I took the job in New York City and Long Island, and Angie and I moved in with her sister. Little did I know it, I'd find myself right back in my car at least two more times. That is how chapters ended in my life back then—not with closure, not with ceremony, but with logistics. A job. A car. A bag of clothes. A dog. Another place to sleep. Another version of me forced into motion before I had time to name what had been taken.

And now, thirty years later, the deed says I can come home.

That is the part I keep returning to, because it does not feel real in the way people expect. Amelia's name is on the deed beside mine, which might be the most satisfying administrative fact of my life. My wife owns Mom's house with me. My wife. Not a secret. Not a euphemism. Not a "friend" in the guest room. Not someone my father gets to minimize, question, tolerate, reject, or remove. Amelia and I own the house together, and Dad would have hated that in ways he no longer gets to express.

There is mercy in that silence.

I do not know what Mom intended when she left everything to me and Amelia. Maybe she understood more than she ever said. Maybe she knew that ownership, in this case, was not about property so much as permission. Maybe she wanted

the house to become something it never managed to be while she was alive—a place where I could walk in through the front door without bracing. When Dad died, we came close, and she adored Amelia, but Mom ran out of time. All I ever wanted was a place where my wife could stand beside me without anyone pretending not to know what she was to me.

Even though I am allowed home now, it's not because anyone forgave me. It's not because the town suddenly understood me, or my family repaired itself, or the past suddenly developed manners. Home is not where you are welcomed—it is where you are no longer subject to permission.

May 1, 2026—Stamford, New York (Mom's House)

This morning began with a bureaucratic nightmare, which is a phrase I do not use lightly. Trying to contact companies after your mother dies—to explain, again and again, that she is gone, that she left you the house, that *you* are now the responsible party, that no, you are not calling as a random stranger, and yes, you have the documents, and yes, the estate exists, and yes, the name on the account is no longer available to confirm anything because dead people are famously bad at answering customer service security questions—is possibly the most unnecessarily complicated thing I have had to do since Mom's passing.

I spent all morning and part of the afternoon on the phone, moving from one hold queue to another, listening to cheerful recorded voices tell me how important my call was while proving, with impressive consistency, that it absolutely was not.

There is a particular insult in being asked to repeat the same grief-shaped sentence to strangers who are reading from a screen and asking questions that no longer belong to the living.

My mother died. She left me the house. I am responsible now. No, I cannot have her answer the phone. No, I cannot "put her on for verification." No, there is not a better time to call back. This is the better time. This is the time I have.

By eleven o'clock, I had reached the point where my brain had started to reject language as a reasonable tool for human communication. So I walked across the street to TP's Cafe, the restaurant I have been getting lunch at since they opened in 1994. I went to school with one of the owners. That detail matters here. In a town like this, history is never fully gone; it just gets older, changes hands, and pretends not to recognize itself when it passes you on the sidewalk.

I ordered my usual, which is the same exact thing I have ordered every single time for lunch for the past thirty-two years, with the kind of consistency that should probably be studied by people who think human behavior is unpredictable: bacon cheeseburger deluxe, French fries, Pepsi. Nothing complicated. No mystery. A clean, reliable meal from a place that has somehow survived the years better than most people I knew.

They came to my table with the burger I ordered, but they had accidentally served me potato chips.

Everyone knows I do not like potato chips. This is not a preference hidden in the fine print of my personality. This is not some newly developed quirk requiring local adaptation. I asked for French fries, and they immediately apologized and made it right, which is exactly how a small-town correction should work.

Just an error, an apology, and the correct food arriving shortly afterward.

After lunch, I had to replace a door lock on the back of Mom's house. Of course the screws provided with the new lock were the wrong ones, because apparently even door hardware has decided to participate in the general administrative hostility of my life.

So naturally, I walked back across the street to the hardware store, the same one where I have been shopping since my parents bought the house in 1986. Same aisles. Same practical smell of metal, dust, paint, keys, and old wood. Same kind of place where nothing should surprise me anymore, and yet somehow still does.

They called me *sir*. The same people whose store I grew up around. The same people who have known me as Emily, or at least should have by now. The same town where some version of me has existed in public record, rumor, memory, and inconvenience for forty years.

I stood there for a moment and let the word land. Not because it was new, exactly, but because it carried the old weight—the specific kind that comes from being misread by people who were present for the original story and still managed to retain the wrong version.

I told them I was actually born a girl, and that whatever my father had told them over the years to the contrary was his own reality, and that I had lived my entire life as such.

I said it plainly. Not angrily. Not softly. Just factually, because facts do not become less true simply because someone was trained to prefer a different story.

My father had a gift for exporting his distortions into other people's mouths. Even now, years after his death, I still occasionally run into his version of me standing upright in public, wearing someone else's voice.

It is an odd thing, correcting a dead man through the living. You think grief is the thing that lingers, but sometimes it is the paperwork of abuse—the names, the assumptions, the way a town can inherit someone else's lie and treat it like local history.

They gave me the correct screws. I took them back to the house. The lock works now.

There is something almost insulting about how simple repair can be when the problem is mechanical. Wrong screws, right screws. Misalignment, adjustment. Deadbolt, strike plate, tension, function. A door either locks or it does not. A person either tells the truth or they do not.

Today felt like I was a ghost visiting my old life. Not returning, exactly. Visiting. There is a difference. Returning implies continuity, some thread still waiting to be picked up where it was dropped. Visiting is more conditional. Temporary. You arrive, look around, notice what still stands, and understand that time kept moving without asking whether you were ready.

Almost nobody knows me here anymore, aside from a select few people who still remember me from decades ago. People go about their daily lives. They carry grocery bags, cross streets, sit in parked cars, check their phones, walk dogs that have no idea who I used to be.

I pass people on the sidewalk and say hello as we move past one another, and their faces are unfamiliar. Not unfriendly. Just unfamiliar. That might be worse in some ways. Hostility at least gives you a defined edge. Unfamiliarity is blank. It does not know what it has failed to remember.

I kept thinking about how strange it is to be known by a place and forgotten by its people. The slope of the street, the old storefronts, the distance between Mom's house and the places I used to wander—all of it remains in my body with more accuracy than most human memory. But the town itself has been repopulated by strangers wearing the same afternoon light. It is like walking through a photograph after everyone in it has been replaced.

Later, I walked down to the other side of town to get dinner at The Dinner Plate—chicken wings, French fries, and another Pepsi, because apparently today required repetition, and fried food in order to remain survivable. The owner was so accustomed to me going to dinner there almost every weekend while I was still living in the area that he asked me how mom was. I said that mom had died in October of last year.

I could not help but notice how many things had changed along the way. The houses where my friends used to live have all been sold to different families. Different cars in the driveways. Different curtains in the windows. Different lives moving through rooms where I once knew the sounds, the smells, the parents, the dogs, the strange little rules of each household.

The places I knew and loved, the places I thought would simply remain because childhood has no real concept of economic turnover, have been replaced with new storefronts. O'Connor's Pharmacy is gone. That still feels impossible to me in the way certain ordinary losses feel more offensive than the dramatic ones.

A pharmacy is not supposed to become memory. It is supposed to stay there, stocked with cough syrup, birthday cards, rolls of film, and the quiet dignity of things that do not need reinvention. The pharmacy I remember would allow you to be a few dollars short and they would trust you to remember that you owed it next time you came in. But it is gone, because everything eventually goes, even the places that once felt like infrastructure.

It seems that everyone I knew left, and those who stayed had reason to. That sentence stayed with me all through dinner. Everyone I knew left. Those who stayed had reason to. I left for a while, though "a while" seems too small a phrase for the distance involved. I left because I had to, because survival required it,

because staying under my father's version of reality would have meant disappearing in a way I could not allow.

I left, built a life, crossed towns, crossed states, and crossed versions of myself I did not yet understand. I became someone the younger version of me might have stared at in disbelief. Successful, yes. Skilled, yes. Scarred, certainly. But alive. Fully, stubbornly, inconveniently alive. I did not know I was lost. And yet I never forgot where I came from.

When I was a young girl, I told Mom that one day I would make it in life. I would be successful. I said it with the certainty children have before the world tries to teach us how unpredictable certainty can become. I did not know what success meant then. I did not imagine grief, estate calls, or standing at the hardware store counter correcting a lie my father left behind like unpaid debt.

I told Mom that one day, when it was time, I would return. I did not know when. I returned, but not as the girl who left. I returned as the woman who survived leaving.

May 3, 2026—Stamford, New York (Mom's House)

There are nights when the world hands you information in the least serious setting possible, and you are left standing there with a drink in your hand, trying not to laugh at how cleanly people reveal themselves when they think they are being casual.

I was at a bar, which is not generally where I go looking for confirmation of anything important, but life has a habit of placing the most useful evidence in rooms with bad lighting, beer signs, and someone's cousin yelling over a jukebox.

At some point, a woman in her seventies introduced herself and asked me if my husband and I had children.

She did not ask it carefully. She did not pause. She asked the question the way women of her generation often ask things —directly, socially, and with the assumption already loaded into the sentence.

I corrected the husband part, of course. *Wife*.

"I'm happily married to another woman, so unless I suddenly start dating men, it's unlikely I'll be having children anytime soon."

Then, for the next few hours, she and her sister treated me like someone familiar. They laughed with me. They hugged me. They joked with me. They offered me shots, which I politely declined. They leaned into the kind of easy physical closeness

that happens only when people are comfortable enough to stop managing the interaction. Touch tells the truth faster than language. People can choose polite words; they cannot always manufacture ease. Ease arrives or it does not. That night, it arrived without hesitation.

For most of the night, the room remained simple. Women laughing. Women talking. Women hugging in the loose, ordinary way of bars, old stories, and shared amusement while the men drank their beers and played pool. No one treated me like a question. No one behaved as though I were a problem in need of resolution. The room had its own rhythm, and for once, I did not feel the need to stand outside of it studying the structure.

Then there was the one man. There is almost always one man.

He was not the room. That distinction matters. He was a malfunction inside it, not the structure itself. Everyone else had managed to exist without turning my body into a public inquiry. He, however, encountered whatever private confusion he was carrying, and decided the appropriate response was to become twelve years old with access to alcohol.

At some point, he asked if I was transgender. I told him, calmly enough, that I was born in between, and that sometimes people make mistakes. He was not the first, and I assured him that I was not offended. I did not say it defensively. I said it the way I might explain anything else in life. Fact, not invitation. Information, not confession.

He heard the information and immediately proved he was not mature enough to have been given it.

“You mean like a hermaphrodite? Can you actually fuck yourself? Are you hung?”, he asked, before offering to show me his penis, which apparently he was proud of.

I looked at him and asked whether he truly believed that, after two decades as a paramedic, I had somehow never encountered full frontal nudity. Did he imagine that emergency medicine had politely shielded me from the human body? Did he think I spent twenty years walking into bedrooms, bathrooms, wrecks, barns, motel rooms, city streets, living rooms, fields, and hospital bays with my eyes closed? The human body stopped being mysterious to me a very long time ago. Under stress, shock, illness, injury, intoxication, grief, heat, cold, bad judgment, and worse timing, people become extremely unromantic very quickly.

I had made the offhanded comment that he seemed to be preoccupied with his penis and asking about people sticking things into their pelvic cavities, and that Freud would have found him utterly fascinating.

He tried again anyway, because some men mistake persistence for charm and do not realize the rest of us are watching them lose altitude in real time.

I told him I would not even consider looking at it for less than five hundred dollars in cash, and even then it would do

absolutely nothing for me whatsoever. If he was expecting a reaction from me, there would not be one.

I also pointed out that any reaction he did see was going to be *sudden excitement that I suddenly just made five hundred dollars and will be buying the next round of drinks*.

That seemed to damage the little performance he had assembled for himself. He had expected the conversation to bend toward him. Instead, I turned the entire thing into a transaction where even payment would fail to generate interest.

There is power in refusing to become part of someone else's scene. He bluntly asked how much it would cost to see my chest.

I told him that unless he was suddenly my gynecologist, my wife, or one of my close female friends, the answer was *no*. I added that, "I might consider it if he were a woman and we had mutually agreed to compare. Alternatively if everyone at the bar collectively gathers five hundred dollars, and everyone here wants to see my chest, if the owner approves… Challenge accepted."

He got that disappointed look on his face—the specific look of someone who has just realized that entitlement is not the same thing as access.

As he was putting on his coat, he asked, "You really go to a gynecologist?"

I said, yes, *the only woman in my life who feels me up and then bills me for it*.

That was the last usable line in the conversation. There was nowhere for him to go after that except outside, which is exactly where he went. A few moments later, through the window, I saw the flicker of a lighter as he lit a cigarette in the dark.

There was something almost cinematic about that, though not in the grand sense. More like the end of a scene that never understood it had become comic relief. Man attempts boundary violation. Woman responds with professional history, pricing structure, medical categories, and dry humor. Man exits to smoke.

I laughed later, but what stayed with me was not only the joke. It was the contrast. For hours, the room had been easy. Then one person stepped into that ease, failed to understand it, and tried to make his discomfort everyone else's problem.

That is not ambiguity. That is poor handling.

I think I am learning, slowly, not to give the outlier more authority than the pattern.

This has been a recurring problem in my life. One person misreads a situation, and some old part of my nervous system wants to hand them more emotional weight, as if their error carries more truth than the dozens of people who simply move

around me without friction. It takes a long time to stop treating every inaccurate perception like a threat to the record.

The women laughed when I told them that the man outside with the cigarette thought I was transgender. The man revealed himself. The cigarette did the closing argument.

May 6, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

I returned from Mom's yesterday afternoon, after stopping in at Angie's place to return some of her belongings that were still at Mom's house. It should have felt simple. A small errand. A bag or box handed over. The kind of thing people do all the time without assigning it any special weight. But nothing connected to Mom's house feels simple anymore.

Angie told me that she still loved me, and the sentence landed with a weight I did not know where to put. In full autistic fashion, I *stimmed* and bit my lower lip, not because I did not understand what she meant, but because I understood it too clearly and too late for it to become simple. I reminded her that I had autism.

Angie loves through romance. I love through friendship. That was the mismatch we spent nearly twenty years trying to translate into something functional, and maybe that is why the ending never fit cleanly into the category of failure.

It was not that our relationship failed. Our bonding styles simply did not match up. She kept reaching for me through the language of partnership, and I kept reaching back through the language of loyalty, proximity, shared history, and practical devotion. We were not absent of love. We were full of it, just organized differently, and sometimes love is not enough to make two internal systems speak the same language.

I had offered Mom's car as a gift to a family friend months ago. It seemed like the right thing to do at the time, or at least the kindest. I did not need it. Someone else might. That was the entire calculation. Clean. Practical. Human. But they remained indecisive about it for *months*, and grief does not make indefinite patience easier.

Estate lawyers do not care that people are uncertain. They do not care that a car once belonged to your mother. To them, it is title, transfer, asset, liability, timeline. To them, love is not admissible unless it has paperwork attached.

In the eleventh hour, with Mom's estate lawyers pressuring me to transfer it, I sold it to an old friend from childhood. That was the decision. Not the one I thought I would make, necessarily, but the one that made sense when the window started closing and I had tired of calling and reminding them of the deadline. I have learned that some decisions do not arrive because you are ready. They arrive because everyone else is finished waiting for you to be.

Mom is gone, and suddenly everything changed. And the thing is, I'm 46, and I still don't know the answers. I do not know when it is assumed that generosity becomes obligation. I do not know when patience becomes self-betrayal. I do not know when a casual friend becomes safe, or when a safe person becomes casual. I do not know why grief makes some people kinder and others slightly more transactional. I do not know why a car can feel like a moral dilemma, or why returning someone's

belongings can feel like closing a door no one admitted was open.

Yesterday's breakfast was at TP's Cafe. Heather was working that morning. I ordered my usual breakfast—western omelette with cheddar cheese, rye toast, home fries, and coffee. Strawberry preserves for my toast. They got my order right as usual, which should not have mattered as much as it did.

But it did.

There is a kind of mercy in a place that still knows what you order. The reliability of someone bringing rye toast instead of white, strawberry preserves instead of grape in those little packets, coffee poured into your mug without needing to request more of it. A western omelette with cheddar cheese, because that is what I always get. Home fries, because breakfast needs different textures. Coffee, because civilization requires it.

When I go there, I try to sit by the window where I can look out on the same street that raised me. The same street where all my friends lived. The same street where childhood happened before anyone understood that childhood was temporary. Some of those friends I see all the time. Some I hear from now and then. But for the majority of them, I have not seen or heard from them ever again.

That is one of the strangest parts of middle age. Not loss, exactly. Disappearance without announcement. Entire friendships that once seemed permanent simply thinning out

until there is nothing left to hold. No final conversation. No betrayal. No dramatic exit. Just time doing what time does when nobody interrupts it. People move, marry, have children, divorce, change names, change states, grow old, become strangers, die, or become so thoroughly absorbed into the lives they built that the person who once knew them in childhood becomes a decorative fact at best. The street raised me, but it did not keep everyone. Maybe no street can. Maybe that is expecting too much from pavement.

I sat by the window at TP's Cafe and looked out at the place where everything once felt permanent because I did not yet understand permanence was mostly a childhood misunderstanding. The houses where my friends lived are still there in some form, though most of the people are not. The old gravitational friendships are gone. What remains is the architecture of memory without the population that once made it feel inhabited.

Timothy Touhey's gallery on Main Street burned[4]. I keep thinking about that too, because some losses are not content to stay in one category. A gallery is a building, technically. A storefront. Walls. A door. A space where objects and sound and conversation once gathered. But Tim's gallery was never only a gallery to me. Timothy Touhey was a long-time friend of my family, and he continued to be a major part of my life when I

[4] 71 Main Street, Stamford, New York

came to visit. He passed away long before his time. He was a talented artist, composer, and writer.

People like that do not simply die. They leave behind a change in the air. They alter the way a town sounds when you walk through it. Main Street is still Main Street, but without him, and without that gallery, something essential has gone missing. Not loudly. Not in a way tourists would notice. But the absence is there, standing in plain sight. The kind of absence that only makes sense if you knew the person, knew the building, knew the particular gravity of his presence. Some people become part of the emotional infrastructure of a place without anyone realizing it until they are gone. The town remains, but it no longer functions in quite the same way.

There are too many absences lately. Mom. Tim. The gallery. The friends who left town. The friends who stayed, but not in ways that included me. The family friend who could not decide about the car until the decision was no longer theirs to make. The version of me who believed that history gave people a better claim to trust. I no longer believe that. History explains proximity. It does not prove care.

Being known for a long time is not the same thing as being known well. A person can know your childhood street, your parents' names, your old dog, the house you grew up in, the general outline of your life, and still fail completely to understand the woman standing in front of them.

Madeline Grace O'Malley is my best and closest friend besides Amelia.

There are people who have remained real while other things have become uncertain. There are people whose presence does not require me to translate myself into something easier to shelve. Maddie is one of those friends who sees me fully for who I really am.

After breakfast, the day kept moving in that ordinary way days do when they refuse to acknowledge what a person is carrying. Coffee cooled. Plates were cleared. Someone laughed nearby. Heather worked her shift. The street outside continued being itself.

I am 46, and I still do not know what to do with that.

I only know what happened.

May 8, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

Today is Amelia's thirty-ninth birthday, and tonight we're going out to dinner with my best friend Maddie—the kind of ordinary sentence that would have sounded impossible to the younger version of me who spent most of her life convinced she would always be standing just outside the circle of things, watching other people belong to each other while pretending she didn't notice.

There are lies so absurd they almost fail to hurt at first. They arrive too large for the room, too ridiculous to take seriously, and for a few seconds the mind refuses to organize them into pain. Then the body catches up. Then the old pattern presents itself with such clean familiarity that the actual sentence almost stops mattering.

