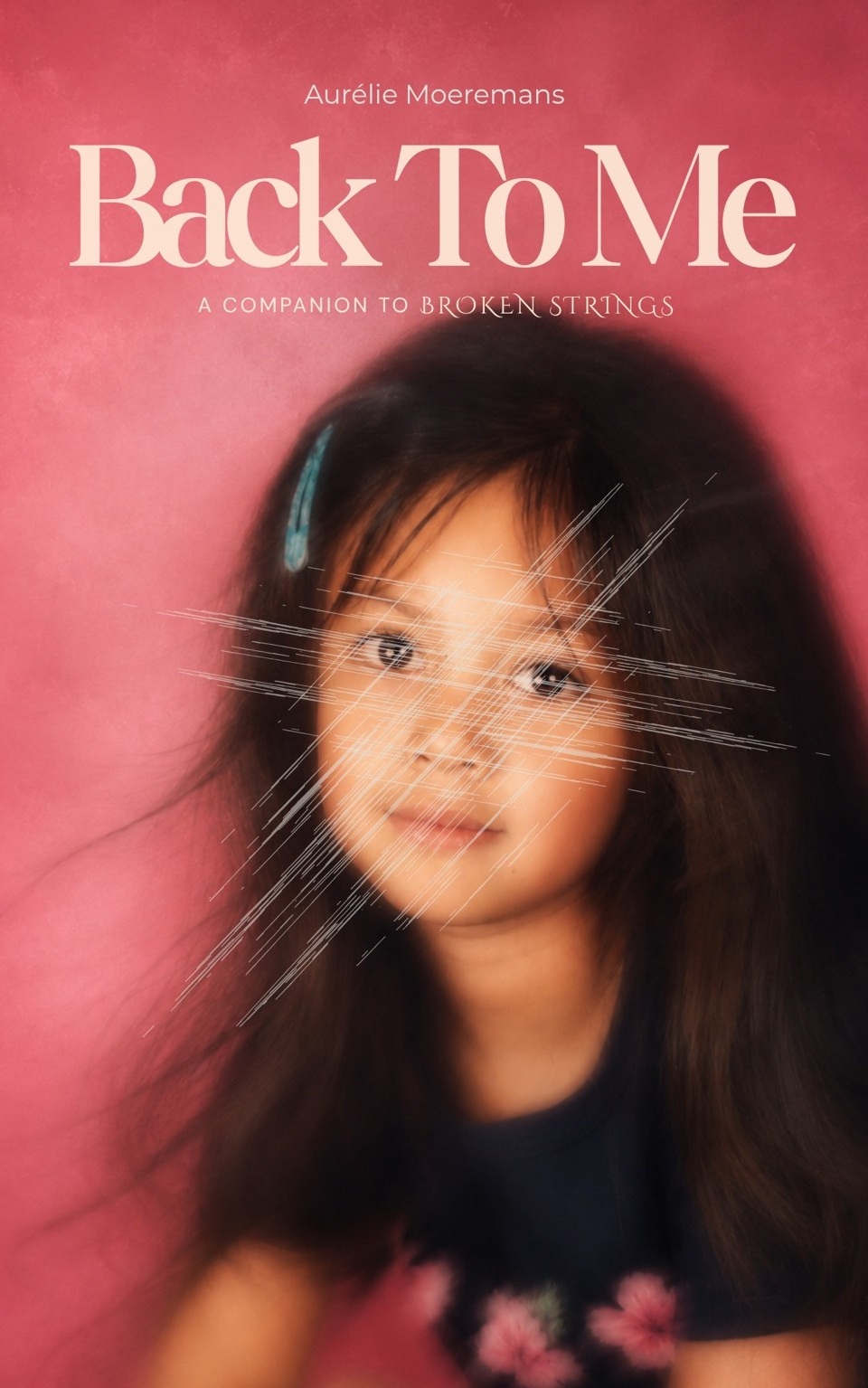
Aurélie Moeremans

Back To Me

A COMPANION TO BROKEN STRINGS



AURÉLIE MOEREMANS

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First edition

A NOTE ON MEMORY AND PRIVACY

This memoir is based on the author's personal recollections. Some names, places, and identifying details have been changed or omitted to protect privacy. The events described reflect the author's experiences and memories to the best of her knowledge.

A NOTE TO THE READER

This memoir explores mental health, past trauma, and unhealthy relationships. Some sections touch on depression, suicidal thoughts, and self-harm, and may feel heavy for some readers.

Please read at your own pace and only as much as feels manageable. Pause whenever you need to. Your safety and well-being matter more than finishing a chapter.

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A Playlist for You

I made a playlist to accompany you through these pages.

Listen on Spotify

PART I

The Life I Could No Longer Perform

1

The Morning I Was Afraid of My Own Mind

Not long before that morning, I had been filming a campaign for one of my favorite beauty brands.

The shoot went well. I already knew my best angles, when to turn toward the camera, and which expression each shot needed. I had done this for years. Looking confident was part of the job, and I was pretty good at it.

There was only one line that required more takes than the others.

"I'm worth it."

The words were easy to remember. Believing them was harder.

Each time I said the line, something in my eyes gave me away. I changed my expression, adjusted my tone, and tried again. Eventually, we captured a version that looked convincing enough.

I did not think much about why it had been so difficult. It was only a line in a commercial. We got the shot. Everyone moved on.

Then came an ordinary morning.

Nothing was different from usual.

I opened my eyes in my bedroom in Jakarta.

Normally, I loved that room. It had wooden floors, tiny lights like the ones I had saved on Pinterest, and bohemian accessories I had chosen carefully. I wanted it to feel warm and personal, like the bedroom of someone creative who had put a little bit of herself into everything.

That morning, it did not feel like mine.

The room was messier than usual. My surroundings often reflected whatever was happening inside me. When I felt stable, I cleaned. When my mind became crowded, objects began collecting around me, clothes stayed wherever they had fallen, and the room slowly lost its shape.

I felt nauseated by the thought of waking up there again.

Before I had properly moved, a feeling passed through me.

Ugh. I don't want to do today.

It was not initially a complete sentence. It was more like a heaviness settling over the morning before I had even lifted my head.

Another day? I have to do another one?

Then another thought followed with frightening ease.

Maybe it would be fine if I just didn't wake up.

I sat upright in bed.

The movement was immediate, as though my body had reacted before my mind could understand what had happened.

Did I just have a suicidal thought?

I had not made a plan. I was not thinking about how to die. I had not decided that I wanted to end my life.

That almost made it more frightening.

The thought had arrived naturally, without drama, in the same quiet voice that might have told me I wanted to stay in bed for another ten minutes.

For a moment, I stared at the room around me. I was afraid of my own mind.

I had felt sad before. I had felt empty, exhausted, heartbroken, and lost. I had spent years waking up without feeling excited about my own life.

But this was different. The thought had crossed a boundary I had not known I was approaching.

I decided immediately that I needed professional help.

At that point, I no longer cared whether my mother approved. This time, I was not going to ask for permission. I was going to tell her that I needed to see someone, and that I needed to do it as soon as possible.

From the outside, there was no obvious reason for me to feel that way.

My Instagram looked busy and happy. I still attended events, created brand content, traveled for work, and made people laugh with my silly videos.

Before I understood what was happening to me, I assumed I had simply grown tired of films and television series, so I took a break from them. I still worked, just in different ways. I accepted brand projects, attended events, and began making more time for volunteer work. It was something I had wanted to do for years but rarely could because my schedule had always been filled with work.