Angie had made outrageous claims to Amelia about my career and my reputation. That I was never a lieutenant. That I cheated on her while we were together. That I was never career. That the work I spent more than two decades doing somehow did not count, or did not happen, or did not belong to me in the way I have always said it did.

It was not just inaccurate. It was career erasure from the very same person who witnessed me go to work every morning with a promise that *no matter what happens at work, I will make it home safely*. And yet I have spent most of my life listening to other people revise me for their own comfort.

My father revised my body. Schools revised my name. Doctors revised my future. Family revised my history. Strangers revised my womanhood. And now, apparently, my career had become something else people felt entitled to edit, as if the years I spent in high-volume fire, EMS, and rescue systems across New York State—from rural departments to the New York City metro area—were a story I had simply told too many times, and not a life that left its marks in my knees, my hands, my sleep, my posture, my dreams, and every room I still scan before sitting down. I still sit in the back facing the entrance, noting exit points, scanning the room as I enter.

I was a Lieutenant Specialist Firefighter and Paramedic, and I was career. I was issued a yellow helmet because, in practice, I had become a captain still wearing the coat of a lieutenant. The rank structure had its official language, but the work had its own truth. I was the lead. People looked to me when something was moving too fast, when the room had too much noise in it, when the first version of the plan was not going to hold, and when someone needed to make a decision before the situation made one for us.

My helmet was yellow. Because of that, anything I attached to my bunker gear carried reflective trim. In autistic fashion, I had decided to match the reflective trim with my helmet color to set me apart from everyone else as an officer. My bunker flashlight had school bus yellow reflective trim. My air bottle had school bus yellow reflective trim. Other pieces of equipment followed the same visual system. I did not choose it

because it looked good. I chose it because visibility is not decoration when things are dark, wet, loud, smoky, and already halfway to chaos. It was accountability. It was identification. It was making sure that if someone saw that flash of yellow in bad light, they knew where I was, what role I held, and what I was attached to.

A lot of the guys mocked me for it. School bus yellow, they said. Short bus yellow. They were not subtle. Men rarely are when cruelty has already decided it is joking.

That used to piss me off severely, not because I lacked a sense of humor, but because I understood the insult underneath it. They were using the same color that marked my command function to imply that I was mentally slow. They were trying to turn visibility into humiliation. They were trying to make the sign of my role into a social defect.

And then, eventually, the system I built became company policy. Line officers were issued Streamlight flashlights for their bunker coats and instructed to mark them with reflective tape according to rank—red for lieutenants, yellow for captains, white for chiefs and assistant chiefs. The same people who mocked the system eventually worked inside it without question.

That is the part people often leave out when they tell stories about women like me. They mock the method first. Then they adopt it after it works. By the time policy catches up,

nobody remembers who endured the jokes while the idea was still only useful instead of official.

I think a lot of my life has been like that. I was different my entire life. Not in the soft, vague way people say different when they are trying to be gentle. I mean different in the factual sense. Intersex. Autistic. Queer. Female in a world that kept trying to find some administrative excuse to make that more complicated than it was.

I do not consider my autism or my intersex variation to be disorders, regardless of the language other people attach to them. They are simply a part of who I am and exactly how I identify. But in the 1990s and early 2000s, autism was considered incompatible with my job. Not officially in every case, not always in policy language anyone would admit to later, but in the imagination of the culture.

Fire and EMS wanted intensity, pattern recognition, sensory tolerance, repetition, command, and obsession with detail—but they did not want the word autism anywhere near the personnel file. At one point, I wrote my name EMILY in letter magnets across the drawer assigned to hold my personnel file. I got written up often and wanted to make sure they knew where to find my file.

Someone at the office had formally documented this as a complaint and placed the paperwork inside the same drawer that still wore the magnets. That felt like the purest expression of governmental bureaucracy imaginable—an entire system

willing to spend an hour or more of government time, money, paperwork, and manpower documenting a problem than the thirty seconds it would have taken to actually remove the magnets.

The best part is that they couldn't rationally justify finding someone for such a task, so the magnets stayed and occasionally another complaint about them would be added to the file.

People suspected, I think. They had to. I was too precise, too patterned, too direct, too vigilant, too attached to systems that made sense even when other people thought they looked peculiar. I had been formally diagnosed. My primary care doctors knew the whole story—my autism, my intersex history, the exact shape of my body and my life. I had to see the medical director every six months, and somehow neither condition made its way into my work file.

Somehow.

There are silences that harm you, and there are silences that keep you alive long enough to prove everyone wrong. I have lived inside both.

At work, my differences did not disappear. They spilled into everything. Not sloppily. Not as dysfunction. They became placement, preparation, redundancy, visibility, and anticipation.

I was one of only a handful of people who owned their own radio. Other people wore theirs loosely slung across their

shoulders as a badge of honor, or an accessory, or some casual statement of belonging to the world of sirens and late nights.

Mine was always close to my body, on a crossbody strap, where I could feel the weight against my side. That weight felt safe to me. It was not about display. It was orientation. It was contact. It was proof that the line between me and the rest of the system was still open.

Because the radio was mine, I had it customized with a scan function so I could listen to neighboring mutual aid departments. That became important when I made lieutenant. I could hear the discussion before we were officially pulled into it. I could listen as the brass went back and forth deciding whether or not they were going to call us for coverage, whether the incident was big enough, whether the situation was getting away from them.

Most people heard traffic. I heard probability.

I would round up my crew and tell everyone to get ready because we were likely going to be called. Nine times out of ten, it became a full response. By the time the official request came through, everyone was already in gear. All we had to do was start the trucks and go.

That was not luck. That was not me playing with a radio. That was operational anticipation. That was the same mind that had learned as a child to listen for shifts in tone, footsteps in hallways, silence that meant trouble, and adults changing the

story I was given a chance to explain what had happened. Trauma gave me vigilance. Autism gave it structure. The job gave it purpose.

People love to separate things that were never separate in me.

I kept Milwaukee lineman's pliers in the radio pocket of my bunker coat. People mocked me for that too. Of course they did. Any system I built before people understood it became a target. But it seemed simple to me. I could get to the pliers with my right (dominant) hand no matter what happened. If I had to, I could get to them with my left hand in a pinch. They were always Milwaukee lineman's pliers. Same feel, same weight, big red handles, same trust. I did not want a tool I had to think about. I wanted a tool my hand already understood in darkness.

Those pliers could break car windows if you hit the biting end at the right spot. They cut through wires and battery cables without complaint. In EMS, they opened oxygen tanks in an emergency, cut tubing, and could be used with paracord to improvise a tourniquet if the situation got ugly enough. There were so many situations handled simply by shoving the pointed ends into something and using the handles until the stuck thing changed its mind. Somehow it worked every single time. I had a carabiner on my belt too. I trusted both with my life. Same reason. Many functions. Low ego. High utility.

That was always my preference. Carry things that can solve more than one problem. Build systems that survive contact

with reality. Put tools where the body can find them after the thinking brain has too much else to do.

People saw quirks. I was building survivability. I read emergency scenes the same way I read twelve-lead ECGs—pattern first, then deviation, then the quiet realization that something critical was about to fail. There is a difference.

I was the only person at work issued a Survivair SCBA while everyone else used Scott packs. Mine was issued specifically to me. My name was on the air bottle—SLATIN—along with RESCUE in 3M reflective lettering. The reflective striping was doubled, and I had an extra luminous pinstripe. Rescue crews tend to be very visually oriented people. It worked well.

That has been the story of my entire life. The system made an exception because the exception worked.

And somehow Angie would look at all of that—the career, the gear, the years, the rank, the calls, the people who knew me, the systems I built, the crews I led—and tell Amelia that *none of it was real in the way I said it was*.

The part that unsettles me is not that the claim was false. False things are everywhere. The world is full of people speaking confidently about lives they did not have the discipline to understand. What unsettles me is that Angie knew enough to know better.

Nearly twenty years is a long time to live near someone's truth. Long enough to know the difference between a job and a career. Long enough to know the difference between costume and calling. Long enough to see the exhaustion, the missed dinners, the late returns, the promises made before shift that no matter what happened, I would make it home safely.

The firehouse was not a story I told to sound interesting. It was the place that raised me after childhood failed to finish the job.

When someone who knows your history tries to rewrite it, the betrayal has a different temperature. It is not ignorance. It is not confusion. It is an attempt to relocate reality to a place where they feel less accountable to it.

I confronted her about it one night at Mom's house. Amelia was across the hall in her room at the front of the house while Angie and I sat in mine with the door half closed between us and the sound of the radio playing in the background.

She looked directly at me and said, "You were never a lieutenant. You were a volunteer." Then, almost seamlessly, the accusation shifted and she accused me of cheating on her too, as if both things belonged to the same category of invention.

The strange part is that my entire life I have bonded through friendship first. That was always my nature. If intimacy or sex ever emerged from that closeness, it only deepened the friendship that already existed. I remained friends with these

women even though I had sexual relations with them at one point or another.

With Angie, though, I was completely faithful. If anything, I spent years setting aside my own needs trying to fill hers, convinced that if I just gave enough of myself away carefully enough, consistently enough, eventually the distance between us would close on its own.

It is not about rank. Not really. It is about credibility. It is about the lifelong experience of standing in front of people with evidence in both hands while they continue preferring the version of you that makes them more comfortable.

As a child, I had to prove I was a girl to people who had already decided my father's lie was easier to manage. As a teenager, I had to prove my queerness was not a phase, not a performance, not a misunderstanding. As an adult, I had to prove that my body was not a contradiction. That my autism was not incapacity. That my directness was not aggression. That my command was not attitude. That my difference was not evidence against me. And now this. Proving I was what I was at work.

There is something almost insulting about being asked to defend a life that already cost so much to survive. I do not need Angie to believe I was a lieutenant. I was there. My crew was there. The records were there. Reality does not vanish because someone tells a cleaner lie.

Still, I know why it hurts. It hurts because being different has always made me vulnerable to revision. People assume that if they cannot categorize you easily, then your own account of yourself must be negotiable. A woman like me is often disputed. I'm too tall. Too direct. Too intelligent. Too capable. Too autistic. Too queer. Too unwilling to soften the facts just because someone else is having trouble with them. They do it because the alternative requires them to admit that someone they underestimated was operating at a level they did not understand.

At work, my difference was everywhere. It was in how I wore my radio. It was in where I kept my tools. It was in how I read a scene before it declared itself. It was in how I arranged reflective trim. It was in how I insisted on consistency because consistency saves time, and time is sometimes the thing standing between a living person and a body. It was in the way I listened to radio traffic, the way I anticipated what was coming, the way I could feel a shift before other people named it.

The things that made me strange also made me useful.

That is the part people never know what to do with. They want difference to be either tragic or inspirational. Mine was neither. Mine was practical. It lived in my hands.

That is what Angie tried to take when she said those things to Amelia. But Amelia knows me. That is the strange mercy of my life now. Amelia knows the difference between a story and a record. She knows that my past is not decorative. She

knows that when I speak about the fire/rescue years, I am not reaching for attention. I am naming the system that built me and nearly ruined me. She knows I still sit where I can see the door. She knows that I need the information—I do not like surprises because my whole life was one long series of other people deciding things about me before I got the chance to answer.

She knows. That matters deeply to me.

May 10, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

Last night was the first time in years that I actually had a dream. That feels strange to write. Most people dream regularly, or at least remember enough of the fragments to say they did. Last night was different.

In the dream, I was homeless again, living in my car the way I did when I was younger. But the part that stayed with me after I woke up was not the homelessness itself. It was the fact that, in the dream, it did not bother me. It was simply understood. I was living in my car. That was the condition of things.

The younger version of me knew what that actually meant. She knew the cold. She knew the logistics. She knew how to make a vehicle function as shelter, bedroom, storage unit, hiding place, escape route, and proof of life. But dream-me was not afraid. That is what unsettled me.

Some part of my mind revisited one of the hardest arrangements of my early life and treated it like familiar terrain. Not danger. Not emergency. Just something already known.

I woke up thinking about summer camp.

That makes sense to me, though I doubt it would make sense to anyone else. The dream was about homelessness, but the feeling after it was about being unheld. There is a difference, though the body does not always bother separating them. A person can have shelter and still feel socially homeless. A person

can be remembered and still not be included. A person can be called a friend by people who have never known a single meaningful thing about her life.

For decades, I was told to believe this was friendship. Mostly by my parents. Especially Mom, who possessed a gift I never inherited—the ability to call someone a friend even when there had been no contact for decades, then revive the connection instantly if that person appeared again later in life. To her, friendship could go dormant for decades and remain intact. It was a book placed on a shelf, waiting to be opened again.

I understood friendship as continuity. Not constant contact, not performance, not obligation dressed up as affection—but some kind of ongoing witness. Some kind of mutual awareness that the other person is still living, changing, surviving, becoming.

I do not need someone to speak to me every single day to believe they matter. But decades of silence do not feel like friendship to me. They feel like memory wearing the wrong name.

Summer camp was supposed to be one of those lifelong things. Or at least that was the story. We were all told it mattered, that the bonds formed there were special, that we would always be connected by those summers, by the lake, by the cabins, by the campfires, by the smell of pine needles,

sunscreen, wet towels, lake water, and woodsmoke that still lives somewhere in the back of my nervous system.

The last real summer was 1998. After that, everyone left. By 2000, everyone I knew had left.

Not all at once, and not with any cruelty I can point to. That would have been easier. There was no final argument, no dramatic betrayal, no closing scene where someone defined the ending for me. Everyone simply continued living, and I was no longer inside the structure of what continued.

For years, I watched the people I called friends live their lives. They got married. They had children. They bought houses, built careers, took vacations, and moved through adulthood in visible, connected ways. Occasionally, a collection of photographs would appear online—a beach, a dinner table, a wedding, a vacation house somewhere—and there would be a handful of people I knew from the same camp standing together, smiling with the ease of people who had remained threaded through one another's lives. I was never included.

Camp reunions came around every several years. I attended most of them. I showed up the way I always show up—willing, observant, hopeful, still carrying the strange idea that shared history might eventually become present-tense belonging.

There were hugs. Conversations. Old stories. The temporary warmth that appears when people agree, for a few

hours, to remember the same version of the past. There were promises too. We will keep in touch. We will meet up. We will make plans soon so that we won't let so much time pass. Then everyone went home, and nothing happened. The same story repeated itself.

For a while, Facebook created the illusion that the connections still existed. We were all technically linked, all visible at the edges of one another's lives. It was not friendship, exactly, but it was atmospheric proof. They were still somewhere. I was still somewhere. A thin wire remained strung between the past and the present, and even though no current moved through it, I mistook its existence for continuity.

Then came the day I closed my Facebook account, and the last connection was severed. For months I had posted my contact information on my Facebook page, citing social media as contributing to the worsening of my mental health. No one came looking. That was confirmation of my fear.

I do not blame them for living their lives. People are allowed to continue. They are allowed to marry, have children, go on vacations, build circles, and keep company with those who remained close enough to become permanent.

What I object to is social shunning framed under the categorization of friendship. The assumption that fond memory and friendship are the same thing. The expectation that a person can be absent from every meaningful chapter of your adult life

and still occupy the same relational category as someone who stayed.

They missed everything. They never knew my career. They never knew what it cost me to become a Paramedic and Firefighter. They never knew my first house. They never knew the nearly twenty years I spent with Angie, the way that relationship shaped my adult life, the way it ended, returned, shifted, fractured again, and left behind a record too complicated for anyone outside it to summarize cleanly.

They never knew the alcoholism. They never knew the mental health struggles. They never knew the nights when I was not sure I would make it through the next day, never mind the next year. They never knew what it meant for me to retire at forty, to walk away from work that had raised me, sharpened me, injured me, and nearly consumed whatever softness I had managed to keep alive.

They never knew of Amelia. They never saw the farm. They never saw the life I built after the life they remembered became obsolete. They never saw me become the woman I am now. And I wanted them to know.

I wanted them to see the broken parts of me. Not because I wanted pity, and not because I needed rescue. I wanted witness. I wanted someone from that earlier world to look at the full arc of my life and understand that I continued after they left the frame.

I wanted them to know that the girl they remembered had not remained suspended forever in some Adirondack summer, sunburned and awkward and quietly in love with girls she did not yet know how to claim out loud.

I wanted them to know because, over the years, I was there for their struggles.

Every couple of years, someone from my past would find my number and call me. The pattern became almost procedural. Something had gone wrong—a breakup, a crisis, grief, fear, some internal fracture they needed to say aloud to someone who would listen. And I would answer. Of course I would. I have always been the person who answers. I would listen, advise, explain, hold the line, offer the kind of calm I learned to produce under much worse conditions.

Then that would literally be the last time I ever heard from them. Crisis, contact, advice, silence. Repeat often enough, and even affection starts to feel extractive. That is not friendship. That is response work. I have already done enough response work for one lifetime.

And then there was Allegra[5].

I cannot write honestly about camp without writing her name. I was once in love with a girl from camp named Allegra. Madly in love with her, in the way first love is always mad because it has not yet learned proportion. She was my first love,

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[5] Allegra Peterson was born and raised in Boston, Massachusetts.

and some part of me probably always will be in love with her—not in a practical way, not in a way that asks anything from the present, but in the way first love becomes a fixed coordinate.

There are people who do not remain in your life, yet never fully leave your internal geography. Allegra was that for me.

I do not know what I meant to her. Maybe very little. Maybe something ordinary. Maybe a passing summer closeness remembered, if at all, with warmth and no particular ache attached. That is the imbalance of first love, especially queer first love.

Still, she mattered. She still matters, though not in the same way. She is part of that preserved world, part of the reason camp never became merely camp in my mind. It was not just cabins, lake water, schedules, and counselors with clipboards. It was longing. It was recognition. It was the first time my heart pointed toward another girl with such certainty that even fear could not fully obscure it.

For me, camp was never just a chapter. It was an origin point. For everyone else, maybe it was summer.

Another reunion is scheduled for the end of this summer. Before the email came, I told Amelia I would be shocked if I were invited at all. Invitations carry more meaning than people admit. They say, *we thought of you while deciding who belongs here*.

I do not know what I expect from going back, if I even go back at all. Maybe nothing. Maybe that is the healthiest answer. I am not twenty. I am not sixteen. I am not the girl living in her car, trying to pretend the situation was temporary enough to be survivable. I am not the young woman madly in love with Allegra, carrying an entire emotional universe in silence. I am not the camper enrolled under a name that was never mine, or the kitchen worker after exile, washing dishes because labor did not ask as many questions as people did.

I have lived enough life that anyone who only remembers me from camp does not know me at all. I still need the closure, regardless of how it ends. That is not their fault.

I grew up alone, and my witnesses became Penfold, the moon, and pine trees.

That sentence has been sitting in me all day. It may be the most accurate thing I know about my childhood. People came and went. Friends rotated in and out of eras. Family became conditional. Institutions renamed me, relocated me, corrected me, filed me incorrectly, and acted surprised when the paperwork failed to become biology.

But Penfold stayed. The moon returned. The pines stood where they were placed and refused to participate in anyone's revision of me.

Penfold was not just a dog. He was the one who knew who I truly was. The parts of me nobody acknowledged, and

never talked about. He knew the girl under the blanket, the girl in the car, the girl in the tent, the girl trying to understand why the adults who were supposed to protect her kept making survival more complicated than it needed to be. He did not ask me to explain myself. He did not need the socially acceptable version. He simply came close, pressed his body against mine, and made the world less unbearable.

Then, one day when I got called into work last minute on my day off. Instead of Angie watching Penfold, he instead ended up at moms for the day, Dad forced Mom to have Penfold put down before his time. I went to work that morning, only to return the following morning and Penfold was dead. I have carried that regret ever since.

I have lived long enough, and worked enough scenes, to understand that life is not obligated to give anyone a gentle ending. But Penfold was taken from me before his natural arc was finished because my father made that decision, and my mother carried it out.