Volunteer work made me genuinely happy. While I was there, surrounded by others and focused on something that mattered, I felt useful and connected. But as soon as I came home, it was as though all of that had been left outside the door. The same emptiness was always waiting for me inside.

People still saw me. They just did not see what happened after the event ended, the work was finished, and I went home.

None of that answered the question I kept asking privately.

Why am I not happy?

I knew my life was not objectively terrible. That knowledge made the emptiness even more confusing.

I had a career. I had a house. I had people who loved me. I could support my family. I received opportunities many actors waited years to have.

I should have been grateful.

I was grateful.

I was also deeply unhappy.

Those two truths existed at the same time, and I did not know what to do with them.

Before considering therapy, I had tried to repair myself privately.

I searched the internet for instructions on how to be happy. I listened to guided meditations. I prayed. I journaled. I looked for ways to love myself, as though self-love were a lesson I had somehow missed at school and could catch up on through the right video.

Once, I used a telemedicine app to consult a psychologist. I entered a false name because I did not want her to know who I was. After a brief conversation, she suggested that I might have borderline personality disorder.

I carried that possibility with me, even though I knew, somewhere, that an opinion formed during such a short online consultation could not be reliable.

Still, the label frightened me.

Maybe there was something fundamentally wrong with my personality. Maybe my emotions were proof that I was not normal. Maybe the problem was not what had happened to me or the life I was living.

Maybe the problem was me.

Once I began to believe that I was the problem, everything that happened started to feel like proof that something really was wrong with me.

I also tried a seven-day silent meditation retreat in Bali.

Every morning began with a bell. For seven days, we were instructed not to speak, make eye contact, gesture to anyone, read, write, or deliberately disappear into daydreams.

We ate only healthy food and did a small amount of physical exercise. The rest of the time, I had nowhere to escape except into my own mind.

At first, my thoughts became louder. My mind jumped from one subject to another like a monkey moving through trees. A memory appeared, then a fear, then a

conversation I wished I had handled differently, followed by something embarrassing I had done several years earlier that my brain had apparently saved for this exact moment.

I imagined the future, returned to the past, judged myself for thinking, then judged myself for judging.

Slowly, something softened.

Our teacher kept repeating one word: *anicca*.

Impermanence.

Everything changes. Feelings come and go. Pain comes and goes. Nothing remains exactly as it is forever.

By the end of the retreat, my mind felt calmer. For a brief period, I believed perhaps I had found the answer. Maybe I only needed more silence. More meditation. More discipline.

But the calm did not last.

Next, I tried a Balinese purification ritual in Ubud.

A young woman went before me. I could hear her screaming so loudly that the sound frightened me. It did not sound ceremonial or peaceful. It sounded as though something were being pulled out of her body against its will.

I almost left.

Before I could, someone approached me and told me to get ready because my turn was next.

Too late.

Once I was in the ritual space, the practitioner told me she could feel from my energy that I was carrying too much. The burden, she said, was too heavy for one person.

She told me to scream and let it all out.

At first, I could not.

My mother was waiting outside, and I knew she would hear me. I was embarrassed. Even in a place where I had been given permission to release everything, I was still worried about the volume.

I screamed, but politely.

The practitioner was not impressed.

“Louder,” she said. “Come on. Let everything out.”

So I did.

I screamed until the sound no longer felt controlled. Then, without warning, I began to cry. My body shook with the relief of finally expressing something I had been containing without fully understanding.

For a moment, it felt as though something had left me.

But about a week after the ritual, I finally admitted something to myself.

I was still not better.

The screaming had given me release, but not direction. Meditation had given me calm, but not understanding. Prayer had comforted me, but it had not answered why I could no longer feel happiness.

That morning in my bedroom, after the thought frightened me out of bed, I found my mother in her room folding laundry.

The scene was so ordinary that I almost felt foolish for interrupting it.

She was arranging clothes while I stood there carrying something she could not see.

My mother had never really understood therapy. Whenever I suggested that I might need help, she responded with questions.

“Why?”

“What happened to you?”

“Why do you need a psychologist?”

“Just pray.”

To her, therapy was for people whose problems were obvious and extreme. If I still had work, food, family, and a home, what exactly was there to discuss with a stranger?

Normally, her resistance would have been enough to stop me. I did not like disappointing my mother. I did not enjoy doing things she did not understand. Even as an adult who financially supported the family, part of me still searched her face for permission.

That morning, I did not ask.

“Mom, I have to see a psychologist,” I said.

Before she had time to answer, I continued. My voice was firm, even though I was already nervous about her reaction.

“Whether you allow me to or not, I’m still going to find one. I need this.”

My voice must have sounded different because she did not argue.

She looked at me and seemed to understand that this was no longer a casual suggestion.

“Okay,” she said. “Let’s find one together.”

I did not tell her about the thought I had experienced that morning. I knew how much she worried about me. If I told her that my mind had casually suggested not waking up, she might panic, watch me constantly, or become too afraid to leave me alone.

I did not want to frighten her. I only wanted help before the thought became something larger.

We sat together in her bedroom and searched online. I typed something simple into Google.

Good psychologist near me.

My mother helped me look through the results. She chose someone nearby who had good reviews, then offered to call because she knew how nervous I became speaking to strangers on the phone.

Even making an appointment felt vulnerable.

What would I say when they asked why I wanted to come?

I did not have one clear answer. Like I said, I was still working. I was still functioning. I was still smiling whenever people expected me to smile.

People often told me, “Aurélie, you smile so easily.”

They were right. I had become very good at smiling. I knew how to make people feel comfortable, how to find the right expression, and how to look fine before anyone had the chance to ask whether I was.

Somewhere along the way, I had become so skilled at hiding what was happening inside me that no one seemed to notice there was anything to hide. Sometimes, even I confused being able to function with actually being okay.

If only they knew.

How could I explain that I was still functioning, but no longer felt alive inside?

My mother made the appointment for that afternoon. She said she would come with me and wait nearby.

Afterward, I felt two things at once.

Relief, because I had finally admitted that I could not solve everything by myself, and because, for once, telling my mother had not turned into a debate.

Fear, because someone was about to look closely at me.

What if the psychologist discovered that the person I had consulted online had been right? What if it was something even more serious? What if I had a mental illness that would never go away? What if there was something permanently wrong with my personality?

What if I began talking and could not stop?

I had spent years protecting the details of my life, not only because they were painful, but because so much of my identity depended on appearing capable.

I was the person who worked. The person who helped. The person who supported other people.

I did not know how to become the person asking to be supported.

But I also knew I could not return upstairs and pretend that morning had not happened.

That thought had frightened me, but perhaps it had also interrupted something.

For years, I had accepted unhappiness as a personality trait. I told myself I was simply ungrateful, too sensitive, difficult to satisfy, or permanently damaged by choices I should have made differently.

That morning forced me to consider another possibility.

Maybe I was unwell.

And if I was unwell, perhaps I was not failing as a person.

Perhaps I needed care.

Looking back, I understand the thought not as a plan or a wish to die, but as a warning that I could not continue living in the same way. I took it seriously because I did not want to wait until it became a plan.

That morning was not the beginning of the end.

It was the beginning of my way out.

2

The Room Where I Told the Truth

By late afternoon, my mother and I were on our way to the psychologist's office we had found that morning.

We sat mostly in silence. I could sense that she was worried, perhaps even guilty that she had not taken my earlier requests for help more seriously.

After a while, she looked over at me.

"Hopefully this helps, Miss."

I wore sweatpants and a T-shirt. Nothing special, nothing that needed adjusting, nothing that made me more aware of my body. I was already uncomfortable enough. I did not want tight clothes, difficult shoes, or anything else that might make me feel more restricted in my own skin.

The office was inside a narrow, unremarkable building with pale hallways, white walls, and a lift barely large enough for a few people.

My mother came upstairs with me. Once the psychologist had greeted us, she told me she would stay nearby. She could find something to eat, pick up a few groceries, or wait in the car until I was finished.

She knew I needed her close, but not close enough to hear.

Then she left, and the door shut behind her.

The room was not really the psychologist's. He explained that he usually practiced somewhere else, but when meeting patients in this area, he borrowed whichever space was available. We did not even use the same room for every appointment.

That first room was almost entirely white. White walls. White desk. White chairs. Nothing soft or inviting. The furniture looked temporary and inexpensive, and my

chair squeaked whenever I shifted. Everything felt stiff, arranged for function and then forgotten.

The psychologist looked like he was in his late thirties or early forties. He dressed simply and did not seem rigid or judgmental.

He smiled easily.

Not a nervous smile or the polished expression of someone working in customer service, but the relaxed smile of a person who believed most problems could eventually be spoken through.

Now that I was alone with him, my mind became loud again.

Okay. Do not mess this up. Be normal. Tell him everything. Do not overthink every word.

He asked me to fill out several pages of questionnaires. There were statements to rate, boxes to tick, and questions that seemed random until I realized they were probably designed to reveal things indirectly. One of them began with something like, "When I see a man, I think…"

My first answer was "toxic."

I almost laughed.

At first, I caught myself trying to answer in a way that made me sound more normal. Not exactly lying, just editing. Choosing the less alarming number.

Softening the truth slightly.

Then I stopped.

This was the one place where I needed to be completely honest. There was no point paying a professional to examine a carefully managed version of me. He met people with problems every day. Whatever I wrote, it was unlikely to be the strangest thing he had ever seen.

So I went back and answered as honestly as I could.

Most of the questions asked me to choose a number from zero to five, depending on how much each statement applied to me.

One question asked whether I had experienced thoughts about death or suicide.

I froze.

Did one passing thought count? I did not want to die. I did not have a plan. But marking zero would not be completely honest either.

So I marked one out of five.

It had happened, but only once. I did not have a plan. I did not want to act on it. Still, I could not mark zero.

When I finished, he read the pages across the desk while I watched his face for signs.

I searched his expression for surprise or concern, anything that might warn me before he named something frightening. A personality disorder. A condition that would worsen with age. Some hidden defect that had finally revealed itself on paper.

Instead, he smiled. Not mockingly. More like something had become obvious to him.

"Oh," he said with a small laugh. "This is severe depression. And anxiety."

I stared at him.

Depression.

So this was depression.

I had heard the word my entire life, but I had never understood what it actually felt like. I imagined depressed people as visibly sad, unable to get out of bed, crying constantly, and completely disconnected from the world.

My life looked nothing like that. I was busier than most people I knew. My days were full of places to be, people to answer, and things that needed to be finished. I had not realized that someone could remain constantly in motion while slowly disappearing inside herself.

"Oh," I said. "I'm depressed?"

Relief moved through me. Depression sounded serious, but it also sounded like something a human being could experience and recover from. It was an illness, not a permanent flaw in my personality.

But the word *severe* frightened me.

"What does severe mean?"

He said my answers showed serious depression and that the thought from that morning was a warning, not something to dismiss. The numbness, anxiety, exhaustion, and lack of pleasure formed a clear pattern.

He told me that four sessions should be enough for me to begin feeling better.

Four sessions.

It sounded far too good to be true, but I wanted to believe him.

"That would be amazing," I said.

He asked what I used to enjoy before everything became heavy.

"Music," I said.

"What else?"

The question should have been easy. Instead, I searched my mind and discovered, somewhat embarrassingly, that my list of hobbies had become very short. Work had occupied most of my life. Even the things I enjoyed were often attached to a schedule, a camera, or someone else's expectations.

Then I remembered one.

"Writing," I said. "I used to love writing."

Used to.

Even the tense felt sad.

I could not remember exactly when I had stopped. I only knew that something I had once done simply because I loved it had become part of a person I no longer felt connected to.

He put the papers aside and asked what had brought me there, what felt wrong, and what I hoped he could help me understand.

My mind went blank.

I did not know where to begin. There were too many possible beginnings, and none of them seemed large enough to explain everything.

I told him I felt lost. I no longer felt emotions properly. Something inside me seemed disconnected, but I did not

know when it had started or what had caused it. It was not as simple as one breakup, one disappointment, or one bad period.

Then I told him something that had bothered me for a long time.

I felt as though I always attracted the wrong people.

That was how I understood it then.

Attract.

As if certain people could sense something in me from a distance. As if I carried a signal that only difficult people could hear.

My first serious boyfriend had physically hurt me. The relationships after him were different, but there always seemed to be something. Cheating. Control. Threats. Drama. Emotional confusion. Different people, different faces, different stories, yet I kept ending up in situations where peace felt impossible.

And it was not limited to romantic relationships. One of my closest friends, whom I will call Stephanie, had recently deceived me and taken money from me.

I told him I did not understand it. I did not want drama. I only wanted to live peacefully, yet somehow I kept finding myself inside it.

I wondered whether it was because I was always trying to fix people. Maybe they chose me because I said yes too easily, listened without asking for the same care in return, and kept giving chances long after I had stopped wanting to.

“What about your current partner?” he asked. “How is that relationship?”

I paused.

The answer felt dangerous, even in a room where I was supposed to tell the truth.

“I’m not happy in my relationship,” I said quietly. “But it’s complicated. It might be one part of why I feel lost, but it isn’t the whole explanation.”

He listened without interrupting. When I had said everything I could think of, he asked me to tell him about my childhood.

“Do you mean the traumatic things?” I asked.

He told me I could share anything that came to mind. Whatever I wanted to tell him, he would listen.

Until then, I had never thought of my childhood as particularly traumatic. There had certainly been painful moments. There had even been several experiences that no child should have had to go through. But they had never organized themselves in my mind under one dramatic heading.

They were simply things that had happened. Moments I had adapted to without asking what they might have taught me.

Once he asked, my mind skipped over the ordinary memories and reached for the experiences that felt extreme enough to belong in a psychologist’s office. I did not tell the story of my childhood in order. I offered only the things that surfaced and seemed too serious to dismiss.

One of the first things I told him was about an uncle I had continued helping financially, only to be deceived and have money taken from me anyway.

I continued talking about whatever came to mind. The psychologist listened as I moved from one memory to another, occasionally lowering his eyes to write notes on a sheet of paper.

After I shared several experiences, he asked me to imagine each person sitting in front of me and to have the conversation we had never been able to have. I could say what I had swallowed, ask whatever remained unanswered, and imagine the other person responding.

The exercise felt awkward with him sitting across from me and listening, but I had come because I did not know how to help myself. I trusted that he knew what he was doing.

Only when a conversation felt complete did he ask whether I could forgive the person.

He checked more than once, making it difficult to give the polite answer and rush ahead. I had to notice whether I had actually released anything or was only performing forgiveness.