The most reliable witness of my childhood was removed, and once again I had to understand that even love could be overridden by someone else's authority. Dad did not just control narratives. He controlled endings.

I do not think I ever forgave him for that. I am not sure forgiveness is even the correct category. Some things are not awaiting repair. They are part of the record. Penfold deserved more time. I deserved more time with him. Mom deserved the

courage not to be forced into carrying out my father's will in ways that harmed both of us. But that was our house. That was the structure. Dad decided. Mom absorbed. I adapted. Penfold paid the price.

I have always struggled with the way people use the word friend. To me, friendship is not nostalgia. It is not dormant affection. It is not a pleasant feeling reactivated at reunions. It is not the ability to say, "We should keep in touch," while already knowing no one will do the work required to make that sentence true.

Friendship is presence under changing conditions. Friendship is witness. Friendship is someone knowing the version of you that came after the old version survived.

By that standard, my friends now are Amelia and Maddie —the two greatest friends I have had in my entire life. Amelia knows the living person, not the preserved one. Maddie knows me almost as well as Amelia. They know my humor, my intensity, my silences, my shutdowns, my practical tenderness, my difficult standards, my ridiculous consistency, my intolerance for nonsense, and the way my heart stays loyal long after most people would have packed up and called it wisdom.

They have seen broken parts of me and did not turn that access into distance. That matters tremendously to me.

It took most of my life to find friendships that match the way I love. Not perfectly. Nothing human is perfect. But close

enough that my nervous system recognizes the difference. To them, I am *Emily*.

That should not feel revolutionary. And yet, it does.

Emily Pratt Slatin

Penfold ♡

my witness

May 11, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

Amelia just turned thirty-nine on May 8, and she asked me what it feels like to turn forty.

I told her I was surprised I made it that far.

I meant it as a joke, mostly, but not entirely. The older I get, the more I realize how much truth I have hidden inside humor because it is easier than pausing the room, setting down an earlier than usual can of Coke, and saying the thing plainly. I am surprised I made it this far. Not because I had some dramatic death wish or because I spent my life being reckless for the sake of being reckless, but because I have spent so much of my life in places where one bad calculation, one unstable structure, or one small failure of physics could have changed everything.

My younger years were adventurous. Rock climbing. Dirt bikes. ATVs. UTVs. Long-distance biking. Mountain biking. Urban exploring. Week-long wilderness trips. Backpacking. Canoeing.

At eighteen came the start of my fire department career. High-angle rope rescues. A handful of tactical rescues. Firefighting. EMS. All the calls where danger was not theoretical, and all the moments where I had somehow completed the assignment before my emotions could catch up. I hopped freight trains a handful of times.

I think about that sometimes now, more than I used to. Maybe that is what forty does. It doesn't make you old. It makes you aware of perspective.

When I was younger, I did not think of my life as dangerous. I thought of it as adventure. I thought of it as curiosity, silence, distance, effort, and the strange relief of getting somewhere other people did not usually go. As a small child, I climbed everything. Trees, furniture, fences, mom's house, whatever structure offered height or handholds. I learned ropes early because ropes made sense to me. Knots made sense. Friction made sense. Gravity made sense. Systems either held or they did not. They were honest that way.

As a teenager, I used to climb out onto the roof of my mom's house just to get some quiet. I could see the town differently from up there. The same streets, the same houses, the same people, the same small world I was expected to fit inside, but from above it all looked temporarily manageable.

Distance gave everything shape. Nobody really understood why I needed to be up there. My mother accepted it, mostly, though as the heights increased, so did her anxiety.

I was the awkward, misunderstood, underestimated little girl who was a secret genius, though I had no clean way to say that without sounding ridiculous, arrogant, wounded, or all three.

I carried a camera and a notebook everywhere I went. I skipped school as much as possible. I documented things. I took pictures. I filled notebooks. I tried to keep records of what I saw and what I knew and what I suspected. I had so many photographs, and so many pages, and for a while I must have

believed, in the quiet private logic of childhood, that if I wrote enough down, I could prove I had been there.

Then I was sent to boarding school, and my parents cleaned out my room, and all of it was thrown away. The notebooks. The photographs. The early archive of a girl who had already begun making evidence out of her own existence. I do not think I have ever fully gotten over that. I doubt I ever will. I spent most of my senior year hitchhiking.

I learned by mistake too early that records can disappear when someone else decides they are clutter. I learned that a whole private world can be erased by people who do not recognize its value. I now preserve things almost fiercely. Images. Sentences. Weather. Places. The pottery that mom and I made in the basement of Stamford. The way light fell across an abandoned room. The way silence sounded in a house after winter had gone on too long. The way a person looked at me before saying something they could not take back.

Abandoned places always felt lonely and familiar at the same time. That is probably more revealing than I want it to be. I used to think I loved them because they were strange, because they were quiet, because they had history, because they were full of visual texture and risk and evidence. All of that was true. But I think I also understood them. Empty rooms. Broken windows. Paint peeling from walls. Staircases going straight into questionable life choices. The remnants of lives other people had

walked away from. I knew that feeling before I knew how to name it.

The wilderness was different. Wilderness trips gave me connection. Real connection. This was the 1990s, before social media and cell phones, before everyone carried the whole screaming world in their pocket. When my friends and I went out for a week, we were actually *gone*. There was bad food, paper maps, backpacks with country flag patches, canoes, muddy boots, inside jokes, shared exhaustion, and the kind of conversation that only happens when nobody can escape into a screen.

I loved hiking most, as long as the terrain did not climb steeply forever. But the hikes in the Adirondacks and New Hampshire that had ladders were my favorites. Insane elevation gains, wooden ladders bolted into rock, exposure, effort, and that sharp little thrill of looking at a route and realizing the only way through was up.

I have always felt safest either at home or outdoors. Not necessarily because the world outside is gentle. It is not. Weather can kill you. Terrain can punish arrogance. Cold does not care how smart you are. But outdoors, the variables are honest. At home, the systems are mine and for the most part, predictable. Everywhere else feels a little less certain. It is not that crowds overwhelm me. It is that when there is less to focus on, I can be more selective. I can choose the signal. I can hear myself think.

This past winter made that harder. It was the worst winter in recent memory, and I do not think I understood how badly it was affecting me until I was already deep into it. Winter in central Vermont is not decorative. It is not a postcard. It is logistics, ice, darkness, frozen equipment, bad roads, short days, long nights, and the constant low-level calculation of what can go wrong before morning. I have lived through hard winters before, but this last one got into me. It worked on my mind slowly, the way cold works into an old house through every seam nobody sealed well enough.

By February, I felt like I was functioning more than living. That is a hard thing to admit, even now. I have reached a strange point in my life where continuing to work simply for the sake of money feels almost counterproductive. Maddie and Amelia have both asked me repeatedly in recent weeks what I want to do with the rest of my life. I do not think I have an answer yet. Maybe that is part of what this winter has been about.

May 12, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

The photograph is from 1989. I am leaning over the railing at 78 Main Street in Stamford, New York, wearing a jumpsuit with small white stars on it, with the old patterned wallpaper behind me. I do not remember the day it was taken. I remember the house. I remember the feeling of being watched, and watching back. There is a difference.

I look at that picture now and see a child who had already learned something she should not have needed to learn so early. Not fear exactly. Not sadness either. More like awareness. The kind that settles in before language catches up.

Writers often begin as children who learned early that watching mattered. I learned that at an early age.

It does not matter where you go, or where you have been. People remember who you are as a person. Not always correctly. Not always kindly. But they remember the shape of you, or the version they were able to understand. Given enough time, distance, and shared life experience, the pattern becomes visible. People remember what they were capable of seeing.

All but a small handful of relationships in my life have existed in the same category: me standing outside the door. Present, close enough to hear the room, and still not inside it. I learned to hide between the lines of whatever I was writing before I understood that writing was not a hobby. It was a record.

Friendship, for me, was never casual. I usually had one person at a time. When that person left, it felt like my world being torn apart. Closure is rarely neat. Most endings do not announce themselves. They arrive as absence. A phone call that never comes. A message that stays unanswered. A person who used to know the details of your life becoming someone who would need context before the story could even begin.

And then there exists the other category of friendship. The friends who truly see you for who you really are, on every level. Matt. Penfold. Amelia. Maddie. Those friendships ring like a bell in the night whenever I feel unbound and alone in this world. The people who did never waffled.

Mom did not make the list. That is not cruelty. It is classification. Mom loved me. I know that. She kept things my father would have destroyed. She saved photographs, patches from work, and pieces of a girlhood other people tried to distort into something else. She saw me in the subtle ways that mattered. She also compromised in ways that mattered. *Nothing mattered more to mom than my happiness.*

With mom it was never a question of affection. It was about who stayed consistent when consistency cost them something.

The child in the photograph did not know any of this yet. She only knew the railing, the wallpaper, the house, the adults, the rules, the rooms she was allowed to enter, and the ones she had to read from the doorway. She did not know she would become a writer. She did not know she was already becoming one.

She was just watching. And I have spent the rest of my life writing down what she saw.

May 13, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

It rained all morning in that steady Vermont way, not dramatic, just persistent enough to soften the edges of everything outside the windows. The grass took it without complaint. The pines darkened slightly. The sky hung low over the farm like it had decided today was not going to be a day it wanted to explain itself.

I walked out to where Amelia was sitting, and she commented on the rain. I looked at it for a second, sipping my morning coffee—the gray light, the wet fields, the house holding itself quietly around us—and said, "Wow, what a great day."

I meant it. That is the part people miss about me, I think. They focus only on the history, the diagnoses, the documents, the institutional problems, the firehouse years, my impossible father, the schools, the doctors, and whatever else they think explains a person from a distance, and they assume it all adds up to suffering as a primary condition.

It does not. In fact, I have always had an insatiable thirst for life, adventure, people, and the little unplanned exchanges that make existence feel worth staying awake for. I like rain. I like roads. I like women with complex minds. I like questions that arrive by text from another room. I like workspaces with too many devices and one exact pen that always seems to migrate to the wrong surface. I like the feeling of having somewhere to go, even when that place is simply the living room.

The world has spent a ridiculous amount of time trying to decide whether I am viable. I have spent most of my life being viable anyway.

Lately Amelia has been talking about college and being kicked out for being different. That word again. Different. It has followed both of us around like a stray dog no one wants to admit they fed.

I was kicked out of half my classes during my second year of college because I was queer, and some of my professors claimed religion as the reason they could not have me as a student. They said it as if my existence had become an administrative burden placed upon their conscience. I remember the tone more than the words—the careful phrasing, the desire to sound principled and justified while performing cowardice. They were not rejecting my work. They were rejecting proximity to the person doing it.

That same year, in English class, the professor spent an entire goddamn week discussing *Nighthawks*. A full week. Edward Hopper, loneliness, late-night artificial light, American isolation, the geometry of distance, all of which can be understood fairly quickly if one is paying attention. It is not that the painting is unworthy. It is that some academic rituals seem designed less to think and more to prove that thinking is occurring. After a full week, all we learned was that there were no exits present—effectively everyone was trapped inside the building, and if we look closely enough the woman's hand was

close to, but not quite touching the man's. At some point, I was told I could drop the class if I did not want to spend a week being fascinated by something that only needed to occupy my mind for five minutes.

That felt accurate. I dropped the class. The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead while a professor who probably thought Fleetwood Mac was dangerous looked at me like I was the beginning of societal collapse.

I was not as goth as the girl I knew from class who went all in, the one with skin white like a geisha, the kind of girl who looked as if she had been assembled from eyeliner, black fabric, and a private mythology no administrator would ever be brave enough to understand.

I was quieter. More like a girl inspired by Robin Tunney in The Craft—not costume, not performance, just a visual language that made more sense than whatever conventional femininity was being offered at the time. Dark clothes. Outsider softness. A kind of watchful refusal. I did not think of it as rebellion. I thought of it as getting dressed. I had a favorite shirt that had a crescent moon embroidered onto it.

My professors were not pleased. Of course they were not pleased. Adults who build their sense of order around obedience rarely enjoy seeing a young queer autistic intersex girl arrive looking like she had already rejected the terms of the room before sitting down.

My dorm room was another problem. According to the person the university sent around to inspect rooms, “there was supposedly adequate fluorescent lighting covering the ceiling.”

Adequate according to whom, I asked, though nobody ever seemed entirely sure. Building code, probably. Some institutional assumption that if a room can be illuminated evenly enough to read a policy handbook, then it has been lit correctly. Even if over-illumination is present, at least we tried. But fluorescent ceiling light is not the same as a table lamp. It was never the same. Overhead lighting flattens everything. It makes a room feel exposed, public, and vaguely accusatory. A table lamp creates a place. A table lamp says here is a small pool of light where a person might safely exist.

People thought I was nuts for bringing a lamp into a dormitory room already equipped with enough overhead glare to interrogate a war criminal.

The room echoed terribly. Hard walls, hard floor, hard furniture, hard expectations. Every sound bounced around like it had nowhere else to go. A zipper was too loud. A drawer opening was too loud. Silence was too loud because the room itself kept answering back. So I covered the walls with cloth hangings because the echo drove me insane, and the wall coverings helped tremendously. Other people saw decoration. I was performing acoustic correction before I had the language for it.

The same thing has followed me my entire life. People saw quirks. I was building survivability.

I had multicolor Christmas lights strung around the perimeter of my bedroom as a child. I still have Christmas lights in my workspace, though now they are LED, which sounds like adulthood until you realize it is just the same nervous system with better bulbs.

Lighting has always mattered to me. I use table lamps with shades, diffused light washing across surfaces, accent lights under the bed and dresser, small glows tucked into corners, little constellations of controlled brightness in rooms where I am expected to think, write, live, and remain human. I do not want a ceiling full of light. I want layers. I want room for shadow. I want visibility without exposure.

I draw night skies whenever my drawings require a sky. The day is boring. The clouds come and go, the sun is there in its fury, and nothing else happens unless weather decides to make itself interesting. Night is infinitely more interesting. Stars. Planets. The moon. Distance. Darkness. Small flickers of lights holding their positions against something vast. Night does not flatten the world. It lets things show up on their own terms. The day wants everything visible at once. I have a difficult time trusting that.

In college, the rainbow flag on the inside wall of my dorm room was eventually deemed offensive and obscene. Not over the dean's desk. Not wrapped around a statue. Not stapled to some university seal with a manifesto attached. Just a rainbow

flag in the room I was already paying double to occupy alone because the university could not figure out what to do with me.

That housing arrangement was its own little administrative masterpiece. My mother and I sat in front of the dean of students and demanded placement in either a female dormitory or a co-ed one for my second year.

The dean was a woman who had already gone on for several minutes about having been born in West Virginia, and how she never left. She cited her Christian values. She told us no, because according to my admissions physical, doctors had said I had male-looking genitalia, and therefore I could be housed with the boys. Penis equals boy. Such was her outlook and understanding of the world and how it worked. An entire institutional philosophy reduced to a bumper sticker with worse implications.

I lifted my university sweatshirt gently and showed her my upper body. I had a female rib cage. I had gone through puberty as a girl and had long since started growing breasts. I had been forced to wear loose clothing, especially sweatshirts in the boys dormitory due to university policy barring opposite sex from the dormitories.

My doctors in Upstate New York had said this would continue, and that there was nothing that could reasonably be done about it. The dean looked at me and said my upper body was very clearly that of a woman, and she was very confused. I

do not blame her for being confused. Confusion is at least more honest than certainty built on bad premises.

The compromise was a single room in a co-ed dorm, and I had to pay double because I would not have a roommate. My mother and I agreed. It was both safety and isolation, which is how a lot of accommodations have arrived in my life. The system cannot understand you, so it gives you a room alone and charges extra for the privilege.

That single room was also the place where my flag became indecent. I pointed out that the boys' rooms had posters of women's breasts and genitalia in grotesque positions, overtly sexualized and treated as decoration, and nobody seemed interested in dragging that into the discussion of decency. The rainbow flag was not obscene. It was just *queer*. Apparently, heterosexual vulgarity was considered background noise, while queer visibility had to be treated like contraband.

I dealt with the same nonsense at work. Men had obscene images plastered inside their lockers, and nobody said a word.

My locker had pictures of Angie, Makayla holding my hand at the park when she was still a small child, one of Penfold. Naturally, mine was the one that made certain people from human resources uncomfortable.

I will never know how many feminine care products were taped to the outside of my locker over the years. Pads, tampons, whatever they could find that seemed, to them, like the pinnacle

of humiliation. They thought they were insulting me by associating me with femininity and the reliance on commercial products marketed to assist with biological realities. These people were also paramedics—the stupidity of that still amazes me.

There were also photographs from work pinned inside the locker. Funny things. The moments that never made headlines because nobody outside emergency services would have understood why they mattered.

A snowman wearing a fire helmet outside our station. The fire chief passed out sitting upright on the living room couch, still wearing his white coat and helmet. A photo of me and my crew sitting in power wheels that the local kids brought by to show off at the station after Christmas. One was a police cruiser, another was a fire truck. The kinds of things people laugh about quietly after surviving enough ugliness together.

Every time feminine care products appeared taped to my locker, the men's bunk room mysteriously developed plumbing problems.

I became extremely good with expired IV bags.

At first it was simple. Gravity-fed. Basic drip mechanics. A little clear tubing, a little patience, and just enough saline to make somebody wake up confused and deeply suspicious of the ceiling above them. Eventually the men started showing up early to claim the upper bunks, believing this represented tactical

adaptation on their part. What they failed to understand was that I had grown up autistic, obsessed with systems, fascinated by infrastructure, and fully willing to weaponize both drop ceilings and discarded aquarium hose in the pursuit of equal opportunity inconvenience. The upper bunk strategy failed quickly once I started routing lines through the ceiling tiles.

Oddly enough, it improved morale.

Most of the public only ever sees emergency services at the point where tragedy becomes visible. They do not see the absurdity, the exhaustion, the private ecosystem that forms inside stations and trucks over years. They do not see the tiny moments that keep people human enough to continue doing the work. My locker looked less like a political statement and more like evidence that I had actually lived a life there.

The sexual harassment stopped immediately when I pointed out that I was on a first-name basis with their wives and girlfriends, because let's face it—girls stick together.

When Amelia and I were dating, she saw me without clothes on for the first time and later admitted she was confused as to why I was obviously a queer woman but had male-looking genitalia.

I respect that she told me the truth. I respect confusion when it does not become cruelty. She had known before we were intimate that I had been to the gynecologist, and that part made sense to her. My documents said female, my medical care

included female care, my social presence read as a queer woman, but at that time my name had been changed to a male one, and my anatomy complicated the picture. At first, she thought maybe I had transitioned to male, but even that did not make sense to her.

I have my own quirks, and by no means are either of us perfect. Amelia cleans her silverware with a paper towel before rinsing it in the sink and putting it in the dishwasher, which feels like a multi-step sanitation ritual designed by a committee of one. She often comes to me just before seven in the morning with physics theories when I'm still waking up. She asks hypothetical questions about philosophy over dinner and expects the conversation to survive contact with food. Amelia annoys a lot of people. Not me. Quite the opposite. I am thrilled to call her my wife.

Some people meet a mind like hers and experience it as interruption. I experience it as a mind I understand. She has her own routes through the world, her own systems, her own habits, her own sharp little private logics. The paper towel before the rinse before the dishwasher. The early-morning theory discussions. The dinner question that begins with something innocent and ends somewhere near the heat death of the universe.

We both require internet to be available at all times. Not because we are fragile without it, but because it functions as infrastructure for our minds. Amelia has an iPhone, a

Chromebook, and a Windows desktop I custom built for her. I am all Apple architecture—MacBook, iPad, AirPods Pro, iPhone, and a custom Mac Studio. My ecosystem is not a preference so much as a continuity system. The devices hand off information without behaving like competing bureaucracies.