With my uncle, I reached a kind of forgiveness, but deep down, I knew I did not want him close to me again. Forgiving him did not require me to minimize what he had done, restore the relationship, or give him access to my life.

I could release some of the anger and still keep my distance.

That distinction mattered.

My first boyfriend was different. I could not forgive him then. Even inside an imaginary conversation, I knew exactly how he would answer. He would deny, twist, accuse, and make me question my own memory.

I knew because he was still bothering me even then. He had not become a safe memory. He was still the same person.

I told the psychologist I could not honestly say that I had forgiven him.

He did not force me to. He said that was okay, and we moved on.

There were many other people he asked me to imagine speaking to and forgiving. Most of the time, I found that I could. Some conversations made me feel lighter. Others showed me how much pain was still there.

For the first time, I began to notice something unsettling.

Memories I had dismissed as old stories still carried the original emotions inside them. I could tell myself that something had happened years ago, that I was older now, and that it no longer mattered. Yet the moment I spoke about it, the feeling returned.

The past had not disappeared.

I had simply stopped looking at it.

By the end of the first session, I understood why he had asked about my childhood. He was trying to uncover what remained unfinished so I could move forward without dragging it behind me.

It sounded beautiful.

The process itself was not always beautiful.

At several points during the session, he had an annoying habit of talking about himself or wandering into random subjects that had nothing to do with me. I no longer remember any of his stories because I was barely listening. I only remember smiling politely while thinking, *Please stop talking. I am paying by the hour.*

Perhaps he was trying to connect with me.

So I nodded, listened, smiled, and waited for him to return to my problems.

Even in therapy, I was worried about making someone else feel comfortable.

People-pleasing had followed me into the one room where I was supposed to talk about people-pleasing. Apparently, it had excellent attendance.

Still, I never considered finding another psychologist. I did not want to start over with someone new. Telling one stranger already required enormous effort. The thought of repeating the same stories from the beginning felt exhausting.

And despite his flaws, his ideas often helped.

Before the first session ended, he suggested trying hypnotherapy at our next appointment.

The idea immediately interested me.

Someone I knew had once told me about doing hypnotherapy in the United States. He described the sessions in a way that fascinated me. He said it felt like sleeping without fully being asleep, conscious but not completely conscious, relaxed enough for the mind to go somewhere it usually resisted.

He told me it had helped him tremendously.

Ever since that conversation, I had wanted to experience it for myself.

At the second session, the psychologist pushed two hard plastic chairs together and asked me to lie across them.

That was the hypnotherapy bed.

The chairs were narrow, uncomfortable, and made a squeaking sound whenever I moved. I tried to position myself without creating too much noise, but there was no comfortable way to lie down. My body felt awkward and unsupported.

Instead of feeling as though I were entering a mysterious state between sleep and consciousness, I felt like someone trying to nap in a waiting room.

He told me to focus on my breathing.

I tried.

The problem was that he had been coughing since the beginning of the appointment. Not loudly. He was trying to suppress it. I could hear him holding it back while he spoke, pausing between sentences and controlling his breath so he would not interrupt the hypnosis.

Immediately, I felt sorry for him.

Poor guy. He is trying so hard not to cough.

Instead of following his voice, I started listening for the cough. Every time his breathing changed, I wondered whether he was uncomfortable. I wanted to tell him he could stop, drink water, cough properly, anything, but I was afraid of embarrassing him.

So I said nothing.

I lay across the squeaking plastic chairs, pretending to relax, while most of my attention stayed fixed on the therapist's throat.

Time moved painfully slowly.

I could not wait for the session to end.

The moment it did, he finally allowed himself to cough properly. It came out all at once, as though he had been holding it in the entire time.

At the next appointment, I told him I preferred the normal kind of therapy.

Talking. Forgiveness. The imaginary conversations.

I made sure to say it lightly, as though hypnosis simply was not my style. I did not mention the chairs or the cough. I did not want him to feel that he had failed.

Even while rejecting a therapeutic method, I found a way to protect the therapist's feelings.

3

What Do You Want?

At the third session, we returned to the same kind of work.

The psychologist kept bringing me back to the relationships I still carried with me, even when the people themselves were no longer part of my life.

At the time, anyone looking at my life from the outside might have thought I had a long list of exes. In reality, the number of people who had genuinely been my partners was much smaller than people imagined. One photo together, one outing, even just working together, and somehow that person would end up on the media's list of my exes. The truth was, I found it very difficult to move from one relationship to another. Once I was in one, I usually stayed for a long time, long enough for people to joke, "Is this a relationship or a mortgage?"

One of those relationships was with Mauro. We were together for four years, and five years after it ended, I still had not fully let him go. So, technically, I had already spent longer failing to move on than I had spent being his girlfriend.

Toward the end, the relationship had become unhealthy, complicated, and unstable. We broke up and got back together so many times that separation stopped feeling final. Even after the real ending, the calm one, the one where we spoke properly and accepted that it was over, some part of me continued believing we would eventually find our way back to each other.

Even though I was the one who ended the relationship, I never believed that was the end of us.

When he wanted to get back together, I kept thinking, *Not yet.*

I wasn't trying to lose him.

I honestly believed we still had time.

I imagined that I might date someone else, and that he might too, but somehow we would still find our way back to each other and end up married.

He was the first person with whom I could genuinely imagine marriage. We had discussed when and where. We had spoken about it in enough detail that the future felt less like a fantasy and more like something temporarily delayed.

The boy I dated after Mauro knew that I was not completely over him. I was honest about that.

What I did not tell him was that I still checked Mauro's social media compulsively. I still looked for signs. I still carried a private belief that our story might somehow change direction.

At least, I did until he married someone else.

Finding out was not difficult. After so many years together, we had countless mutual friends. Everyone posted about the wedding.

On the actual day, I avoided social media. I already knew what I would see.

Photographs.

Congratulations.

Proof that the future I had quietly preserved for myself had become someone else's present.

It felt as though my world had collapsed.

I was embarrassed by how badly it hurt because I had been the one to end the relationship. I felt as though I had forfeited the right to grieve him so deeply. Only my mother knew how much it affected me.

For a long time, I quietly avoided events where I thought Mauro might be. Not because I hated him. Mostly because I had no idea which version of myself would show up if we met.

Apparently, the universe did not care about my event-planning strategy.

Some time after his wedding, we happened to run into each other at an event.

We had a brief conversation, mostly polite small talk. I asked how his child was doing, and that was about it.

Before we went our separate ways, we exchanged a quick high five.

His wedding band brushed against my hand.

It did not hurt.

At least, not physically.

Something about feeling that ring against my hand made the reality of his new life more final than any wedding photograph ever had.

I smiled, said goodbye, and went home.

The feeling stayed with me.

The psychologist asked me to have an imaginary conversation with Mauro, just as I had done with the others.

This felt even more awkward than the earlier exercises.

It was one thing to confront someone who had hurt me. It was another to imagine speaking to the man I still loved while another person listened to every word.

He did not give me a script. He asked me to imagine the closure I needed, speak as myself, and then answer as Mauro.

Of course I tried. I had decided to trust the process.

But I was not honest.

I rushed through a shorter, safer version of the conversation. I said whatever I thought would bring the exercise to an end.

I was not trying to find closure.

I was only trying to get through it.

After I went home, the unfinished feeling followed me.

I kept thinking that the psychologist must have given me the exercise for a reason. If I wanted therapy to help, I had to try it properly instead of doing just enough to say that I had done it.

That night, alone in my bedroom, I tried again.