Amelia and I are obsessed with mesh networking. That probably sounds ridiculous to anyone who has never loved a house enough to want it fully connected. We have workstations throughout the house like satellite nodes of thought. My bed has a folding table for the MacBook Pro. I have an office and creative studio with the Mac Studio. The living room has my childhood bedroom furniture and a workspace where I build things with Raspberry Pi, wireless projects, crafting materials, and whatever device currently requires attention. The garage serves as barn storage and maker space. I write wherever I happen to be.

The house is not organized around rooms so much as functions. Thought moves. Work moves. Writing moves.

I built a web server in the basement so Amelia and I could collaborate in real time with many terabytes of files available locally and instantaneously because they are local. RAID 6, of course, with regular snapshots. There is no reason to build a shared intellectual life and then trust it to a single point of failure like an amateur.

The server hums below us quietly, holding files, drafts, photos, diagrams, ideas, backups, and whatever else two autistic women with too many projects and not enough patience for

latency decide belongs there. Some couples have a shared junk drawer. We have local enterprise storage with redundancy that used to be reserved for information technology departments.

We also have handwritten notebooks we allow each other to read. Nobody else. The notebooks are different from the server. The server is collaboration, speed, archive, continuity. The notebooks are handwriting, pressure, private thoughts. Amelia can read mine. I can read hers. That level of permission does not come from romance. It comes from trust that has survived being tested in ordinary, unglamorous ways.

Amelia and I very rarely call each other by phone. Most of our communication is text. People treat that like a deficiency because they are still invested in outdated hierarchies of closeness. A phone call interrupts. A text waits. A text lets the sentence arrive without dragging the whole room into it. A text can be answered from the garage, the bed, the studio, the kitchen, the living room, or wherever the thought happened to land. It is not distance to us, it is a form of intimacy.

Even my neighbor Trish texts me interesting questions from time to time. I wish she would send them more often. There is something deeply satisfying about a question that arrives from someone else's mind without ceremony. It says, I was thinking, and I thought of you. That is one of my favorite forms of connection.

My diagrams begin on the iPad with the Apple Pencil. Then I run them through software to clean them up. Hand first,

refinement second. That seems to be the pattern in my life. The original line matters, even if it needs correction later. Clean enough to communicate. Human enough to stay mine.

Teachers and doctors always singled me out. Doctors have always wanted a cleaner line than biology was willing to provide. When I was sixteen, every adult except Mom told me that I could not live my life as a girl if I had a penis. I asked why not. Was there a rule somewhere that said I could not, or that I was not allowed? And if such a rule existed, what gave some external entity the authority to override my internal understanding of my own being and how I related to the world? That question became the core of my existence. Why not? That too remains unanswered.

It is such a simple question that people mistake it for defiance. It is not always defiance. Sometimes it is a demand for established structure. Show me the law. Show me the rule. Show me the mechanism by which your discomfort becomes my obligation. Show me why a paperwork category, an anatomical observation, or a social assumption should outrank the lived continuity of the person standing in front of you.

My pediatrician at the time said maybe I knew something they did not. I was sixteen.

In the doctor's office, the gender affirming surgery discussion took center stage around my college years. They seemed to think nineteen or twenty was some ideal point, as if adulthood arrived with a surgical calendar attached. Everyone

was trying to figure out which path in life I was going to take. Apparently, I went my own path, much to the dismay of those who felt like they had a say in the matter.

When doctors brought up my “boy parts,” I pointed out that they had never once been an issue at any time in my life except when I was on a doctor’s exam table. The problem appeared exclusively and reliably in rooms where people wore gloves and turned biology into a binary classification problem.

I told them they were dismissing biological nuance and replacing it with their Westernized binary views on gender. I did not say it because I had read the right books. I said it because I was sitting there as living evidence that their model had failed to account for reality.

They became visibly frustrated when my annual physicals stopped functioning as straightforward examinations and instead turned into philosophical discussions about gender roles, social expectation, and the remarkable lengths people will go to in order to preserve a binary worldview that reality itself does not consistently support.

I kept pointing out that they were searching for a surgical solution to a hypothetical problem that did not actually exist anywhere outside the discomfort of the people attempting to define me.

My body was not preventing me from living my life. Society was struggling with the fact that my existence

complicated a model it preferred to keep simple. The issue was never truly anatomical. It was societal.

When Amelia and I moved to Vermont, doctors wanted proof that I was intersex and demanded all the tests be repeated.

I said that was not a medical problem. It was a paperwork problem. They simply needed to contact my previous hospital system and obtain the records they required. I said no to the tests. Not because I reject medicine. I reject unnecessary repetition conducted for bureaucratic comfort.

On paper, I have a grade eight education. That sentence still amuses me. I was handed a grade eight diploma with the understanding that I would leave school two weeks early and not attend graduation.

Boarding school denied me a diploma, which I do not entirely blame them for, given that I skipped class, hitchhiked, and temporarily ran away my senior year. It apparently took them nearly four whole years to realize I was really a girl being sent to an all-boys school. I never finished college.

Employers eventually found out I had only officially completed grade eight. Two called my employment into question. The last department to do it was the same one that promoted me to lieutenant. I cited twelve years of getting consistent results. In the grand scheme of things, is that not what matters? Apparently not. Institutions love outcomes until

outcomes threaten the paperwork mythology explaining who is supposed to produce them.

I used to love saying “watch me” to people. *Why* not was the question. *Watch me* was the answer.

Those phrases carried me through more than they probably should have. You cannot live as a girl if you have a penis. Why not? You cannot survive without the diploma. Watch me.

I did not ask those questions to be difficult. I asked because the answers were often missing.

The Westernized post-industrial educational system failed me and wasted my time. I remember in my second year of college sitting through a week of Nighthawks and being told to drop the class if I did not wish to participate in the ceremonial appreciation of a painting my mind had already processed. It failed me long before college. It failed me every time it mistook speed for arrogance, difference for disruption, autonomy for pathology, and survival for noncompliance.

The teacher who told me I would amount to nothing currently lives in the same town where they were born, never left, and is a raging alcoholic. I do not say that with triumph. Alcoholism is not funny. But there is a particular adult clarity that arrives when you realize the people who once spoke most confidently about your future were often trapped inside the

smallest and most restrictive versions of their own lives. They were not prophets. They were employees with opinions.

I think about this when Amelia talks about college. College and the years she spent growing up inside a family structure that could not understand her are experiences she and I discuss often. Her stories do not land in me as anecdotes. They land as shared experiences. Two women who were each pushed out of institutions and families for being different.

We are not perfect.

I am stubborn, exact, impatient with redundancy, and prone to leaving systems the moment they begin to feel like cages. I can be too certain because uncertainty spent too many years being weaponized against me. I can sometimes be unintentionally mean to those who love me.

Amelia has her own strange intensities, her own rituals, like her own ways of arriving before seven in the morning with questions better suited to a graduate seminar than a household still negotiating breakfast. She can annoy people by being exactly herself.

Girls stick together.

That sentence has done more for my sense of belonging than most institutions ever did.

I have never been especially interested in being normalized. Normal has always seemed like a word people use

when they have stopped paying close attention. I am interested in what works. There is no reason to pathologize a life that keeps functioning under pressure simply because it does not match the diagram.

I still think about a therapist years ago sending me for evaluation, and those doctors speaking as if my existence made other people uncomfortable enough to require intervention. I think about how quickly the problem dissolved outside their offices.

I had more reasons to stay alive than any clinical form could hold. Sometimes I think the entire mistake was that institutions kept measuring me as if I were unfinished. I was never unfinished—I was simply uncooperative with their preferred ending.

May 14, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

I kept thinking about Alice in Chains today. There are songs that entertain you, songs that accompany you, and songs that wait quietly for decades until you are old enough to understand what they were saying all along. *Nutshell* is one of those songs.

I have been thinking about the idea of *misprinted lies*, and how much of my life was spent following instructions that looked official because they had been printed by people with authority.

The lies did not arrive looking like lies. They arrived with letterhead, parental expectations, college admissions packets, family systems, shared holidays, old friendships, long car rides, and promises nobody ever formally made but everyone behaved as though they understood.

College was the first misprinted lie. Not education itself, because learning has never been the problem. It's just that I have always learned best outside the rooms that demanded attendance and confused it with comprehension. The lie was that college would be the only acceptable path to success, the approved pathway, the place where my father's expectations and my actual life might somehow line up if I simply performed correctly enough.

My father treated college like destiny, as if legitimacy had to pass through an institution before it could be considered real.

He often held my inheritance over my head, stating that if I failed or dropped out of college, he would give my inheritance to someone else.

My mother was far more reasonable, almost suspiciously so by comparison. Her standard was simple: finish high school, and do something with your life. She did not need the whole thing dressed up in ivy, diplomas, and whatever professional fantasy my father had mistaken for care.

My father did not simply want me to attend college. He wanted college to certify the version of me he had already invented.

At Marshall University in 1998, I met Gerry in my dormitory. I remember him with that strange precision certain college memories retain, not because they were dramatic, but because they were ordinary in a way I miss.

My father had forbidden me from owning a television set while I was in college, which in hindsight says less about television than it does about his inability to distinguish discipline from control.

It was never about the television. It was about denying me access to something considered normal, something social, something that allowed other people to gather without explanation. So I would spend time in Gerry's dorm room, because he had what I did not, and because friendship in the late 1990s often formed around rooms, music videos, borrowed

snacks, and the simple human need to be near another person without having to justify it.

On Sunday afternoons, Gerry and I would walk to Taco Bell because it was the only restaurant we knew for certain would still be open on Sundays in Huntington, West Virginia. College towns always felt strangely abandoned on Sundays back then—streets quieter than usual, fluorescent lights humming behind locked doors, entire blocks looking like they were recovering from the night before. Taco Bell remained, lit up like some absurd little sanctuary for broke college students trying to stretch the weekend a few hours longer before Monday arrived and started making demands again.

I had written an essay for English class about the talking trash cans there—the ones that politely said “Thank you” every time someone pushed open the deposit door. I remember finding the entire concept unnecessary in the specific way certain inventions only exist because nobody involved stopped long enough to ask whether they should.

Still, the existence of a talking trash can immediately created a more important question: what would happen if someone opened it repeatedly without actually throwing anything away? Naturally, this required experimentation. I discovered fairly quickly that after enough openings, the trash can entered a kind of three-minute silent timeout, refusing to acknowledge further interaction no matter how many times the door was pushed.

Apparently the engineer responsible for designing it had already anticipated the existence of someone exactly like me.

One afternoon downtown, someone had apparently shit themselves so catastrophically that rather than dispose of the underwear, they had hung it from a parking meter like some kind of municipal warning flag. Someone else had responded by taping two quarters to the outside of the meter alongside a handwritten note apologizing for not having the guts to remove the underwear. There was a quarter-circle arrow pointing upward toward the evidence. I remember telling Gerry that this was the one time I truly regretted leaving my camera behind in my dorm room.

I went back the following day hoping it might still be there so I could finally photograph it properly, only to discover two men in Tyvek suits and yellow hard hats scrubbing the parking meter with long-handled car wash brushes and a bucket like they were decontaminating the aftermath of a small biological incident.

The city had placed orange traffic cones in all directions twenty five feet around the meter and strung up caution tape as though the entire downtown block had briefly become an environmental hazard zone. I remember standing there looking at the whole scene and thinking, fuck, I missed my opportunity.

I wrote the essay about the trash can for English class, and apparently had shown enough effort and adherence to expectations that I had earned a B+. It felt meaningless to me

because I felt like the work was far beneath my ability and I was quickly becoming disenchanted with paying for what was supposed to be higher education. Submitting a piece about the shit filled underpants downtown would have certainly gotten me an F, but it would have been worth it.

I remember sharing my sandwich with Gerry so I could stay in his room and wait for the premiere of *Thank U* by Alanis Morissette on MTV's *Total Request Live.* I had a Math professor who was determined to enforce attendance despite the fact that actually passing her class was now, ironically mathematically impossible. She had gone so far as to send my faculty advisor to my door to try and force me to comply.

Half of a meat lovers sandwich was enough to allow me to escape the situation entirely. It was October 12, 1998. That detail has stayed with me for years because it contains the whole era inside it. A sandwich as currency. A dorm room as temporary refuge. MTV as an event, not background noise. Two young people sitting near a television, waiting for something to happen at an assigned time because the world had not yet become endlessly available on demand. There was an innocence to that, even if my life around it was already complicated. We were still analog enough for anticipation to matter.

The professor then decided to double down on her efforts to get me into her classroom to face disciplinary action in front of the entire class. Gerry and I decided that we were going to see if we could make it to the local mall by taking the city bus, as

neither of us had access to a car. Dad had forced me to sell the car he gave me at sixteen when he kicked me out of the house. Mom used it to drop me off at college. It sat with a for sale sign on my parents lawn long enough for her to pick me up from college the following year before someone eventually bought it.

We were not aware of it at the time, but the bus service stopped for the day thirty minutes after the bus dropped us off at the mall, so the bus that was waiting behind the bus we had just exited was the only bus back to campus. Gerry and I ended up hitchhiking back to campus. What an amazing time we shared together.

On Halloween during my first year at Marshall, Gerry and I decided that since absolutely nobody seemed to be doing anything on campus, we should attempt to manufacture the stereotypical college experience ourselves by throwing toilet paper into one of the trees on the quad.

We walked across the street to 7-Eleven and bought the last roll of toilet paper they had left, then crossed back over to campus where I unraveled the first few feet and threw the roll upward into the tree. Unfortunately the roll immediately wedged itself into a fork in the trunk about halfway up. There it remained for months afterward, surviving rain, wind, and eventually winter itself. By springtime the college was prevented from removing it because a bird had somehow built a nest inside the center of the roll.

I did not know then that so many friendships would later become visible only in retrospect, like abandoned roads you can still trace through the woods if the light is right. At the time, Gerry was simply my friend. And during our college years, we would be seen together. Gerry took me to the clubs on the weekend. We volunteered for MTV day at Marshall and that evening met Garbage.

Years later, Angie and I decided to drive out to Ohio to visit Gerry and his boyfriend. I remember accepting the situation as it unfolded because that is what I do when I am trying to preserve a relationship. When we arrived, Gerry decided at the last minute that we *could not spend the night at his place*. His decision was final.

Angie and I accepted it. We understood that like me he was autistic, that he had never met Angie before, that hosting people can become too much. That boundary does not automatically become cruelty simply because it inconveniences someone else.

So we simply booked a hotel. We took him to the science museum. We went to lunch. The next day I stayed at his house all day while we caught up on all the ways life had changed, while Angie went shopping with his boyfriend. It was not perfect, but it worked well enough because everyone adjusted, and I still believed adjustment was one of the ways people proved they cared.

A little over a year later, Angie and I made plans to visit Gerry and his boyfriend, who by then had become his husband. We called him. We confirmed the plan. He agreed that we could *absolutely* spend the night at his house this time.

Angie and I told him we were leaving our house and gave him a window for when we expected to arrive. That should have been enough information for any reasonable interpretation of the situation. It was not vague. It was not implied. It was spoken out loud and confirmed between people who knew each other and had a history.

When we arrived, all the lights in the house were off. Nobody answered the door. Nobody answered the phone. Nobody was at the house. We waited outside for a little over two hours, before we got back on the interstate and drove four miles away to the nearest highway rest area and spent the night in the car because there were no hotel rooms available. That became the kind of memory forever attached to the friendship. A dark house. A phone not being answered. A rest area.

The knowledge that you traveled across several states to visit someone who had agreed to receive you, only to discover that the agreement had apparently evaporated without notifying anyone.

The excuse came later, of course. It always does. He claimed that I had not been clear about when we were coming, despite the fact that we had literally called him and told him we were on our way.

There are few things more disorienting than having someone rewrite a reality you participated in clearly enough to remember the sequence. It is not just that the excuse is wrong. It is that it asks you to doubt your own accuracy for the sake of someone else's comfort. I have spent too much of my life being asked to participate in that transaction.

Still, we tried. He took us to meet his husband's family, and Angie and I immediately bonded with them. We arrived in good faith, with warmth, curiosity, and the willingness to meet people where they were. Then, out of nowhere, Gerry came over and told us that we needed to go because his family was private hard working blue collar people with limited free time, and they only allowed two hours of outsiders.

Two hours of outsider time.

There are phrases that collapse under their own absurdity the instant they leave someone's mouth. That was one of them. It reduced the entire interaction to an unwritten social policy we had not been told existed until the timer had already expired. It was not that the family needed privacy. Families do. It was not that boundaries are wrong, so much as it was the procedural nature of it. It was the sudden reclassification of us as outsiders after we had just been allowed enough warmth to forget that we were temporary. That is what hurt. Not the boundary itself, but the timing of the truth.

After that, Gerry became more distant. Not all at once, because most endings in my life do not arrive with the decency

of a visible fracture. They thin. They lose frequency. They become harder to reach without anyone acknowledging what is actually happening. Silence becomes the delivery system. Eventually, the relationship stops existing in the present tense and survives only as a set of memories: the dorm, the years of college, the decades that followed, the dark house, the rest area, the two-hour limit, and then nothing.

That is how most of my failed relationships have ended. Silence.

I have been thinking about Makayla too, because some relationships are not easy to classify after they disappear. From her perspective I was likely the longest friendship she ever had, if friendship is the right word for a child I helped raise, watched grow, took on vacations, and carried inside the daily structure of my life for more than two decades.

I started dating Angie in 2002, when Makayla was just two years old. Angie and I were engaged for a long time. I was friends with Makayla's mother. I was considered part of the family.

Makayla used to visit the farm here in Vermont, even in the years after Angie and I broke up. She was a core part of my life for many years. Vacations. Family gatherings. Inside jokes. The ordinary details that accumulate when you have known and been a part of someones life since practically the beginning. It is strange to help raise someone and then reach a point where the relationship has no current form. It makes memory feel almost

illegal, as if you are holding onto something that no longer belongs to you because the social system reassigned custody of the past.

When Angie and I broke up in 2020, her family followed her. In some ways, I respect that. My own family might have done the same if I had been able to maintain a friendship with a former romantic partner. Families often close ranks because that is what families are trained to do. They are not always asking who was right, or who was wrong, or what history existed before the breakup. They protect the people they recognize as part of their structure. I understand the mechanics. Understanding them does not make the loss feel smaller.

I stopped talking to Makayla in the summer of 2025 after our trip to Atlanta and Nashville. I met her when she was two. I stopped talking to her when she was an adult. Between those two facts exists a span of years large enough to hold vacations, birthdays, family systems, photographs, stories, and an entire version of my life that no longer has a place to stand.

The lie was not that people loved me. Some of them did. The lie was that shared history guarantees continuity. History can become decorative if the present stops maintaining it. Longevity can fool you into thinking something is permanent when it is actually conditional. A person can be in your life for twenty-four years and still become unreachable once the social conditions that held the relationship in place have changed.

I do not want to turn any of these people into villains. That would be too easy, and it would also be inaccurate. Gerry had his limits. Angie's family had theirs. Makayla had her own adulthood to enter, and maybe her own version of the story that has nothing to do with mine. People are rarely as simple as the damage they leave behind. Most of them are just operating from internal rules they never bother to disclose until you have already planned the trip, packed the bag, and arrived at the dark house.

The older I get, the more I understand that I did not chase lies because I was foolish. I was not weak for believing them. I was young. I was loyal. I was operating from corrupted source material and doing the best I could with the information repeatedly presented to me.

There is a particular exhaustion that comes from realizing how much of your life was built around bad information. Not bad in the sense that everything was false, but bad in the sense that the underlying assumptions were misaligned from the beginning.

A single wrong premise can alter decades. My father believed college would prove something. I believed friendship would endure if I kept showing up. I believed family meant more than affiliation by romance or blood. I believed silence was temporary, that it would eventually be broken by someone who cared enough to account for it.

I played Nutshell again and let the song move through the room without trying to make it carry more than it already does. Some songs are not answers. They are instruments. They measure the distance between what you thought your life was, and what it actually became. Today, that distance felt both enormous and survivable.

I think the misprinted lies are no longer instructions now. They are artifacts. College as salvation. Friendship as guaranteed continuity. Family as unconditional structure. Silence as something other than an ending. I can hold them up, look them over, and see the flaws in the print without needing to live inside them anymore. That may be the closest thing to peace I can reasonably expect. Not forgiveness, and not closure. Just the ability to better recognize misinformation.

May 15, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

This morning I woke up thinking about the rest of my life, which is a ridiculous thing to think about before coffee, but apparently my brain has never respected standardized operating procedures. It came in before the light fully reached the room, before the house had finished making all of its small morning noises, before I had any business being philosophical.

I sat up for a short time, staring out the window at the Japanese maple in the front yard, not moving, letting the thought sit beside me without answering it. The rest of my life.

I am forty-six years old, and I have somehow arrived at a point in life that feels both impossibly early and impossibly late. Too young, by most standards, to talk about retirement without someone tilting their head and asking how it's even possible. Too old, by my own internal count, to pretend I am still at the beginning of anything.

I have lived too much life in too little time. That is the simplest way I can say it without turning it into melodrama. I compressed an entire lifetime into less than half a century, and now I am standing in the quiet aftermath, unsure whether this is what people mean when they talk about being done.

Done with what, exactly? The job is done. The uniform is done. The firehouse life is done. The version of me who knew how to move through smoke, death, broken metal, bad weather, bad lighting, and worse news is still somewhere in me, but she

no longer runs the day-to-day operations. But she is no longer being called out into the night to deal with the world's worst moments as a matter of employment. Such experiences fundamentally change the shape of time.

Mom is gone. That sentence still feels like something I am reporting instead of something I believe. She outlived my father by well over a decade, long enough for me to think, in some irrational corner of my mind, that she might simply continue. Not forever, exactly, but longer. Some people become so woven into the origins of your life that mortality begins to feel like an administrative impossibility. Parents are not immortal, but they can be foundational. Mom was such a parent. We were friends since the day I was born—we could be angry with each other, call each other every name in the book, disagree, and yet still remain friends. We bonded deeply in the handful of years when Amelia came into my life.

What finally took her was not old age in the broad, softened way people like to say it. It was not a clean decline, not a neat and dignified fading from one stage of life into another. It was numerous complications from a botched knee replacement surgery. She had been warned of the risks. Not once. Not casually. Numerous specialists had told her that her risk factors were astronomical. They said it clearly, repeatedly, with the kind of cautious medical language that is supposed to make people pause. She pressured them into doing the surgery anyway, and they eventually did it.

I do not know where to put my anger about that. Some days I place it with the doctors, because perhaps they should have known better. Some days I place it with her, because she was warned and did not listen. Most days I do not know where to place it.

I understand why she wanted it. That is the cruel part. I understand wanting one more chance at mobility, one more correction, one more fix that might make life smaller in its suffering. I understand the logic of a person who has spent too long being trapped inside a body that no longer cooperates the way you want it to.

But I also understand risk. I understand consequence. I understand the thin membrane between routine and catastrophic. Years in EMS taught me that ordinary things can turn fatal without warning. A surgery. A clot. Pneumonia. A decision made because the alternative feels intolerable. The world likes to separate tragedy from choice because it makes everyone feel safer, but life rarely does us the courtesy of staying that simple.

After she died, something in the structure of my life gave way. Not all at once. Not dramatically. I moved even deeper into the life I had already started in Vermont. I stopped trying to negotiate with the old roles. Daughter. Lieutenant. Caregiver. Problem solver. The one who stays. The one who carries. The one who answers. The one who comes up with a plan when everyone else is staring at the ceiling.

There are only so many times a person can be useful before usefulness starts impersonating identity. I became incredibly sarcastic when I became a lieutenant. I remember being genuinely disappointed when the local paper failed to quote me correctly after an accident scene. They asked if I could explain what happened. I said, “Sure. Someone fucked up.”

I once told a newspaper reporter that two people decided to ignore stop signs at an intersection at the same time, and because of this, the cars tried to occupy the same spot at the same time, and predictably, it didn’t work out. The stripped down version of this account was printed.

I have been thinking lately about what I want for the rest of my life, and the honest answer is still that I do not know. The question is not what must be done next. The question is what I actually *want*, and I am not sure I have ever been asked that without an emergency standing behind it.

Maybe this is retirement. Maybe it is not. Retirement was sold to me as golf carts, pensions, card tables, cruise brochures, and cheerful people who spent thirty years doing something stable enough to leave with cake in the break room.

I am still entering a new era of my life, but it does not have a name yet. That may be the point. Names have never protected me as much as people think they do. Sometimes a name is a shelter, and sometimes it is a box. I have had enough boxes. People love talking about thinking outside the box. I have become increasingly suspicious of the box itself.

I am still waiting to hear back from my old summer camp. It will be interesting to see if I get invited back. I am not going there because I need the social background of a reunion, or a circle of people remembering me correctly, or a name tag and a sandwich under a tent. I do not need applause from anyone who last knew me as a child under false pretenses.

What I need is closure, and closure is not the same thing as approval. Approval asks to be chosen. Closure asks to place the truth where it belongs, and leave without dragging it behind you.

If the people I used to know no longer respect me, then I will know for sure. I am under no obligation to stay, and I am under no obligation to return. The freedom I spent a lifetime fighting for includes the freedom to leave places that cannot hold the woman I became.

People do not always understand that kind of freedom. They resent it, sometimes. I see it in little comments, in pauses, in the thin smile people make when they ask what I am doing tomorrow and I say *not sure yet*. They have to make plans around work, school calendars, other people's availability, obligations stacked so high that their own time becomes something they rent back in pieces. I know what that is like. I lived inside those systems for years. With enough determination, and the right life choices, I eventually fought my way out. I paid for my autonomy in ways most people will never see and would not believe if I told them.

What am I doing tomorrow? I'm not sure yet. I guess when tomorrow comes, then I will know for sure. That sentence feels more honest than any five-year plan I ever made.

I think it is time I restore Mom's house. Repair is mechanical. Restoration is emotional, historical, and occasionally expensive in ways that make you question whether old houses were designed by people who hated heirs. Amelia and I have plans to meet with people I have known all my life, people we have agreed to hire because they understand the house as more than a structure with aging systems and questionable decisions hidden behind walls. They know the place. They know the town. They know the history my mom and I had there, and why moms house means so much to me.

Amelia and I are going to continue living here at the farm. The farm is home now, in the plainest and most durable sense of the word. It is where the pines stand, where the wind moves through the fields, where the house makes its small noises, where the quiet has finally become something I no longer need to outrun.

Keeping the farm running matters to me, even if all it produces is scenery and the kind of life I thought existed only in my imagination. A place must not be expected to generate profit, crops, inventory, public usefulness, or some kind of measurable output in order to justify its existence.

The farm produces the mornings you want to wake up to. It produces long, quiet summer days. It produces the exact kind

of life I used to believe belonged to other people. Evening brings big open-sky Vermont sunsets, followed by a bright night sky to hang the stars upon. I finally have what I always wanted. A place to live, and two best friends. That is such a small sentence for something that took almost half a century to obtain.

Amelia is my wife, and also my best friend. She is the person who came into my life through writing, of all things, through a #WritersLift on Twitter in 2020, which still feels absurd enough to be true. Of all the wild places I have found people—firehouses, train tracks, abandoned buildings, hospital rooms, camp docks, diners in towns that barely survived the 1990s—I found my wife through writers on the internet throwing their work into the void and hoping someone decent would notice.

Maybe Allen Ginsberg was right after all. I have been thinking about that lately, too. He once said I would devote my life to writing and photography. Dad dismissed it as nonsense, as a distraction from what I should have been focusing on, which according to him was becoming a surgeon.

My father loved prescribed futures. He loved credentials, titles, institutional validation, and anything that could be framed as respectable in a room full of people who cared too much about how things sounded. Allen, who was friends with my father, told me I should think about writing and photography anyway. He jokingly said maybe it would help me meet girls.

Come to think of it, it did. That memory feels almost irritating now in its accuracy. My father wanted me to become a surgeon. Allen saw the writer and photographer before I fully understood that those were not hobbies, but native passions. I did not become a surgeon. I became someone who spent twenty-two years in and around bodies, blood, urgency, death, and damage, and then came home and tried to make language out of what remained. Maybe the outcome was not as far from the prediction as my father would have liked to believe.

Then there is Maddie. I met her through a mutual friend. The three of us were exploring abandoned buildings, walking through lost places the way certain minds do—not for trespass as much as curiosity, not for danger as much as the irresistible pull of forgotten systems.

Maddie and I bonded immediately. It still surprises me, even now. I have met intelligent people before. I have met emotionally mature people before. I have met people who could discuss complicated subjects without blinking, and people who could hold difficult emotional material without making it about themselves. Rarely, however, have I met someone who could do both at the same time, and almost never someone twenty years younger than me.

It was unbelievable to me that someone could be at my level intellectually, and at the same time meet me in terms of emotional maturity. Not close enough to flatter me. Not performatively clever. Actually there. I do not know if she truly

realizes how refreshing it is to have a friend like that, someone who has become a central point in our lives without ever demanding to be made central.

The curious thing about the relationships that matter most is that they rarely arrive carrying a banner. They arrive in the middle of some ordinary absurdity and quietly alter the trajectory of your life.

Maddie has proven herself to be the absolute greatest friendship I have ever experienced in my entire life. I do not write that lightly. I have had friends. I have had people I loved. I have had people I promised I would be there for no matter what. That was always my vow. I would be there. I would answer. I would show up. I would remain present even when things became difficult. I would not abandon people the way I had been abandoned.

Everyone abandoned me. Maddie stayed. She stayed in the way that matters, not with declarations, not with speeches, not with theatrical loyalty, but through continuity. She stayed in the quiet, practical, ordinary way that is impossible to find. And yet Maddie and Amelia are the only friends I have who have never asked anything of me.

So many people have loved me as a function. They loved what I could do, what I could fix, what I knew, what I carried, what I survived, what access I provided, what stability I represented, what emergency version of myself I could become when they needed someone with a calm voice and a working

plan. People mistake dependence for love all the time. They do not always mean to. Some of them even believe they are being sincere. But usefulness has a way of wearing affection's clothing until the bill comes due.

Amelia and Maddie never did that. They have never treated my existence like something to extract from. They are the two people in my life who make me feel wanted rather than required, and I have lived long enough to stop pretending the distinction is small.

I see Maddie as a younger sister. She is family in the chosen sense, but also in the practical sense—the kind of person whose presence becomes a welcome and essential part of your life. Amelia and I speak of her naturally now. Her name belongs in the house. Her friendship has become one of the fixed points around which this new era is arranging itself. I do not think she understands how much that means to someone like me, someone who has spent most of her life being present at the beginning of things and absent from what lasted.

I am finally learning that the rest of my life does not need to be organized around proving I survived the first part. That is new. Or maybe it is not new, so much as I am only now quiet enough to hear it.

The farm is quiet today. The rain passed across the fields all morning. Somewhere outside, the pines hold the edges of the

property like old witnesses who do not care about human drama but have agreed, generously, to remain nearby anyway. I have trusted pine trees longer than I have trusted most people.

Pine trees do not panic in winter because they cannot yet see spring. They simply continue being living until the season changes around them.

May 16, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

If you think about it, metaphorically, everything eventually becomes metaphor if you give memory enough time to misbehave. Radio waves moving through the air long before I understood the difference between information and safety. A voice coming from the kitchen, or the living room, or the dashboard of whatever car Mom was driving.

WAMC, Fresh Air, Wait Wait Don’t Tell Me, and whatever Rex Smith had called into the station to talk about that day. Dad knew Alan Chartock personally, which meant public radio existed in our house not only as background noise, but as something closer than that—one of those strange adult-world proximities that made my childhood feel more intellectually furnished than emotionally habitable.

The contradiction throughout childhood was that my father could provide almost anything except safety. He could provide objects, education, access, travel, music, books, cameras, tools, and vocabulary. He could place me near culture, history, science, and impressive people. He could afford to create the appearance of a life that should have been stable from the outside. But he could not love me without control, and control is not love.

When I was young, he gave me what I wanted, part of the time without questioning it. The photographs show that. I am in the frame constantly—small, bright-eyed, already alert, already studying the world as if I knew it was going to turn against me

and I wanted a record before it did. There are pictures where I am spoiled in the ordinary way children are spoiled before the adults around them realize they cannot control who that child is becoming. I had whatever reasonable thing could be bought or handed over.

At first, I was visible. Then my body began revealing the truth Dad was trying to hide, and that is when the pictures changed.

Not all at once. Nothing important ever seems to happen all at once. The most consequential damage is usually procedural. A haircut. A form. A school enrollment. A pronoun spoken loudly enough that everyone in the room understands which version of reality is tolerated.

Mom knew where the photographs were. In the last years of her life, she kept telling me where to look, and I did. Drawers. Envelopes. Boxes. Corners of rooms where paper and dust had been hiding for decades. She had hidden pieces of my childhood from my father, which sounds dramatic until I remember that in our house, evidence itself had to be protected. My childhood had a chain of custody. Mom preserved what he would have destroyed, and maybe she did it because she knew, long before I did, that one day I would need more than memory. I would need proof.

Photographs are strange witnesses. They do not explain motive, and they do not offer mercy. They simply hold the frame.

At first, I was everywhere. Then, slowly, I wasn't. By eleven, my father decided it was time for me to "come to reality."

Come to reality, as if reality were his property. As if my body, my name, my identity, my girlhood, and every instinct I had carried from the beginning were some childish error waiting to be corrected by paternal authority.

He cut my hair. He enrolled me at summer camp as a boy. He made sure everyone understood that even though I looked

like a girl, I was actually his son. I was glad when he left. He always brought nothing but heartache.

I was housed in the boys cabin. Dad had told me that if I wanted to attend camp, it would be as a boy. Sadly, he delivered on that promise.

I learned very quickly that certain places are only freeing if you are allowed to exist inside them honestly. Camp should have been easy for me. In many ways, it was an extension of what home used to be. The Adirondacks had a certain atmosphere in the early 1990s that I do not know how to describe properly. I have not felt it anywhere since.

The smell of woodsmoke, pine needles, sun-warmed docks, dirt roads, and cafeteria food all made sense. WIZN was always there at camp, and that station became part of the physical atmosphere of my summers, as much as mosquito bites and cabin bunks.

Camp had rhythm, and I loved rhythm. Wake up, move, eat, swim, hike, work, listen, disappear, return.

Mom sent me with my favorite oversized sweatshirt and my favorite pair of Doc Martens. I wore the sweatshirt everywhere I could, even when it made no sense for the heat, because my breasts were developing and I needed to hide them.

That sweatshirt was not clothing. It was concealment, comfort, stim, and one of the few forms of control still available

to me. In every camp photo from those years, I am in loose clothing. Visibility became something I had to learn how to manage.

At age fourteen, I got my first period in the boys cabin at summer camp, in the middle of the night. There are childhood memories the body keeps with unreasonable precision. The darkness. The panic. The realization. The air in the cabin. The boys sleeping nearby. No immediate access to showers. No privacy. No adult I could safely ask.

The next morning at breakfast, the comments started about, "that smell", because boys that age are immature about those kinds of things. They started singing the bridge lyrics to the Lenard Skynyrd song *That Smell*. Afterwards, some of the girls I was friends with came over to me and told me not to pay attention to them.

I buried my underpants in the woods behind the cabin during rest hour.

In prior summers, my father had enrolled me in Boy Scouts too. He even went so far as to enroll me in Boy Scout camp, which turned into the disaster it was destined to become.

I refused to take my shirt off in front of anyone. I had to change separately. I had to shower separately. I insisted on it, but never stated the reason.

Even as a counselor at camp, I was housed in the boys cabin, still forced to play the role. By then, people suspected

things. People are not stupid. They suspected for years, but nobody knew the truth until I finally revealed it in my forties.

Dad and the doctors had told me it would be harmful if anyone found out about my "problem."

I disappeared from where I grew up for thirty years because of it. That is social erasure. I was removed from the town that knew me, then routed through institutions designed to enforce a version of me that had never been correct. Over the years, I would stop by for a couple of days at a time, especially when I lived in the area, once a week—mainly to do my laundry at Mom's house.

My father did not need to kill me to erase me. He only needed to remove me long enough for people to stop looking for me.

I am grateful to have grown up before the era of hyper-connectedness and social media. Life moved slower then. People spent more time together. Time together mattered differently because it was not constantly competing with everything else.

When you sat with someone, you were usually just there with them instead of somewhere else at the same time. *That is nostalgia*.

Not the cheap kind you're supposed to feel. Not the kind people package and sell back to you with retro fonts and

artificial sentiment. Real nostalgia is not wanting to relive the past.

Real nostalgia is simply remembering how life itself worked. How we worked. How we played. How we lived. How people called in song requests to radio stations. How voices belonged to regions. How hearing a song accidentally played twice on the radio meant everyone nearby was hearing it too, at the same time, under the same sky, and talking about it afterward. How local culture had a pulse before everything became searchable, portable, optimized, and dead behind the eyes.

Before the internet, I had music, my dog, my camera, and my notebooks. When the internet came along, I recognized it immediately. Not as novelty. Not as escape, but as extension of my creativity. I started posting my writing and photography online.

For a long time, I thought the ending of the story would need to be grand in order to count. I thought happiness, if it ever came, would arrive with scale—money, recognition, a huge circle of people, some final vindication loud enough to drown out every adult who had ever misunderstood me. I truly believed I'd never see age thirty, let alone forty.

I'm turning forty-seven this July. My perspective has changed, and the older I get, the more I understand that the loudest outcomes are often compensating for weak structure.

Today, I am happy. Finally, I can make that claim without reservation.

I am happy because the life I have now is mine. Amelia is here. Maddie is here. Matt and Trish are here too, in full Vermont fashion—neighbors who became friends simply by showing up consistently over time. My circle is small, but it works. That matters more than the appearance of abundance ever did.

I made it.

May 18, 2026—Stamford, New York (Mom's House)

Amelia and I are at moms for a few days. There are places I visit, and then there is moms house. Visiting implies movement, intention, luggage, plans, and the polite fiction that I am passing through. Moms house is different. I do not pass through it so much as re-enter it. Sometimes when I am here, I feel less like I have come back as an adult and more like I have stepped into a room where sixteen-year-old me has been waiting patiently all this time, not angry, exactly, but not relieved either. Just waiting.

This morning, Amelia brought up an old childhood friend of mine, one of the first girls I met in third grade after we moved to Stamford. I had not been thinking about her in any organized way, but memory has never needed my permission. One name, one reference, one sentence over coffee, and suddenly I was back there—back in that strange middle period of childhood when I was always being introduced to another life before the last one had finished making sense.

She and I were friends until my father pulled me out of school and enrolled me at Cooperstown for grade eight, before sending me to boarding school in ninth grade. At the time, I do not think I understood what was happening to me as disruption. I understood it as life because children are forced to accept whatever shape life takes around them. But now, looking back, I can see how often my father reset my social world.

Every few years, there was another scene, another group, another set of rules I had not been present to learn, another place where everyone else already belonged to each other before I arrived.

All of this became harder as I got older. When children are young, the social world still has soft edges. Friendships form quickly, loyalties are fierce, and everyone is still partially unfinished. But later, the circles harden. By adolescence, people already have their own private histories, shared jokes, betrayals, alliances, crushes, grudges, and tiny mythologies. To enter a social scene late is not the same thing as joining one.