I spoke as myself first.

Then I answered as him.

For the first few moments, I felt ridiculous. I was sitting alone, performing both sides of a conversation that had never happened.

But as the conversation continued, something shifted.

In my imagined version, Mauro told me to find my own happiness. He told me that he was happy now and that he loved his wife completely.

He thanked me for the years we had shared. He said that knowing me had changed him for the better.

More than anything, he told me to stop waiting.

What we had was real.

It was also over.

He apologized for the ways he had hurt me.

Maybe those were not the words he would have chosen in real life.

Maybe it did not matter.

They were the words my mind needed to hear.

As I answered him, the conversation stopped feeling imaginary. My body reacted as though something real had finally been completed.

There was no dramatic breakdown. I did not scream or collapse.

I felt calm.

It felt good. Quietly, simply good.

Afterward, I moved on.

I mean that literally.

From that day, I accepted that Mauro was not the person I would marry. The future I had imagined with him no longer felt delayed.

It felt finished.

Not long after that, Mauro and I ran into each other at an event. We greeted each other from a distance.

I waited for the familiar ache.

The small rush of hope. Anything that might prove I had only convinced myself that I was over him.

Nothing came.

It felt like seeing an old friend. Someone who had once occupied an enormous part of my life and could now stand across a crowded room without pulling me toward him. That was when I knew the exercise had worked.

Closure isn't forgetting. It's remembering without wishing the ending had been different.

As the sessions continued, the psychologist kept returning to one question.

"What do you want?"

I knew how to explain what other people needed from me. I could list my responsibilities, the promises I had made, and the consequences of disappointing anyone.

My own answer was harder to reach.

He asked the question about work.

Did I want to keep accepting every project?

Did I want to continue carrying so much responsibility?

Did I want to stay in Indonesia?

Did I want to stop for a while?

Every time I answered, I immediately explained why my own desire was impossible.

I was the backbone of the family. People depended on me. I could not simply stop.

The truth was, being able to help my family made me happy. I was proud that my work could make their lives easier. The problem was not that I wanted to help them.

The problem was that I had begun treating every desire of my own as a threat to the people I loved.

He reminded me that it was still my life.

That sentence sounded almost irresponsible at first.

Of course it was my life, but it had never felt as though it belonged only to me. Every decision affected someone else. Every break created a problem another person might have to solve. Choosing myself always seemed to mean abandoning someone else.

He used the image of a glass.

"You keep trying to fill everyone else's glass," he said. "But yours is empty. How are you supposed to keep giving anything?"

That was how he connected the people-pleasing to the depression.

I had spent so long making sure everyone else was okay that I had not noticed I was disappearing.

I thought self-sacrifice made me good. I had not realized that constantly abandoning myself would eventually leave me empty.

When he asked what I wanted from my relationship, I already knew the answer.

I just did not yet know how to trust it.

To understand why that answer had become so difficult to say, I have to go back to how Vincent and I began.

4

When My No Became Negotiable

Vincent and I had been together for more than a year by then.

Our relationship began with a social media job. He contacted me professionally, but somewhere between discussing work and exchanging jokes, the conversation became personal.

I usually disliked phone calls. With Vincent, somehow, I could talk for hours.

His life was steady. Work, home, repeat. Mine sounded like a television series he had missed several seasons of, and his reactions made me want to keep telling him what happened next.

Talking to him also felt safe because I honestly assumed we would probably never meet.

At that point, I had already decided that I should be alone. I told him that too.

"I keep choosing the wrong people," I said. "And I'm still not over someone from my past. I don't want to hurt anyone else. I think I should just stay single."

He understood. He was still trying to let go of his previous relationship too.

Two emotionally unavailable people talking on the phone.

What could possibly happen?

Then he asked if we could meet.

My stomach tightened. The phone had been a very comfortable distance.

"It's not a date, right?"

It was not.

We met, and it was exactly what we had agreed it would be: two people meeting, not a date.

I was awkward. Vincent was somehow even more awkward. There was no chemistry between us, which was perfectly fine because neither of us had gone there expecting any.

After that, he started sending food to my shooting locations and picking me up when I finished filming, even when it was late.

At first, the attention made me nervous. I had been clear that I did not want a boyfriend, and now there was a man repeatedly appearing with food and transportation, which felt suspiciously boyfriend-shaped.

But he was thoughtful and consistent. Slowly, I stopped bracing myself every time he did something kind.

Eventually, I decided to give the relationship a chance.

He treated me well, and I hoped love would grow. We laughed, went out, had fun, and made real memories together. I was happy with him in many ways. I just kept waiting for the deeper feeling to arrive.

Before it did, Vincent made several mistakes.

They were not unforgivable, but they happened at a time when I was already beginning to question whether kindness and compatibility were enough to build a future on. They added pressure to a relationship I was no longer certain about, and something inside me became unusually clear.

This is it. We should end this.

So I tried.

Vincent believed we could fix things. Each time I said I wanted to leave, he asked me to stay. Each time I saw how much the breakup hurt him, I softened.

After several attempts, I became tired of repeating the same painful conversation. Staying began to feel easier than fighting to leave. At least staying ended the argument for the day.

So I stayed.

We could still laugh. We could still have good days. But whenever he spoke seriously about our future, my body reacted before I could produce a polite answer.

A chill moved through me.

I cared about him.

I just did not want the life he was describing, and I still believed that admitting it made me cruel.

Around that time, I found Tyler while searching online for a chiropractor.

His profile said he was Indonesian American, so I assumed he might also practice in Indonesia. It turned out that he was half Indonesian but lived and worked in California. Apart from childhood holidays with his parents, Indonesia was not really part of his adult life.

We followed each other afterward and occasionally replied to each other's stories. The conversations were completely platonic. Vincent knew about him. I barely paid attention to Tyler's relationship status because I had no plan involving him. I vaguely assumed he was engaged or married.

At some point, Tyler mentioned that work might bring him to Bali and said it would be cool to meet.

I replied casually.

"Sure. Let me know."

I still thought we probably never would. I was almost always working, and I went to Bali perhaps once a year.

Several months later, after I had completely forgotten about that conversation, I unexpectedly had a few days away from work. I decided to go to Bali with my mother and Jérémie.

Around the same time, Tyler messaged me again and sent me the dates of his trip.

They matched mine almost exactly.

The coincidence felt harmless. I offered to show him around. Balinese food, the Kecak dance, whatever a man who had barely visited Indonesia might enjoy.

I told him to meet us at my house in Uluwatu so we could leave together. The Kecak dance was nearby, and my mother and Jérémie were coming with us.

Bringing my mother and brother felt like very strong evidence that this was not a date. Then I saw him in person, and something shifted.

He was handsome, of course, but it was not only that. He felt strangely familiar. I had been nervous about speaking English for hours, but within minutes, I forgot to be nervous.

There was attraction, but there was also calm.

Wait. Is this it?

I immediately corrected myself.

Please relax. You have known this man in three dimensions for approximately four minutes.

After we watched the Kecak dance, I no longer had to wonder whether Tyler was attracted to me.

He started flirting openly.

I panicked, mostly because I could feel that I wanted the same thing.

"Did I ever tell you I have a boyfriend?"

Tyler stared at me.

Then he started laughing.

His friends, he said, were going to have a wonderful time making fun of him. He admitted that seeing me had been one of the things he was excited about on the trip, and I had apparently forgotten to mention one fairly important detail.

"What?"

I genuinely had no idea.