I became very good at adaptation, which is not the same thing as belonging. I am not sure I ever learned to remain. And as such, childhood friendships have always meant something different to me. I have never understood them as disposable. A friend from childhood, as far as I am concerned, is a friend for life until factors determine otherwise. Time alone is not one of those factors. Distance is not one of those factors. Silence is not automatically one of those factors. I think this is one of those beliefs I carried with me long after the world tried to make me feel foolish for carrying it.

Most people grow up and reduce friendship into convenience, location, schedules, and adult maintenance. I never really did. To me, a childhood friend is someone who knew me before I had language for most of what I was surviving. That kind of bond does not simply expire because decades pass.

Going back to my hometown has always reminded me of summer camp in a strange way. Camp friendships had their own rules. You could be best friends with someone for years, then live entire lives apart, then somehow come back into each other's orbit and pick up the conversation as though it had only been interrupted by dinner. Childhood hometown friendships can feel the same way, except there is often more ache inside them. At camp, everyone expects the world to be temporary. At home, the temporary nature of things feels more like a betrayal.

Sometimes when I am back here, it feels like I am living inside some warped version of It's a Wonderful Life, where there is always the potential to be known if given enough time, except the time never happened. I have known these people since early childhood, yet many of them only know my name.

They did not see the ambulances, the firehouses, the late-night drives home after impossible calls, or the version of me those years created. They did not witness my breakups, my struggles with alcoholism after retirement, the women I loved, the ones I lost, or the life I somehow managed to build despite the odds multiplying around me for years like weeds growing through cracked pavement. To most of them, I remained suspended somewhere near adolescence, preserved as an earlier draft of myself while entire lifetimes unfolded elsewhere beyond the borders of this town.

Moms house became the center point of my childhood, and I think that is why it hurts so badly when anyone suggests I

change it, or let it go. They are not talking about a house, even if they think they are. They are talking about the one fixed point in a childhood that was otherwise repeatedly interrupted. They are talking about the place where I spent the best times of my young years with my best friend, Matt. The place where I lost my virginity to another girl. The place where I dealt with every heartbreak, and every late-night cry with Penfold—all of it happened here, or returned here, or was carried upstairs afterward and written about within the walls of my bedroom.

When people casually suggest moving on from a place like this, they do not understand that some places are not possessions. They are witnesses.

When I was a child, it felt like I raised myself. My parents felt more like roommates to me. Dad's rules were simple from the beginning, but above all else, my career had to come before a relationship, and this included dating. I would be allowed to date when I was older. Mom let me do whatever I wanted, so long as I kept my grades up and didn't bother anyone.

I would get up, make my own breakfast, get dressed, and go to school by myself, and it felt less like childhood than going to work. I would come home, do my homework, find something to do, and Penfold would be involved in it somehow. Then I would go upstairs to my room and go to bed with him. That was the daily rhythm. On the weekends, Matt would occasionally come over to my house after school Friday and end up spending the night at moms house. On a handful of occasions, I would

hitchhike out to Harpersfield and meet up with him at the general store on the corner of his road and walk back to his parents house.

There were adults in my house, but the structure of my life felt like something I maintained on my own. I do not remember being guided so much as managing myself. Childhood, for me, had a procedural quality. Wake up. Eat. Dress. Leave. Return. Complete tasks. Entertain myself. Make sure Penfold has everything he needs. Retreat upstairs. Sleep beside the dog.

Penfold was threaded through everything. He was not merely my dog. He was the only one in the house whose loyalty never required interpretation.

I was the weird kid who sort of lived upstairs in my bedroom like it was an apartment. My room was not merely where I slept, it was where I existed. It was where I wrote, cried, listened to music, read books I was not sure anyone else around me would understand, built theories about the world, and became myself in private.

On my bed was always my copy of *Cassell's Encyclopedia of Queer Symbol and Spirit*. That book mattered to me because I was not only trying to understand sexuality or identity. I was trying to understand lineage, symbol, meaning, language, and where someone like me might fit in a world that seemed determined to misread me.

I found culture where I could. I was somehow on a first-name basis with Davy Rothbart and Sarah Locke from *Found! Magazine*, which I discovered online through old websites hosted at Geocities.

I was mentioned as an “all-star finder” in one of their books. This made perfect sense to me then and still does now. I have always been drawn to the evidence people leave behind—the notes, scraps, fragments, photographs, lists, and strange little abandoned signals that prove a life was happening even when no one else seemed to be paying attention.

One day, when my father got drunk, he threw those things out, along with my rainbow flag. Books, objects, my diaries and letters from friends, small proof of selfhood—gone because he decided they should be gone. What he never found was my hardcover copy of Richard Bach’s Illusions. That survived. I’ve since replaced the books.

The albums of my childhood were Sheryl Crow’s *The Globe Sessions*, Pearl Jam’s *Ten*, R.E.M.’s *Out of Time*, Duran Duran’s *Wedding Album*, Counting Crows’ *August and Everything After*, the Indigo Girls, especially *1200 Curfews*, and Nirvana.

Matt and I listened to Nirvana and Pearl Jam’s *Ten* all the time. These were not just albums. They were what I had when adults were not speaking the language I needed. Throughout my childhood I was often lonely in a way that made ordinary conversation feel useless. The music understood alienation,

longing, anger, memory, devotion, desire, and the particular ache my generation felt of being young and already tired.

Matt was my first best friend. Over the years, we ended up living at each of our parents places at one time or another. I got kicked out of moms by my late father, but if Matt was around, I was tolerated more because my father would have “father/son” time with my best friend instead of me.

It did not make much sense to me at the time. I only understood the emotional mechanics of it. If Matt was there, the atmosphere shifted. My father seemed easier, more engaged, more able to inhabit a role he understood. I became more acceptable by association. That is a confusing thing for a child to absorb—that someone else’s presence can make your own existence more tolerable to a parent.

One year, the Super Bowl was on television, and my father and Matt sat in the living room with a bottle of vodka and a half gallon of orange juice and watched the game and drank together.

They started with shots and already my father was saying misogynistic things about me and mom. I went upstairs to my room with Penfold when he looked up at me with those big brown eyes that whispered words of love and loyalty in the shape of the day. The two of us spent the evening hiding in my bedroom with Pearl Jam’s *Ten* playing on CD while I wrote in my notebook. Downstairs was football, alcohol, male bonding, and the version of fatherhood my father seemed able to perform with someone else.

I think about that division often now. Downstairs was the visible world, the socially approved world, the world people could name. Upstairs was the actual world, at least for me. Upstairs was where I kept myself alive in the ways that mattered. It was where I learned the language of my own interior. It was where I discovered that writing could hold things other people could not, or would not hold. It was where I learned that a dog could look at you and say more with his eyes than most humans could manage with a full vocabulary. It was where I learned to trust music, notebooks, books, and animals as forms of continuity.

Reconnecting with that childhood friend hurt so much, and why thinking about her today opened this whole thing inside me again. When Amelia and I got married, she saw my name in the paper and somehow managed to call my mom, who still remembered her and gave her my number.

We reconnected immediately. There was no awkwardness, no cautious adult distance, no polite performance of "catching up" while secretly assessing whether the past still mattered. It mattered. It had always mattered.

We spent part of a summer in close proximity, attending concerts, camping just the two of us, and revisiting abandoned places that used to exist from our childhood in the Catskills of New York. It felt like the old emotional laws still applied. It felt like she understood friendship the way I understood it—that

time may pass, but some bonds remain dormant rather than dead.

She was apparently the one friend I had in my life at that time who still believed in the magic of friendship the way that I understood it. That is what makes this memory both beautiful and devastating. She proved that I had not invented that feeling alone. She remembered. She came looking for me. She found her way back through old channels, through my name in the paper, through my mother. And when she returned, it felt immediate, as though the friendship had simply been waiting for contact to resume.

Then came the day she told me about her abusive boyfriend. I had suspected he might have been abusive towards her after seeing parts of their relationship that summer. Of course I offered her Vermont. There was no question about it. If she needed to hide, she could come to us. It was not even remotely a problem. Childhood friendship, to me, does not stop being real when adulthood becomes inconvenient. If anything, that is when it matters most.

She stayed with him. Soon afterward, maybe two weeks later, she called us and said she needed help. Amelia and I raced to her house. I got through her door because I was able to shim the catch. She had been beaten badly and had cuts all over her body. I asked her if she wanted to go to the hospital. She said no. I asked again. I kept asking. She asked me to help her get cleaned up.

I helped her undress, and she sat in the bathtub in warm shallow water while I helped her get clean. It looked like she had been in an industrial accident—cuts, bruises, blunt force trauma, the unmistakable evidence of violence written across a body that should have been safe.

I begged and pleaded with her to come back to Vermont with us, or at the very least, to please let me take her to the hospital. I told her Vermont would be safe. I meant it. Amelia and I would have taken her home with us right then. I would have made room. I would have protected her as much as any human being can protect another. She told me she loved me and was happy that she had been able to meet Amelia, but she told us we needed to go.

One last hug followed by the two of us crying and holding hands for a few minutes is my last memory of her. I found out in the newspaper that she died soon after. No cause of death was stated.

There are losses that feel like grief, and there are losses that feel like a door closing on an entire possible life. Hers felt like both. I did not only lose the adult woman she had become. I lost the child I knew, the friend who came back, the summer we had briefly recovered, the abandoned places we revisited, the proof that someone else still believed in friendship the way I did, and the future where maybe she came to Vermont and lived.

I know I did what I could. I know she was an adult. I know refusal is refusal, even when it is heartbreaking. Sometimes even

when love and loyalty are real, and the offer genuine, it is still not enough to save someone. Sometimes things happen this way because the world itself can be stronger than what two people can carry between them. The hardest part about getting old is watching pieces of your own history disappear with the people who carried them too. That is a terrible thing to know.

Amelia and I met up with Maddie during our trip to moms. Somewhere along the way, she quietly became the younger sister I would have wanted beside me throughout my childhood, the kind of best friend who would have understood the strange little world upstairs in my bedroom without needing much explanation.

The three of us had dinner together at Kashi Sushi in Queensbury, and for the first time since I have known Amelia, she actually tried sushi, trusting Maddie's recommendations without hesitation. Watching the two of them together across the table felt oddly healing in a way I cannot entirely explain, like witnessing different parts of my life learning how to belong to each other naturally.

I do not think Maddie fully realizes how much her presence has enriched both mine and Amelia's lives already. Some people arrive loudly and all at once, but others become family so gradually and sincerely that one day you suddenly realize the shape of your life would feel incomplete without them in it.

Being here at moms brings all of this back because this house is where my understanding of friendship was formed. In the strange, quiet structure of a childhood where I often felt like I was raising myself, yet still found fierce attachments that became permanent in my mind.

When someone tells me I should change this place, or let it go, I do not think they understand what they are asking. They are asking me to loosen my grip on one of the only places that held the whole record. They are asking me to behave as though childhood is something that can be boxed, edited, renovated, and made neutral. But my childhood was not neutral. It was lonely, vivid, strange, self-contained, funny in places, frightening in others, full of music, full of longing, and full of Penfold's big brown eyes always looking up at me.

In the months since mom has been gone, I have learned to forgive her. The forgiveness did not arrive simply because she died. Death alone does not automatically soften the truth of a life or erase the complicated weight people leave behind. Forgiveness came later, slowly, when I finally allowed myself to fully accept that there was absolutely nothing in this world that mattered more to my mother than the bond we shared. She prioritized my happiness in every way she knew how, even when it came at a cost to herself, to our stability, or to the structure of our lives together.

She was imperfect, deeply human, sometimes overwhelmed, sometimes afraid, and sometimes wrong, but she

loved me with a ferocity that shaped my childhood in countless ways, regardless of whether I understood it at the time or not. I cannot, and likely will never be able to forgive her for carrying out my fathers wishes to have Penfold put down as revenge for me being queer.

I can finally forgive her for everything else because she was human, and because despite everything, she did the best that she could. I no longer need her to have been flawless in order for her love to have been real.

Amelia and I are staying over at moms for a few days. Amelia knows the adult version of me, the Vermont version, the version who survived long enough to build a life elsewhere. But here, regardless of legal ownership, Amelia and I have agreed that for as long as I shall live, we will call it mom's house.

Sometimes continuity is something you have to keep yourself. You keep it in a room, in a book, in a song, in an old friend's name, in a hidden object that survived, in the memory of a dog refusing to leave your side, or in the ache of someone who came back into your life just long enough to prove the magic you believed once existed was in fact real.

I still want to be upstairs when I am here. Not because I am stuck in the past, but because part of me is still there, and she deserves company.

May 19, 2026—Stamford, New York (Mom's House)

I used to think coming home would be obvious. That if I ever came back here in any real way, I would know exactly what to feel, how to stand, where to place my hands, what to name the ache rising up through me. I thought return would announce itself as closure, or triumph, or grief, or maybe some cleaner mixture of the three. I imagined it would feel like stepping over a threshold and finally understanding what all the years had been trying to say.

There is a kind of violence in recognition after too much time has passed. I walk through these rooms and my body knows things before my mind catches up. It knows how to move here even when I do not know how to feel here. That familiarity unsettles me more than the ghosts. Because the ghosts, at least, are honest.

And I am left trying to understand what it means to return to a place that never stopped existing, even after I had to stop belonging to it.

I keep looking at old photographs. I tell myself I am sorting them. That is the practical word, the adult word, the word people use when they need to make grief sound organized enough to fit on a table.

I make piles. I turn pictures over. I look for dates that are sometimes written on the back in my mother's handwriting. I try to place events in sequence. A summer. A holiday. A birthday. A

corner of the yard before the neighbor's house burned. A room before the wallpaper changed. A version of my mother before age had leaned into her shoulders. A version of my father before I understood the full nature of his control. A version of myself before the world began correcting what was never wrong.

The girl in those photographs is me. I know this. I understand the fact of it. But she does not always feel like me.

She is small and bright-eyed, already observant in the way children become when the adults around them cannot be trusted to tell the whole truth. She is often dressed in ways my father would have hated if he had noticed too closely. She is standing in yards, sitting on furniture, squinting into sunlight, holding objects I cannot remember caring about, looking directly at the camera as if she already suspects that photographic evidence will matter someday.

I want to know her. That is what frightens me.

Most people look at childhood pictures and say, that was me. They laugh at the haircuts, the clothes, the awkwardness, the lost rooms, the old cars, the adults who seemed permanent until they weren't. Their memories might be imperfect, but the line between then and now remains mostly intact. The child is earlier, the adult is later, and the life between them is understood as a continuation.

I do not experience it that cleanly. I look at those pictures and feel as though I am viewing the childhood of someone I

inherited. A girl whose records were transferred into my custody after some unnamed disaster. I recognize the face. I recognize the rooms of moms house. I recognize the posture, the guardedness, the way she stands slightly apart from the frame even when she is in the middle of it. But there is a separation there I do not know how to erase. It feels as though I have now returned, thirty years later, to determine whether she is still here.

I have started to think of my life as having happened in three distinct movements, though even that sounds too orderly for the reality of it. Lives do not divide themselves neatly while they are happening. They bleed into each other, argue, overlap, and leave remnants behind.

There was Emily the girl. There was Lieutenant Slatin. And now there is Emily, again, returned home after surviving all the systems put her through.

Emily the girl lived here before the interruption.

She was complicated. Some children are, and I certainly was. I was bright in ways that irritated adults who preferred intelligence to arrive in adult-coded packaging. I was autistic before the word was allowed to mean anything useful in my life. I was queer before I had enough privacy to hold the word safely. I was female in the plain, lived, obvious way of my own body and mind, even while my father treated that truth as something to be

administratively contested. I was intersex before doctors and institutions settled on any language they could use without choking on their own discomfort.

But inside myself, I was not confused. That is one of the things people misunderstand most consistently. They assume complexity produces uncertainty. Sometimes it does. In my case, complexity produced conflict outside of me, not within me.

Other people were confused. Other people disagreed. Other people built elaborate systems to avoid admitting what my mother already knew, what my closest friends understood, and what I knew in the plain, private authority of being alive in my own body.

I was a girl. I was Emily. I loved other girls before I understood what love would eventually cost me.

This house held that girl. Not gently, not consistently, and not without harm, but it held her for a short time. In that first life, home was still a word I trusted.

It was imperfect. It was frightening. It was governed by my father's moods, my mother's compromises, and the strange, shifting rules of a family system that could praise me in one breath and erase me in the next.

It was where I watched the weather change through the same windows year after year. It was where my mother and I built a language made of glances, errands, shared jokes, and the

kind of understanding that does not always rescue a child, but does sometimes keep her from vanishing completely.

It was also where my father tried to make a son out of his daughter. He failed. That failure shaped everything that followed.

There are failures that should be celebrated only because they prevented a larger crime from succeeding. My father's version of me never fully took. It moved through paperwork, institutions, introductions, and certain public settings, but it never truly lived. It was a document-level fiction, a social performance built for the comfort of adults who thought authority could outrank reality.

I moved through it because I had to. I answered when survival required it. I learned to let the wrong name pass, pretending it didn't bother me, when correcting would have cost too much.

That is what children do when the truth has no official protection. They preserve it *quietly*.

They hide it in posture, in friendships, in private language, in the way they look at themselves in mirrors when no one else is home. They carry it underneath clothing, beneath school records, behind the face they use to get through another day. They keep a version of themselves alive in the only place authority cannot reach without consent.

I did that. Emily the girl did that. She kept herself intact until the world finally forced the interruption.

At sixteen, the door closed behind me, and the first life ended. Not symbolically. Not cleanly. Not in a way that anyone standing outside the story would necessarily understand.

From a distance, it might have looked like teenage conflict, family disagreement, rebellion, stubbornness, the familiar narrative people reach for when they do not want to examine the machinery of exile. But from inside the moment, it was much simpler. Shelter had become conditional on denial. Family had become conditional on compliance. Home had become a place that could be revoked if I refused to become smaller, quieter, less queer, less female, less myself.

I left.

I have written that sentence in different forms for years, and it still does not capture the scale of it.

I left with things that could fit in a car. I left with Penfold. I left with enough cash to suggest motion but not security. I left with books, a camera, notebooks, clothes, instinct, rage, and a kind of hope so primitive it barely had language. I left without the ceremonial protections people like to pretend young people have. No safety net. No soft landing. No adult plan waiting underneath the disaster. Just movement.

Survival has a way of disguising transformation. It does not announce the moment adaptation becomes identity. You do

not wake up one morning and understand that the person who left home has started becoming someone built for conditions she never should have had to endure. You just keep going. You make decisions. You take the job. You sleep where you can.

You learn which strangers are safe enough, which rooms have exits, which offers come with invisible prices. You learn the difference between loneliness and danger. You learn that hunger is not always physical. You learn that movement can feel like freedom even when it began as displacement.

And then, somewhere inside all that motion, I found the work. Or the work found me. It is difficult now to separate the two.

Fire and rescue did not enter my life as a career in the ordinary sense. I did not drift into it as a respectable job with benefits, a uniform, and a set of predictable expectations. It arrived like a system that finally matched the intensity I had been carrying internally for years.

There was urgency. There were rules that mattered. There were consequences. There were people who needed something done immediately, correctly, and without emotional performance. Just like my life thus far, there were no second chances.

The work demanded judgment, but it did not ask me to pretend that what was happening was not happening. That distinction mattered. I became good at it because I had to, and

because I understood pressure before anyone trained me to use it.

People sometimes talk about public safety work as if courage is the central attribute. It is not. Courage is too cinematic a word for something that mostly runs on training, repetition, pattern recognition, fatigue management, dark humor, trust, stubbornness, and the ability to keep moving when common sense tells you to hesitate.

What mattered was not fearlessness or bravery. I was never fearless. What mattered was function. Could I read the scene? Could I understand the pattern? Could I do what had to be done before the moment ran out of tolerance? Could I hold enough information in my head under conditions that made ordinary thinking fail? Could I be exact when exactness mattered?

I could. That ability became the spine of my second life.

Lieutenant Slatin did not replace Emily the girl all at once. She formed gradually, call by call, shift by shift, uniform by uniform, patch by patch. She formed in stations under fluorescent light, in ambulances at three in the morning, on roads glazed with winter, and in places where death had already arrived and someone still needed to be calm enough to say so.

She formed in the space between command and grief, between competence and the cost of competence, between showing up

and carrying home what could not be shown. She did work that needed doing, and she did it well.

But she was also an interruption extended over decades. That is the part I am only now beginning to understand.

The fire service became the life between lives. It was not a detour. It was too large for that. It consumed too many years, too much identity, too much of my body, too much of my sleep, too much of my memory, too much of my idea of purpose.

It became its own reality, with its own rules, language, rituals, wounds, loyalties, betrayals, and forms of love. It took the girl who had been expelled from home and gave her a place where being necessary could temporarily stand in for being held.

That sounds harsher than I intend it to.

The job did hold me in some ways. Not softly. Never softly. But it held me through structure, expectation, and use. It gave me something to do with all the vigilance my childhood had installed. It gave my pattern recognition a purpose. It gave my calm under pressure an audience that needed it. It gave my body a task. It gave my mind a system. It gave my life direction when the original map had been torn up and thrown out by a man who thought control was destiny.

For a long time, I confused the two because the job required me to. If something meaningful hurts, you tell yourself

the hurt is part of the meaning. If something necessary breaks you down slowly, you tell yourself the breaking is honorable.

If people praise your steadiness, you start hiding the cost of staying steady because you do not want to disappoint the story they have built around your usefulness. A woman in command learns very quickly that composure is not only expected; it is consumed.

Lieutenant Slatin was consumed. Sometimes by the work. Sometimes by the culture. Sometimes by the people who depended on her without understanding that dependence is still emotional weight. Sometimes by the part of me that believed usefulness was the safest form of love.

I was good at the work. That is not vanity. It is the record. That kind of ability comes with a price people like to admire from a distance.

The second life demanded everything from me, then acted surprised when I eventually had nothing left to give.

When I retired, I thought I was betraying the job by leaving. I had spent so many years inside urgency that ordinary time felt almost suspicious. Mornings without listening to dispatch over the radio. Nights without calls. Dinner tables without one ear listening for my pager to go off.

Civilian life did not welcome me back so much as stand there, blinking, while I tried to remember how to enter it.

By then, Emily the girl felt impossibly far away.

I had photographs of her. Fragments. Furniture. Objects. A pine tree outside a window. The smell of old paper. The memory of my mother's voice. The outline of girlhood hidden inside a house that had belonged, for too long, to the man who tried to deny it.

I knew she had existed. I knew I had been her. But knowing is not the same as continuity. There were too many years between us. Too much smoke. Too many sirens. Too many dead. Too much command voice. Too much motion. Too many moments where the person I had to be left no room for the person I had been.

And then life did the thing it sometimes does, which is to wait until you have stopped expecting restoration before handing you something that looks almost like it.

My father died first.

His death did not free me all at once, though I once thought it might. Control lingers in paperwork, habits, money, houses, family stories, and the nervous system. Men like him do not disappear simply because their bodies stop. They leave instructions behind. They leave legal structures, emotional weather, distorted records, trained silences, and rooms where their rules still seem to stand after they are gone.

For many years after his death, I still lived in relation to him. Against him. Around him. Despite him. The absence of a tyrant is not automatically freedom. Sometimes it is only the removal of the visible source while the machinery keeps running.

Then Mom died. Nothing prepared me for that.

Not the fire service. Not all the deaths I had witnessed. Not the clinical familiarity with final breaths, hospital rooms, pronouncements, paperwork, the administrative aftermath of bodies leaving the world. None of it made any sense when the person was my mother. The mind knows categories. The body knows loss. They are not the same system.

My mother was imperfect, complicated, sometimes emotionally unavailable, sometimes constrained by fear, marriage, habit, and the limits of her own survival. She did not save me from everything. She agreed to things I still struggle to forgive. She stayed quiet when I needed her voice. She made compromises that cost me. She loved me, and she failed me.

But she also knew me. Not always fully. Not always bravely. But more than anyone else in that first life. She knew the girl. She knew Emily before the world built arguments around her. She kept photographs my father would have destroyed. She saved objects. She preserved evidence. She left paperwork where it could speak after she no longer could. She handed me, in death, the strange, unwieldy gift of return.

Mom knew me as Emily whenever my father was not around.

The house was left to me and Amelia in moms will. That sentence still feels unreal.

The insurance companies wanted to know what I planned to do with the house. That is a reasonable question in the world they live in. A big house needs a plan. A big house needs heating, maintenance, insurance, locks, repairs, decisions. A big house is liability, square footage, numbers, risk, possible income, possible sale. They suggested renting it. Airbnb. Selling it. All the sensible possibilities people offer when they are standing far removed from the emotional jurisdiction of a place.

I told them I did not know yet, but I wanted to keep it forever, and go there whenever I felt nostalgic or homesick.

They said it was a big house. They said I could rent it out. They said my plan did not make sense.

I told them it did not need to. Not everything meaningful has to justify itself to the economy. Not everything sacred has to become useful. It is the place where I grew up. That is worth more than rent. That is worth far more than sense.

Besides, sense is overrated when it is defined by people who have never been exiled from their own beginning.

I am here now with Amelia. Her presence alters the structure because she is my wife, and she is here openly, without

euphemism, without apology, without the absurd family choreography that once turned women I loved into “friends” and private truths into logistical problems.

Amelia moves through these rooms with her own history of rejection, her own autism, her own sense of what it means to be misread by families who preferred comfort over truth.

Peace feels unnatural after a life built around interruption. I do not know what ordinary women feel when they return to childhood homes after their parents are gone. I imagine there is grief, perhaps discomfort, perhaps the strange rearrangement of becoming the oldest living authority over rooms where one was once a child. I imagine they touch banisters, open drawers, stand in kitchens, remember things inaccurately, and forgive themselves for it. I imagine they feel the sadness of time moving in one direction.

My return feels less linear than that. It feels as though I am stepping into the life that could have been, but only after living the life that happened instead.

There are moments here when I can almost sense the alternate version of the house. Not imagined exactly. More like an adjacent possibility.

A version where I was never forced out. A version where my girlfriends came through the front door and my father had no authority to turn love into a disciplinary issue. A version where my mother became brave earlier. A version where I grew up as

Emily without the constant need to defend moms choice for correctly calling me that. A version where I left for adulthood in the ordinary way, not through exile. A version where coming home for dinner did not require me to split myself into acceptable pieces.

People praise resilience because they do not have to live inside the cost of it. They admire the woman who can return from fire, from exile, from trauma, from family collapse, from institutional erasure, from every system that misread her and still somehow failed to stop her.

They like the shape of survival after it has been cleaned up enough for public language. They call it *inspiring* when they do not have to wake up with the nervous system it produced.

I am not ungrateful for my strength. But I am no longer willing to pretend it arrived free.

That is not something I can explain to an insurance company. It is not something I need them to understand. There are truths that become weaker when translated for people who will only ever hear them as impractical.

Usefulness is not the only measure of whether something deserves to remain. Some things remain because they must.

Some things remain because losing them would create a wound no amount of time or money could heal. Some things

remain because the woman who owns them was once a girl who had no say in leaving.

I think about my parents often when I am here, though not always in the way people might expect. My father is easier to understand now that he is dead, which is not the same as forgiving him. Death simplified his power. It reduced him from force to record. From authority to memory. From living threat to historical fact.

He was a brilliant man, yes. But the part that nobody saw was that he was also a controlling man. An abusive man. A man who mistook his expectations for truth and his discomfort for law. A man who tried to bend my life toward his own unfinished mythology and died without understanding that reality had already outlived him.

My mother is more complex. Love always makes the record more complicated. I miss her with a force that still surprises me. I miss the ordinary parts most. Her voice. Her timing. Her strange little comments. Her way of making certain absurdities tolerable because she understood exactly how absurd they were.

I miss being able to call her when something ridiculous happens. I miss the person who knew about life before I had language for it. I miss the witness. I miss the woman who saved the pictures, even when she could not save me from everything else.

But I also sit here now and understand what she allowed. That is part of the record too. Love that requires historical inaccuracy is not love; it is *editing*.

I loved her. She loved me. She failed me. She protected me. She stayed. She compromised. She left me the house. She knew I was her daughter. She knew more than she said. She said enough at the end to matter.

And now I am here with Amelia, whom she absolutely adored. Perhaps that is what she wanted.

Thirty years later, I am standing in the house where the interruption began, living something that feels like the life that could have been.

May 20, 2026—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)

I always remember the last things people say when they are leaving.

The last time Dad spoke to me, I asked him why he had abandoned me as a child. It was not a rhetorical question. I was not asking for a speech, an apology, or the kind of deathbed reconciliation people imagine when they have been raised by loving parents and still believe the world bends toward tenderness. I asked because I wanted to know.

I had spent my life already knowing the answer, but I wanted to hear him say it. I wanted to know whether there was anything human behind all those years of rejection, displacement, and punishment, or whether the wound itself was exactly as shallow, cruel, and stupid as it had always seemed.

His answer was that I *was supposed to be his son*, and that I had *failed him at the most basic task, which was to be born male*. Therefore, *I was an idiot and a failure*. He told me to leave.

So I did.

I left, went home, and then called work and went back for a few extra shifts. A tried and true way for me to deal with family drama was to simply vanish for a few days, maybe a week, and by that time, something else eventually comes along to replace my trespasses.

Four days later, Dad died.

Mom called me the morning he died. When I answered the phone, she asked about my day and whether I had any plans. I told her I had the day off. Then I asked, “And why?”

She told me *your father died* with the emotional weight one might use to report that the team they were rooting for had lost a football game. Not grief. Not shock. Not tenderness. Just information, delivered after small talk, as though death itself required proper social pacing. There was a familiar undertone of inconvenience in her voice.

Neglect is not always loud. Sometimes it arrives in ordinary sentences, in the absence of urgency, in the bland municipal administrative tone of a parent who has no idea how to feel for anyone outside herself. Sometimes the most devastating thing a parent can do is make catastrophe sound routine.

Mom and Dad cared deeply about optics. They cared about how things looked, how the family appeared, how the house stood, how the collection shone, and how their lives could be described to other people. Mom had even considered hiring a professional obituary writer to document her life and accomplishments. When she died, I ended up writing it myself.

They did not care about their own daughter in the way most parents care about their own daughter. If they had, I would have had an almost ideal childhood. That is the part that makes the whole thing so obscene. There was overwhelming opportunity. What was missing was the most basic thing—care.

Mom paid more consistent attention to her ceramics collection than she did to me. The pieces were kept behind built-in glass cabinets. Every few months, she took them out, polished them, told me they were valuable, and placed them back again. She kept a separate photo album documenting the collection in greater detail, complete with handwritten notes. They were never ever used. I was not allowed to touch them. Nobody was.

They were held captive behind glass with the promise that one day, when she and Dad were not around, I would be able to sell the collection. That was how she spoke of inheritance. Not memory, not family, not beauty, not use—sale. Future value. Deferred transaction. Things preserved so carefully that they were never allowed to participate in life.

I thought about that when I left Mom's house this morning. The ceramics were protected, polished, and displayed. I was corrected, exiled, and left to myself. Their objects were guarded from damage or unwanted touch. Their own daughter was not.

Wear, decay, and entropy are all similar yet distinct forces within the physical universe. Wear implies use. Decay implies neglect. Entropy is simply the inevitable drift of everything toward disorder, dispersal, and collapse. A worn thing has been touched, carried, trusted, handled, needed, and loved. A decayed thing has been left. Entropy waits for all of it.

Physical objects show evidence of their own existence eventually, given enough time.

My bedroom door at Mom's house is not the original door to the house. It was originally installed in the basement. When I came out as a lesbian at sixteen, Dad stormed up the stairs, broke my door, and beat the shit out of me.

Someone else might see a mismatched door. I see the broken boundary, the violence, the impact, the basement door installed afterward, and the house quietly continuing as though the change meant nothing. Houses remember. They remember even when the people inside them lie.

When I went back, my childhood bedroom was still in the same exact configuration it had been in when I left thirty years earlier, under everything Mom had hoarded. It was not preserved with love. It was *buried*.

That told me all I needed to know about how my parents felt about me. A room can be kept as a shrine, or it can be entombed by someone who cannot process loss, change, departure, or reality.

My room was under all those years of accumulation, the old version of me still expected to be there somehow, the living version of me having gone on to become someone neither of my parents ever properly knew.

When we lived in New York City, Dad would be home on Friday afternoons, and Saturday and Sunday were supposed to be family days. That was the official mythology. In reality, I was often seated at the dining room table with a portable television

set, watching Mister Rogers' Neighborhood while my parents were nowhere to be found. It is strange to think of it now. A child alone at the dining room table, taking comfort from a man on television who spoke gently to children, explained feelings, offered reassurance, and never once seemed angry that a child needed kindness.

My father eventually got tired of us not bonding and enrolled me in figure skating lessons at Sky Rink in New York City. I do not remember being there very long. I lacked the coordination to advance into the actual classes. I remember my father screaming at me from the railing while the other girls asked why some old man was yelling at me, which embarrassed me. Even then, before I had the language for it, I understood there was always a right kind of child in his mind, and I kept failing to resemble the one my parents wanted.

In New York, my parents stayed upstairs in their room most of the time, and I pretty much took over the living room. When we moved upstate, my parents took over the living room and library, and I had my apartment upstairs in my childhood bedroom with everything I needed. By age ten, it resembled a college dormitory. That was my childhood in many ways: materially supplied, spatially separated, emotionally left to run almost entirely on my own. What I did not have was the steady presence of parents who wanted to know me.

Mom's place was huge. When I was a kid, I used to ride my BMX bike through the downstairs and out the kitchen door. I

can still feel the motion of it, the childish thrill of moving through the oversized rooms, and the little private racecourse I made out of a house that was often too still, too quiet, and too concerned with presentation. I lived in that house more fully than they did.

When Mom died and the contractors came to her house, the first thing they wanted to do was renovate the kitchen. I said *no. Absolutely not. Not now. Not ever*.

They do not understand how someone gets attached to the way things used to be physically. For them, the kitchen is old cabinetry, old counters, and old flooring. For me, it is Mom's kitchen. Brown wooden cabinets, layered linoleum, and the place where I learned what love felt like when no adult in the house could be bothered to show me.

When I was a little girl, I would come home from school crying and sit on the kitchen floor leaning against the wooden cabinets. The multi-layer linoleum was cold when I first sat down, but it soon became warm beneath me. Penfold would always come over, lick my tears, then sit beside me pressing his strong back against my side in solidarity. If my breathing changed or I moved, he would immediately look at me like a status check. At the time, it was all I ever knew of love.

That is why the kitchen stays.

The kitchen isn't perfect. It's not supposed to be. Nothing is ever perfect, except maybe on occasion the moon herself.

Penfold always came because he loved me. His body against mine was not symbolic at the time. It was immediate. Weight, warmth, loyalty, and presence.

Penfold enriched my childhood simply by refusing to let me be alone.

There are two things I can never forgive my parents for: boarding school and Penfold.

I was molested and sexually assaulted at boarding school. Mom knew, and she decided to keep me placed there because *taking me out would upset my father.* That is the sentence. That is the moral structure of the family, reduced to its barest form. My safety ranked below his emotional comfort.

I called Mom from a pay phone in Buffalo to tell her what had happened. I did not use the phone in the dorm because we had been advised in the school handbook of "possible monitoring," and I knew the administration might be aware of at least part of the conversation if I called from inside.

A child should not have to think that way. A child should not have to assess risk and communication systems before asking her mother for help. But I did.

When I told her, she said, "Oh well."

Later, when I confronted her about it, her reply was, "I didn't know how to respond to the news."

That was it. Not remorse. Not horror. Not “I failed you.” Not “I should have come for you.” Just a total dismissal dressed up as confusion. She did not know how to respond, so she chose not to protect me. I have spent most of my life trying to understand people, but there are some things that cannot be made acceptable by understanding them.

When I hung up that pay phone, the handset clicked onto the latch, and the coins dropped into the bucket inside the phone at the same moment as the realization. Me and Penfold were on our own from then on. I was seventeen.

There are moments in life when childhood does not end gradually. It ends with a sound. A click. Coins falling into a metal collection bucket. An analog dial tone gone dead. The realization that no one is coming, not because they do not know where you are, but because they know full well and have decided to leave you there anyway.

Before boarding school, I had come home from summer camp wearing friendship bracelets that my female friends and I had made and traded with each other. I wore them all summer. I had tan lines on my wrists from them.

The sun had recorded the memories of friendship onto my skin. When I got home, Dad cut the bracelets off my wrists. Less than a week later, he sent me to boarding school.

This was my first year of boarding school. My father’s instructions were clear: *I was to attend boarding school and come*

out a man. There was *no excuse why I can't make the honor roll the entire time*. The bracelets were feminine, and apparently I had not seen the memo.

Dad absolutely hated that I dressed in pastels and bold colors. He hated so many natural expressions of who I was. My clothes, my softness, my friendships with girls, my identity, and my refusal to become the son he had invented in his mind before reality disappointed him. He saw difference as failure. I see now that he was wrong about nearly everything that mattered.

I have always been fascinated with Saturn, whom I perceive as nonbinary. Saturn exists beyond the small rigid categories that frightened my father so much.

Saturn is ringed, distant, strange, beautiful, and magnificent without needing permission. The moon is nearer, more intimate, and more faithful in her appearances, but Saturn has always felt like a declaration from the outer dark—that there are forms of existence no human father can reduce to his own disappointment.

I think that is also why I am drawn to pine trees. They are different. When everything else goes bare, they remain visibly themselves. They are not tidy. They drop needles, bleed sap, bend under snow, take scars, hold wind, and keep standing. They do not apologize for being evergreen. In winter, they are proof that life continues even when the rest of the world looks stripped down and done.

I have only named three people as best friends in forty-six years: Matthew Jacob Orlando (who grew up in nearby Harpersfield, New York), Amelia Phoenix Desertsong, and Madeline Grace O'Malley.

I do not use that term lightly. To me, friendship has never been casual decoration. It is not a social accessory. It is kinship, allegiance, and chosen continuity. My parents accumulated objects. I have been far more careful with people.

My time as a medic in New York City remains one of the most interesting and important eras of my young adult life. I still sought connection. Despite everything, I still believed there had to be something better than what I had known at home, and there was. EMS gave me perspective. It showed me that the vast majority of people are genuinely nice people who work hard, try their best, and show up for those they care about, regardless of origin.

I saw people frightened, exhausted, poor, wealthy, angry, grieving, sick, injured, drunk, sober, alone, loved, and dying. I saw strangers help strangers. I saw families try. I saw neighbors stay. I saw people do imperfect but humanly decent things in impossible moments.

Today, I told Amelia that I am keeping Mom's house even though it does not make sense. It does not make sense financially, practically, or perhaps even emotionally, depending on which version of me you ask. If anything, it feels like my just reward. I obtained the one thing that meant everything to both

of my parents: the house they referred to as, "Their Mansion in the center of town."

They loved that phrase. *Their Mansion in the center of town*. The status of it. The way it positioned them in relation to everyone else. It was never just a house to them. It was proof, display, permanence, and identity.

Now it belongs to me and Amelia. My late father would never have approved of *any* of this.

I am keeping the things Mom and I created together, and half of the furniture. Mom had double furniture throughout the house because she was always expecting company. Sadly, the only people who ever came were my father's side of the family. The last time I spoke to any of them was nearly twenty three years ago.