Somewhere in that conversation, I finally asked about him too. He was single. His last serious relationship had ended about a year earlier, but he admitted that it had been unhealthy and had left him more guarded than he used to be. He was still trying to let go of some of what he had carried from it.

He was not looking to rush into another relationship. Which was probably for the best, because I still had one rather significant problem of my own: Vincent.

Whatever was happening with Vincent, I did not want to cheat.

Later that night, during a difficult phone call with him, I finally said what I had been trying to say for months.

"I want to break up. Please don't ask me to change my mind again. I really mean it. I don't want this anymore, and I need you to accept that I can make this decision."

It was not an easy conversation. There was no clean way to end something that had once made both of us happy.

But eventually, after months of trying, the relationship ended.

I saw Tyler twice more during the same trip. Three meetings should not have felt so important.

They did.

I liked him. I also still felt guilty about Vincent. I knew ending the relationship had been the right decision, but that did not make the sadness, guilt, and confusion disappear immediately.

Then Tyler returned to the United States.

At first, we spoke often, and I allowed myself to hope.

Then Tyler told me there was a Japanese girl he had already been getting to know before we met.

I am sure there was more context. At the time, I was not particularly interested in hearing it.

My brain had already reached its conclusion.

Oh.

So this is not serious.

He had made me no promises. We had spent only three days together. Logically, I knew that.

Emotionally, I had already started backing away.

Maybe it had been special to me and only exciting to him.

Back in Jakarta, Vincent kept asking if we could talk.

At first, I refused. I wanted to protect whatever might be developing with Tyler, although nothing had actually been defined.

Eventually, I asked myself why I was guarding a possibility that the other person was not asking me to guard.

So I agreed to see Vincent.

He came to my house, spoke to my mother, and showed me a PowerPoint presentation about our relationship.

Yes.

A PowerPoint.

There were photographs, memories, promises, plans, and everything he hoped we could build differently if I gave us another chance. It was thoughtful, sweet, and so specifically him that I cried through most of it.

My doubts did not disappear.

My guilt became louder.

I felt terrible that I had allowed myself to hope for someone else while Vincent was still willing to fight for our relationship. I felt terrible that a person could make an entire presentation about loving me and I still could not manufacture the feeling he deserved. The more I thought about it, the more I felt as though I had damaged something that might still be repaired.

I did not want to hurt him again. At the time, walking away felt like leaving behind a mess I had helped create without even trying to fix it. So I went back. Not because my doubts were gone, but because my guilt had become louder than my certainty that I wanted to leave. My mother understood the problem immediately.

“If you stay only because you feel sorry for him, that’s unfair to him too,” she said.

I knew she was right. Knowing and doing were still two separate skills.

Once Vincent and I were back together, I decided I needed to create some distance from Tyler. If I was going to give my relationship with Vincent another chance, it did

not feel right to stay in contact with someone I had started developing feelings for. I also did not want to hurt Vincent again.

Before I blocked him, I sent Tyler a message explaining my decision.

He did not pressure me or criticize me. He only said that he hoped this was not how our story ended.

The sentence gave me butterflies, which was inconvenient.

Then I blocked him anyway.

Going back did not restore the relationship we had before. I had hoped commitment would quiet my doubts.

Instead, I became more unhappy than I had been when I first tried to leave.

Stress had always affected my stomach, but after I went back to Vincent, acid reflux became part of my daily life. My body seemed to be rejecting what I was still forcing myself to accept.

Some time later, Tyler contacted me from a number I did not recognize.

His official reason was that he wanted information about Bali Usada, the silent meditation retreat I had once told him about.

It did not take long for the real reason for the call to surface.

He said he missed me. He told me he had not been able to stop thinking about me since Bali.

He also told me that he and the Japanese girl had never actually been in a relationship. He had already been unsure about taking things further, partly because of their age difference. They had finally talked honestly, realized they were not compatible, and decided not to pursue anything further.

He hoped to combine the retreat with work in Jakarta so that we could see each other during the same trip.

My heart answered before I did.

Yes.

But I had returned to Vincent, and I did not want to hurt him again.

“Good for you,” I told Tyler. “But I can’t. I’m back with my ex, like I told you before.”

By the time I began therapy, I was deeply depressed.

The relationship was not the only reason, but it had become part of the weight.

I had spent a long time knowing what I wanted, then teaching myself that my own no could always be negotiated.

That was the version of me who woke up in Jakarta and became afraid of her own mind.

5

The Decision I Already Knew

By the time of my fourth session, Tyler was already in Jakarta.

His silent meditation retreat was scheduled to begin in a few days.

I mentioned him to the psychologist carefully, as though Tyler might become more real if I said his name too loudly.

I explained that we had met in Bali, that I had felt something I could not dismiss, and that I had returned to Vincent afterward. Part of me wanted to see Tyler. Another part did not want to hurt Vincent again.

The psychologist listened.

"What do you want?"

There was that question again.

For a second, my mind went to *The Notebook*.

"What do you want?"

"It's not that simple."

"What do you want?"

"It's not that simple!"

Except now the psychologist was Noah, I was Allie, and the borrowed white room had somehow become the set.

Then I blinked.

I was back in the office. He was still waiting for an answer.

Even considering only what I wanted felt selfish. I told him that.

"You're allowed to be selfish once in a while," he said. "Tyler is here. Maybe you should give yourself the chance to find out. Who knows? This might be the right time to finally make a decision."

He was not telling me to choose Tyler. He was pointing out that I had been avoiding a decision I already understood because I did not want anyone to be hurt by it.

He asked me to imagine what I might do if, for once, I stopped building every choice around other people's comfort.

I could end the relationship honestly.

I could take a real break from work.

I could travel.

I could discover what my life looked like when I was not immediately explaining why every desire of my own was impossible.

And yes, I could give myself the chance to find out what might happen with Tyler.

Just imagining those possibilities made something inside me come alive. I felt nervous, but beneath the nerves was an excitement I had not felt in a long time. The life I was describing was uncertain, but for the first time, uncertainty did not sound frightening.

It sounded like freedom.

"Then go for it," the psychologist said.

The sentence was almost offensively simple.

I left the session knowing one thing.

I have to end the relationship.

Afterward, I called Vincent.

"I want to break up."

He knew it had been my fourth appointment. Before I began therapy, he had admitted that he was afraid the process would end with me leaving. I had reassured him that it would not, partly to calm him and partly because I had believed it myself.

"I knew this was how it would end," he said.

At the time, I had not yet understood what he seemed to understand before I did. Therapy was bringing me closer to a truth I had spent months trying not to act on.

He did not accept the breakup on the phone. He asked if we could meet.

“I don’t want to argue anymore,” I said. “I know what I want. You can’t make me change my mind again.”

“I’m not asking to argue,” he said. “I just want to have dinner with you and your family one last time.”

I agreed.

Because he had not accepted the breakup on the phone, it still felt unfinished in my mind. I knew how many times I had been certain before, only to soften the moment I saw his pain.

Dinner was scheduled for the next day, and a small part of me was already afraid that I would lose my decision again.

That evening, my best friend Kelvin asked me to go out.

We ended up at a bar where the music was unusually good. Song after song made the room feel as though we had somehow returned to 2014. I started moving with it, first in my seat, then without thinking about whether I looked awkward.

Kelvin watched me.

“This is the first time I’ve ever seen you dance like this,” he said.

I laughed, then realized he was right.

He had known me for years. Apparently, I had spent all of them dancing under the supervision of my own brain.