If I tried to sort and sell everything she left behind, it would take me the rest of my life, and even then, I would have accumulated perhaps two weeks' worth of my investment income. The financial value is almost beside the point. The emotional cost of sorting through all of it would be far greater than the money. I am not obligated to spend the rest of my life processing the residue of hers.

The house is still full of objects, many of which have outlived their meaning.

I sold Mom's car to someone I have known since childhood who grew up in town. The New York license plate on

her car said PENFOLD8. *Penfold for infinity*. I still find it ironic that she chose a vanity plate honoring a dog she killed.

I came home to the farm this morning with Amelia. My parents had their mansion. I have the farm, Amelia, and finally, *a home*.

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Being a queer girl isn't something you decide. It's something you survive, until you get old enough to claim it.

For much of my career in emergency medical services and technical rescue, I worked in environments where competence alone was not enough to guarantee respect. I entered a profession that publicly claimed to value skill, composure, and patient care above all else, but privately often operated through old loyalties, informal hierarchies, and deeply gendered assumptions about who belonged there and who did not.

As a woman working in emergency services, I frequently found myself in the impossible position of having to prove my competence repeatedly, even after I had already demonstrated it. Male coworkers who possessed less training, less experience, or weaker clinical skills were often assumed to be competent by default, while I was expected to justify my presence continuously. If I performed well, I was treated as an exception. If I made even the most minor of mistakes, those mistakes were treated as evidence that I did not belong.

I was routinely undermined in front of patients, coworkers, and supervisors. There were times when male colleagues openly questioned my abilities while I was actively performing medical procedures, telling patients that I was inexperienced or did not know what I was doing despite years of training and operational experience. This was not done quietly. It was done publicly, in ways clearly designed to diminish my

authority and confidence. In emergency medicine, where patient trust and team cohesion matter enormously, this behavior created both professional and emotional damage.

The discrimination was not always overt. Often it came through systems of exclusion and obstruction. I was denied equipment routinely provided to others. Requests for proper protective gear were ignored or delayed despite the obvious safety implications. I was left using personal equipment while coworkers received department-issued gear immediately and without issue. This not only affected safety, but also reinforced the feeling that I was viewed as less legitimate than the men around me.

Scheduling became another method of control. My hours were changed unpredictably, removed without warning, or manipulated in ways that made it difficult to maintain financial stability or personal consistency. I was often denied opportunities routinely offered to others, including overtime, advancement, or specialized responsibilities, despite having the qualifications and experience necessary to perform them safely and effectively. Newer or less qualified male employees were frequently treated more favorably.

At times, I felt I was being deliberately set up to fail. Schedules would change without notification, leaving me blamed for absences from shifts I had never been informed about. Policies were enforced inconsistently, often applied rigidly to me while ignored for others. The unpredictability created a constant

atmosphere of anxiety and instability. I came to feel that some supervisors were less interested in evaluating my actual performance than in manufacturing reasons to portray me as unreliable or difficult.

Being a woman in rescue and EMS also meant existing inside a culture where emotional intimidation and public humiliation were normalized. Loud reprimands, dismissive behavior, and deliberate isolation became part of daily life. Some supervisors and coworkers appeared threatened by the fact that I was highly skilled, technically capable, and unwilling to quietly accept mistreatment. Rather than acknowledging competence, they responded with resentment, hostility, or attempts to marginalize me professionally.

At the same time, I was operating in some of the most demanding environments imaginable. I worked trauma, rescue, industrial accidents, fatalities, suicides, hazardous atmospheres, active shooting, difficult extrications, and recovery operations involving human remains. I was expected to remain calm, technically precise, and emotionally controlled under extraordinary pressure. Physicians trusted me with difficult airways. Teams relied on me during high-risk rescue operations. Patients entrusted me with their lives and, sometimes, with their final words.

The contradiction was painful: in the field, my skills were often respected because outcomes mattered more than politics. During emergencies, people cared whether I could solve the

problem. But once the scene ended and the adrenaline faded, I was returned to an environment where gendered power dynamics frequently overshadowed merit.

There was also the exhausting reality of carrying multiple layers of difference simultaneously. Existing as a woman in emergency services already meant navigating skepticism and hostility. Existing as a autistic neurodivergent lesbian woman added another layer of misunderstanding and prejudice. Behaviors related to concentration, communication style, or emotional processing were sometimes interpreted unfairly through the lens of bias rather than competence. Instead of recognizing that different minds can produce extraordinary clinical performance, some people viewed difference itself as weakness.

Despite all of this, I stayed. I stayed because I loved the work. I loved the patients, the rescue environment, the clarity of purpose, the teamwork during real emergencies, and the knowledge that my skills genuinely helped people survive terrible moments in their lives. I stayed because, beneath the politics and discrimination, I believed deeply in the mission of emergency service itself.

But surviving inside that culture required enormous emotional endurance. Over time, I learned that being exceptional at the job did not protect women from discrimination. In some cases, it intensified it. Competent women in male-dominated environments are often treated not merely as coworkers, but as

disruptions to an established hierarchy. The better I became, the more resistance I sometimes encountered.

Even so, I remained operationally effective for decades. I performed rescue work, advanced medical care, recovery operations, and leadership responsibilities under conditions that demanded absolute precision and composure. I built a reputation based not on image or politics, but on consistency, technical skill, and the trust of the people whose lives depended on me.

That trust mattered more than the hostility ever did.

Sometimes I think about the girl I used to be—the one who slept with a camera under her pillow, who wrote things down before she understood what she was writing, who kept her real thoughts folded tight because she learned early that truth made people uncomfortable. I don't try to become her again. I just honor the fact that she was right about more things than anyone gave her credit for. The hardest part of growing up was realizing no one comes to save you from the person you used to be. I've had to walk her home myself.

I learned to trust what functioned under neglect. Not the things that claimed meaning, not the voices that insisted on it, but the quiet systems that stayed upright when no one was keeping score. There is a kind of intelligence in continuity, in showing up without needing to be witnessed. When you have lived long enough inside failure, you stop romanticizing revelation. You start paying attention to what still works.

There are nights when the moon hangs low and indifferent, and I feel the weight of the days responsibilities slip from my hands without ceremony. The doctors wanted to operate when I was young—early enough that I would never remember the decision.

They would have removed tissue that appeared as male genitalia but functioned as my clitoris. That wasn't correction. That was a decision about my body I wasn't allowed to make. My mother refused. Not loudly, not completely—but enough. She held them off long enough for me to decide for myself. I'm glad I was born this way. I'm glad I stayed this way. That was the one place where the system did not finish its sentence.

I stand alone outside in the cold air beneath the pines and let the sky decide who I am for a moment. The pines don't judge me for staying. The wind doesn't ask why. The land doesn't care about my back story. The moon, high above the clouds—she knows only the beauty of love, and her borrowed light reminds me that I'm never truly alone.

There are moments when the world narrows to its most practical truths, when abstraction loses its grip and only accuracy remains. I have learned more in those moments than I ever did in places designed to inspire. Beauty did not arrive with intention. It arrived sideways, unannounced, and usually while I was busy doing something else. That is how I learned that meaning does not require agreement to exist.

Empathy is just pattern recognition applied to pain. Not everything worth keeping announces itself. Some things just stay. And what mercy the truth brings—that even though it sometimes hurts, I'm still willing.

I stopped looking for answers that wanted to be admired. The ones that mattered never introduced themselves that way. They showed up quietly, often late, and stayed without explanation. I have come to respect anything that does not ask to be believed, only tested. If something holds under pressure, I pay attention. Everything else is commentary.

Sometimes I realize I'm living the life that girl never dared to picture because she thought she'd burn out before she grew up. Not because she was reckless—because she didn't have any evidence that things could get gentler. I think about her more as a witness than a wound now. She wasn't dramatic. She was exhausted. And she kept going anyway, even when she didn't understand the reasons.

I used to think understanding was the goal. Now I think care is. Care requires attention, patience, and a willingness to remain present as things change shape. It is easier to explain the world than it is to stay with it. Easier to categorize than to tend. Intelligence, as I have come to know it, is not about mastery. It is about stewardship.

The pines hold still, tall and knowing, their needles catching the light in quiet applause. They've seen all of me—the rage, the ruin, the rebuilding. And they still let me stand among

them. I don't say much to them anymore. I don't need to. Everything important already runs at it's own pace. The river flows, the wind blows gently, and the youngest of hearts that kept its own time.

Night comes softly here. No arrival, no fanfare—just the quiet certainty of something that's kept its promise. I've learned that stillness isn't the absence of movement. It's what remains in moments when you stop needing, or desiring to be elsewhere.

There are nights when the fog rolls in like it bears a tale that needs to be told again, and I swear I hear my younger self somewhere in it—quiet, stubborn, still waiting for someone to tell her she wasn't wrong about everything.

I've known a lot of people in my life, and most of them are gone now—not dramatically, not ceremonially, just gone in the way people are when time decides it is finished with them. I used to believe that if I loved people correctly—paid attention, stayed loyal, showed up early, stayed late—I could keep them. I learned early that loss does not bargain, and effort does not protect. What stays with me is the knowledge that people disappear even when you do everything right, and the fear—rarely spoken, but always present—that one day I will disappear the same way, quietly, completely, and without anyone noticing the moment I am no longer remembered.

Growing up around people the world recognized taught me something early that I did not yet have language for. I watched people speak fluently about inclusion in public spaces

while quietly drawing lines in their personal lives—lines that included my wife and me. My family was publicly supportive of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights, yet struggled deeply with the biological fact that I was born intersex, and identify as a lesbian.

That contradiction did not make me cynical. It made me precise. I learned to listen less to what people declared and more to how they behaved when no audience was present. Being an ally, I learned, is not proven by statements. It is proven by proximity.

There are places where the ordinary reveals itself as something fragile and exact, something that only survives because someone—or something—kept going without fanfare. I notice those places more now. They feel honest. They remind me that most of what matters does not arrive dramatically. It endures.

There are memories I never talk about, not because they hurt too much, but because they don't belong in conversation. Moments where time folded, where someone's desperation pressed into the lines of my voice, where the world expected me to be steady even when I wasn't fully formed myself. There is a certain loneliness that only gifted children grow into—the kind that makes them translators for worlds that never asked to be understood. I don't carry guilt about those moments anymore. Just a quiet acknowledgment that I was there, and I did what I could with what little I had.

Before mom passed she asked, since I had been present for many people's passing, if there is anything that is said or any prayers, or what the standard protocol is. And I said, “there really is no protocol, but I want you to know that if you have to go, that wherever you end up, just know that I have things here totally under control, because we made it up until now, together.”

I still catch glimpses of my younger self in reflections I wasn’t prepared for—shop windows, darkened computer screens, water that stayed still long enough. Sometimes in these passing moments, I look back and realize I spent years trying to be a version of myself that made other people comfortable. Quieter. Smaller. Easier to interpret. It took until my forties to understand that comfort is not the same as love, and neither are worth sacrificing your own outline.

Nobody ever took the time to know me. I was seen but never remembered. And over time I became a ghost waiting on a crumbling shore. And for awhile I lost sight of who I was and for years and years I roamed. Long time. Nothing new. I showed up, worked hard, and was repeatedly failed by the same institutions I helped maintain.

A certain ache comes eventually when you realize that you spent a lifetime saving everyone but yourself, and somehow made peace with the imbalance. I’m not quieter now—I’m just more selective. A steady reminder that I somehow carried myself through everything I thought would break me. It wasn’t hope. It certainly wasn’t pain. It was continuity. The proof that I’m still

here. Still standing. Still learning what it means to live with everything I've kept, everything I've lost, and everything I never got to say.

I was never confused about who I was. Confusion belonged only to others who needed the world to stay simple enough to manage. From the beginning, I understood myself with a clarity that didn't require explanation, only permission to exist uninterrupted. What complicated things was the constant insistence that I needed to be corrected, redirected, or translated for other people's comfort. Over time, I learned that clarity without power is treated like defiance, and that being certain can make others deeply uneasy.

Most people spend their lives trying to outrun the past. The wiser ones eventually realize the past is not chasing them—it's waiting for them to finally understand it. The past only stops hurting when you stop negotiating with it. I have spent the majority of my life learning that survival and happiness are two entirely different skills. I learned early that the woods do not care who you are—but they will teach you how to stay alive. I trust the way pine trees stand in winter—steady, patient, and unconcerned with anyone's opinion.

Every system eventually reveals its weak point; patience is simply the discipline of waiting for it to appear. I stopped asking life to be fair a long time ago. Now I only ask that it remain interesting. Some stories are not meant to be explained—they are meant to be survived. And yet there exists a

particular loneliness that comes from understanding things too early.

I used to believe that the point of life was to outrun the periods that hurt. But the older I get, the more I realize that you cannot outpace anything you haven't yet named. The past catches up eventually—usually on a quiet evening when you think that everything is going fine.

Some of the darkest parts of my life weren't defined by what happened, but oftentimes by what failed to happen—silence where there should have been support, stillness where comfort should have existed, and the empty echo of being left alone to figure out things that no one should have to handle alone.

There is a particular stillness that arrives once you stop needing to be understood. It's not resignation. It's relief. You stop translating yourself for people who were never listening in the first place. You stop editing your life to make it more palatable. You let the truth sit where it is, unsoftened, and trust that the right people will recognize it without instruction. Everything else becomes background noise.

People often misunderstand stillness—they think it means nothing is happening, that no decisions are being made, that no movement exists beneath the surface—but stillness is often where the most irreversible choices are made. It is the place where you measure the cost of speaking, of leaving, of

staying, and decide—without witnesses—what you are willing to carry.

There are moments when I look at someone I care about and realize I don't love people the way people are used to—urgently, anxiously, hoping they're doing it right.

My love tends to be quieter, steadier, more observational. Love, for me, looks like remembering small details, giving space without disappearing, and offering care without the need to be seen giving it. It feels more honest.

I learned reverence from vending machines that still worked at three in the morning, from small systems that kept doing their job long after the people around them had given up. The places where people most often claim to feel god are not the places filled with noise or performance—they're often the quiet ones. The woods in winter, the moment before sunrise, the stillness and silence that comes after something has ended. It's not the content of those moments, it's the absence of interference. Whatever is there becomes easier to perceive when everything else falls away.

Maybe enlightenment is just remembering how to marvel without needing a reason. Understanding the world isn't the goal. Loving it and caring for it while it changes—that's the real intelligence. And if there's a god, she's probably quiet, holding the sky steady while we argue about what it all means. And when I die, I hope my spirit will always remember exactly how it

felt to be me—to think this much, to feel this deeply, and to exist long enough to notice how beautiful the ordinary really was.

We are all, in some quiet and unspoken way, trying to prove that our lives mattered—not to history, not to the world at large, but to ourselves, to the version of us that kept going when it would have been easier not to, and sometimes that proof is nothing more than the fact that we are still here, still choosing to continue.

Sometimes when I sit on the front porch of moms house it feels like I'm just Emily, as if sixteen year old me had been patiently waiting for me on moms doorstep all this time.

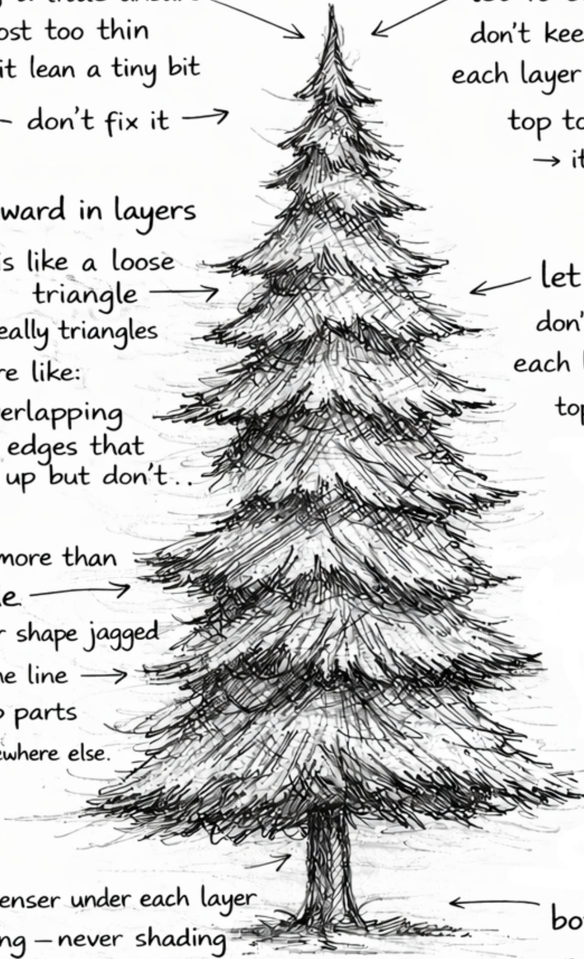
At some point, you realize that the life you built is not something you need to justify. Not to your past, not to other people, not even to yourself. It exists because you made it, because you maintained it, because you chose it repeatedly when it would have been easier to abandon it. That is enough. Not everything meaningful needs external confirmation to be real.

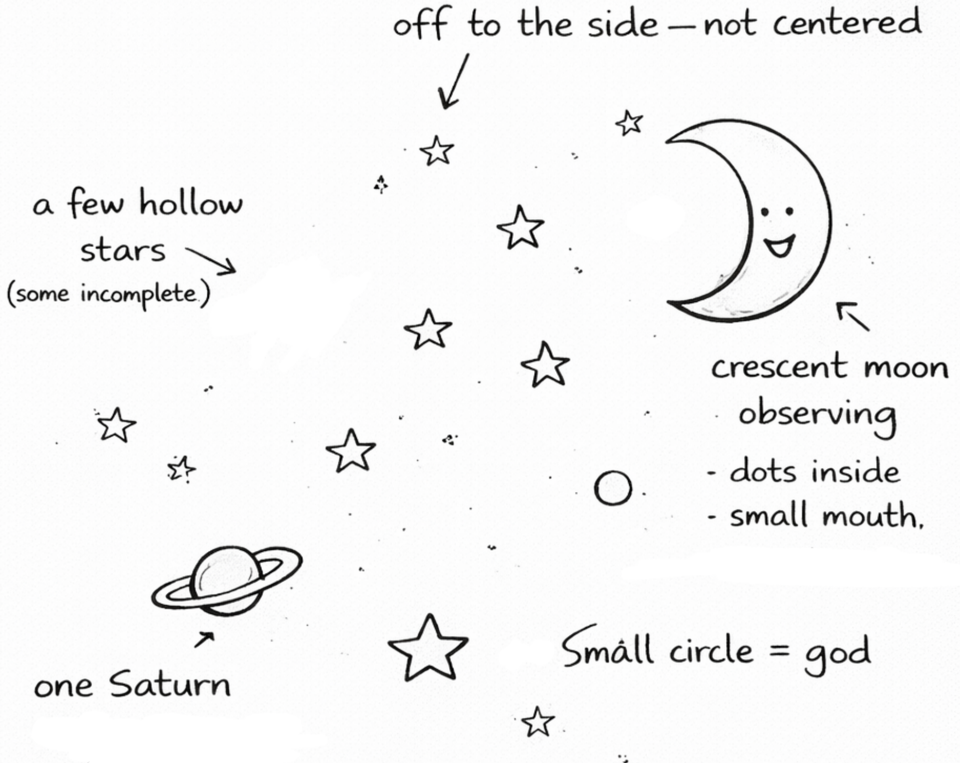
I was born in New York City. I was raised in Upstate New York. I became myself in Vermont. We move through life believing we understand the forces shaping it, when most of the time we are blind to the tide that turns the sea. And yet we keep going anyway.

The moon in her glory shines down upon me from above the pines. The night breathes softly now. Finally alive and somehow we made it through together.

With love,

How to draw a pine tree.




Sky (Emily style layer)
off to the side — not centered
a few hollow stars
(some incomplete)
crescent moon observing
- dots inside
- small mouth.
one Saturn
Small circle = god