At the bar, I opened my chat with Tyler again. The last few messages were all from him, asking if there was any chance we could meet while he was in Jakarta. Until then, I hadn’t dared to reply to any of them.

This time, I finally typed:

“Where are you?”

“At my hotel,” he replied.

I asked which one.

It turned out to be directly across the street from the bar.

I had once heard that there is no such thing as coincidence. I was not sure whether I believed that, but by then I was beginning to wonder.

Neither of us had known where the other would be that night.

I told him I was only a couple of minutes away, but I did not ask him to come. My mind immediately invented possibilities. Maybe he was tired. Maybe he had plans. Maybe he was with another woman.

So after telling him how close we were, I said nothing else.

Tyler was not impressed.

“Did you message me just to tell me you’re nearby?” he asked. “You don’t want to see me?”

“Of course I do.”

And I did. A small part of me felt uneasy about how quickly everything was happening. I had only just told Vincent that I wanted to end the relationship, and in my mind the breakup still felt unfinished. Now Tyler was suddenly right across the street.

But he only had a few days in Jakarta before leaving for the retreat. The timing was not neat, but it was the only timing we had.

Not long afterward, Tyler walked into the bar wearing a black hoodie.

The room seemed to slow down around him.

I watched his expression change when he saw me. Surprise, happiness, relief, caution. He looked as though he had not been certain he would ever stand in front of me again.

Inside me, the answer was immediate.

Oh my God. Yes. This is it. My man.

For once, I did not argue with myself.

I did not know whether Tyler and I would work. I did not know whether three days in Bali and one reunion in a Jakarta bar could become a real life.

I only knew that I wanted to find out.

For the first time, wanting something felt like information instead of evidence that I was selfish.

The next day, Vincent took my family and me to dinner.

There was sadness, but there was also the tenderness of two people who had shared more than a year of their lives. What we had was not meaningless simply because it was ending. There had been laughter, kindness, and memories I would always value.

But this time, I stayed with what I had said.

I did not let his sadness become proof that my decision was wrong. I did not turn his love into an obligation to remain.

The relationship ended.

I did not feel triumphant afterward.

I felt lighter. The relief was so immediate that it frightened me.

Only then did I understand what Vincent had sensed before I did. Therapy had not planted the wish to leave. It had shown me how much of my depression was connected to staying after I already knew I wanted to go.

Vincent deserved a relationship in which he was fully chosen.

I deserved to stop confusing guilt with commitment.

Once I began asking what I wanted in love, the question spread into every other part of my life.

What did I want from work?

For years, saying yes had felt like part of being professional. An opportunity arrived, and I accepted it. Someone needed me, and I adjusted. Even when a commitment was months away, I allowed it to occupy a space in my future before I knew what I might want by then.

Around that time, a singer had already recorded a song with me and wanted me to perform it at his concert in November.

It was only March.

When I said I could not promise that far in advance, he tried to make the decision easier.

“Tell me which date works for you,” he said. “Any date in November. I’ll follow your schedule.”

The date was not the problem.

The problem was that, for once, I did not want to give away a piece of my future before I knew what I might do with it.

The old version of me would have noticed his disappointment and said yes. This time, I apologized and kept November open.

No.

It was a small word.

It took up an unreasonable amount of space in my body.

My family supported my decision to take a break. I continued helping them financially, just as I always had. Choosing myself had never required abandoning them. That was the fear I had created, not the reality.

I had been working since I was fourteen.

For once, I wanted a change large enough to surprise me.

There was another sign, something private and slightly strange.

For almost five years, no matter whom I dated, Mauro remained the man who appeared most often in my dreams. He was not always my partner in them. Sometimes he was simply there, occupying the story in some way.

My waking life could move forward, but my sleeping mind had apparently refused to update the casting.

Then Tyler entered my life.

One day, without me noticing exactly when it happened, the person in my dreams changed.

Tyler became the one who appeared.

My subconscious had finally recast the role.

Maybe that sounds small.

To me, it meant that something enormous inside me had shifted before I knew how to describe it.

For years, I had believed that choosing myself would hurt people, disappoint them, or leave me alone.

Instead, it created space.

And for the first time, I was ready to discover what might enter it.

PART II

What Entered the Space

6

Love Without the Emergency

Two months later, I flew to California to meet Tyler's family and closest friends.

By then, I knew we were moving toward something serious.

We had not clearly named what we were, but in my mind, the answer already felt obvious. I was crossing an ocean to meet the people closest to him. This did not feel like casual research.

It was not my first time in California.

Years earlier, I had traveled to California with Mauro, and both of us had fallen in love with it for different reasons.

For me, Los Angeles felt strangely familiar because I had spent years playing *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. The palm trees, wide roads, neighborhoods, and particular quality of the light made me feel as though a digital place from my childhood had somehow become real.

Back then, Mauro and I had imagined that we might live there one day.

Now I was returning alone to meet someone else, carrying a future that belonged entirely to me.

Tyler picked me up at the airport.

The moment I saw him, we hugged, and the feeling that moved through me was simpler than excitement.

It felt like coming home.

That should have frightened me. We had not known each other long enough for a word like home. We had spent only a few days together in Bali, reunited briefly in Jakarta in March, and spoken across countries and time zones.

Logically, he was still someone I was getting to know.

My body did not seem interested in logic.

I met his parents and his older sister first.

His mother was Indonesian, which immediately made me less nervous. I could switch to Indonesian whenever my English became tired, and hearing my own language inside their home made the distance from my family feel smaller.

His father was warm. His sister welcomed me easily. They joked with me instead of examining me.

I had prepared myself for an interview.

They gave me a family dinner.

Later, Tyler introduced me to his group of friends.

The language still made me shy. Sometimes one of his friends would ask me something, and I would understand every word separately but not the meaning of the sentence as a whole.

I would turn toward Tyler with a look.

Please translate the English into easier English.

He would repeat the question using simpler words, and everyone continued without making me feel stupid.

His friends already knew about me because he had spoken about me before I arrived. We went to karaoke at one of his best friend's places, which helped.

Singing required far less grammar.

I could be quiet and still participate.

Part of me had been waiting to be judged for who I was in Indonesia. In America, being known there meant very little, and I was relieved by that. I did not want anyone to think I expected special treatment because strangers recognized me somewhere else.

Here, I was simply Tyler's guest. A woman from another country, speaking carefully, hoping the people he loved would understand what he saw in me.

They did not make me work for their approval.

That was new.

After I had met his family and friends, Tyler dropped me off at a salon because he had an appointment with his therapist.

When he picked me up, we began driving toward the beach.

Partway there, he looked at me with unusual seriousness.

"I'm done," he said. "You're it. I'm one hundred percent committing to you, and I'm not afraid if it doesn't work out."

I looked at him.

Had we not already been doing that?

That was when I discovered that Tyler had not considered us official yet.

It was probably for the best that I learned this only after arriving. Had I known beforehand, I might not have traveled to the other side of the world to meet the family and closest friends of a man who, technically, was not even my boyfriend.

In my head, the relationship had begun the moment we found our way back to each other in Jakarta. In his head, feelings and commitment were separate until a conversation made them official.

Apparently, this was the conversation.

Not long afterward, he added, "By the way, it's hard for me to say that because I've never said this to anyone."

I had crossed an ocean and completed what felt like the final round of family interviews before discovering that we were still in the preliminary stages of dating.

But he was choosing me clearly now.

That was enough.

The seriousness of the conversation did not mean the relationship itself became serious all the time. Being with Tyler was, oh, so fun.

To most people, he was a doctor.

Focused, intelligent, composed.

With me, he would suddenly perform an exaggerated ballet across the room, pointing his toes and turning with complete seriousness because he knew it would make me laugh.

Sometimes, even on his way to the bathroom, he would do a tiny jump, flick one pointed foot behind him like a dancer, then look back to make sure I had seen it.

We collected inside jokes faster than we could explain them. Sometimes all it took was one look across a room, and we would both start laughing before either of us had said anything.

From the outside, we probably looked like two children who had somehow acquired a mortgage application.

When Tyler and I disagreed, he did not turn the conflict into a test of how much I loved him.

He did not threaten to leave, punish me with silence, or make me responsible for repairing the entire emotional atmosphere.

Usually, we gave each other time to calm down, apologized, and moved forward. More often than not, he apologized first.

Sometimes I waited for the second part of the argument, the moment when the actual punishment would arrive.

It never did.

People can be upset and then… stop being upset?

In previous relationships, love had announced itself loudly. It arrived through obsession, jealousy, grand apologies, desperate promises, and the feeling that another person could not survive without me.

With Tyler, love was steadier.

Because it did not constantly overwhelm me, part of me sometimes wondered whether it was strong enough.

“Do you love me?”

At first, he answered patiently.

Eventually, he became slightly irritated.

He told me he did not want to repeat “I love you” so often that it became mechanical, like someone walking through the street selling peanuts.

He wanted the words to carry meaning every time he said them.

The comparison made me laugh.

It also made me notice what I was doing.

I was asking for words because I did not yet trust consistency. I had learned to recognize love through emotional extremes, so calm affection could sometimes look suspiciously like indifference.

Peace felt unfamiliar because I had spent years mistaking chaos for love.

Tyler’s actions kept answering even when his mouth did not.

He showed up.

He included me.

He listened while I built sentences slowly.

He gave me space without making space feel like abandonment.

That did not mean I immediately stopped expecting the worst.

One day, at the cinema, I saw an iMessage notification on his phone with a large heart emoji. I did not see who had sent it.

My mind was delighted to supply the missing information.

Here we go. Of course. He is handsome. There are probably twelve women and a spreadsheet.

Instead of asking him, I went quiet.

Later, I checked his phone.

The heart was from his mother.

Tyler saw my face and laughed, not unkindly.

I felt relieved and deeply ridiculous.

He had not created the suspicion. He was simply the person standing in front of it.

The past was over, but part of me was still preparing as though it might happen again.

I had to learn that not every silence was punishment, not every woman was a secret, and not every peaceful day was the calm before something terrible.

Soon after he told me he was ready to commit, Tyler said he wanted to come to Indonesia and ask for my parents' blessing.

That surprised me even more than the official conversation.

He was American, although his mother was Indonesian, and I had not expected him to approach the relationship so traditionally.

There was something sweet about imagining him sitting in front of my father and asking properly.

There was also something terrifying about it.

7

This Time It Was Real

I had been disappointed enough times that even a beautiful promise arrived with a small shadow behind it.

Tyler said he wanted to travel to Indonesia mainly to speak to my parents and ask for their blessing.

Part of me wanted to believe him immediately. Another part had learned to wait and see whether promises became actions.

But Tyler came.

Afterward, I planned to take him to Labuan Bajo so his experience of the country would not consist entirely of Jakarta traffic and Bali.

Tyler was confident about many things.

Meeting my father was not one of them.

I had warned him.

My father had never approved of anyone I dated. More than once, he had told me that if I married a particular boyfriend, he would not attend the wedding. Even with someone I had come close to marrying, his position remained impressively consistent.

I used to think no one would ever be good enough for him. Later, I began to wonder whether my father had simply noticed things I was still busy explaining away.

Tyler only knew the frightening version.

He asked question after question.

What was my father like?

How formal should he be?

When should he bring up marriage?

Should he speak to both of my parents?

Should he wait until after dinner?

By the time we sat together on the sofa at my house, I could almost see him rehearsing inside his head.

My mother, my father, and Jérémie were there. Tyler waited for an opening.

Before he found one, my father smiled.

“So,” he said. “What is this? What is going on between you two? When are you planning to get married?”

I stared at him.

Who is this man, and what has he done with my father?

Tyler looked at me with almost the same question.

This was the difficult father I had described?

He had prepared himself to ask permission. My father opened the conversation for him.

My mother suddenly became worried that perhaps Tyler should speak to my father privately, even though Tyler had planned to address both of them. She disappeared toward the kitchen with the energy of someone who had just remembered an urgent relationship with the refrigerator.

My father asked me to go to my bedroom. He wanted to speak to Tyler alone.

The details of that conversation belong mostly to them. I learned pieces later. There had been advice, questions, and a simple request that Tyler take good care of me.

What mattered was that my father said yes.

He had already researched Tyler. He had watched podcast interviews, learned about his work, and listened to what my mother and Jérémie had said after meeting him in Bali.

More than anything, I think he respected that Tyler had crossed an ocean to face him directly.

Maybe my father saw the same thing I felt.

This time, I was not forcing myself toward a future my body wanted to escape.

My mother had noticed the connection even earlier. During our first Bali trip, while I repeatedly insisted that the Kecak dance was not a date, she kept whispering to Jérémie that Tyler and I looked good together.

Apparently, everyone understood before I did.

After Tyler returned to California, he asked me what kind of engagement ring I liked.

He was not subtle enough for the question to feel theoretical.

I was still in Indonesia when he asked, sending him examples from across the ocean. I chose the smallest, simplest rings I could find because I did not want to become a financial burden.

He looked at them and apparently decided that my participation was not useful.

"Never mind," he said. "I'll choose it. Just tell me, gold or silver?"

"Silver."

I knew what the question suggested, but I did not know when or how anything might happen. I tried not to investigate too closely. For once, I wanted to let a beautiful possibility arrive without controlling every detail.

A couple of months later, I was offered a job in Washington, DC, performing at an Indonesian Independence Day event at the embassy.

I was being paid to travel to the United States just as I had been wondering when I could see Tyler again.

The universe is paying for my flight to my boyfriend.

After the work in Washington, I continued to California.

Of course I did.

I was not flying that far and then politely returning home without seeing him.

I still expected to return to Indonesia after the trip.

In September, Tyler and I traveled to Kauai.

One day, Tyler took me to a place called the Fern Grotto. We joined a group of tourists on a boat and traveled along the Wailua River, surrounded by dense tropical greenery. From the landing, a short path led us through the rainforest toward a natural lava-rock grotto, its dark stone softened by ferns and tropical plants hanging from above. Everything around it felt green,

quiet, and slightly unreal, as though the forest had grown its own hidden room.

It was the kind of place that made you instinctively lower your voice, as though its beauty asked not to be disturbed.

After the guide finished explaining the history of the grotto, everyone began walking back toward the boat.

I followed them.

Tyler caught my hand.

"Let's take a selfie here."

That was suspicious.

He was not usually the person delaying an entire group for additional photographs.

We took the selfie.

He still did not move.

He looked nervous, as though his body were trying to retrieve a speech his brain had carefully filed somewhere else. First, he pointed toward the entrance to the cave.

I looked where he was pointing, confused.

"My parents got married inside that cave," he said.

"What?" He had somehow kept that information from me.

He said the place was special to his family, and he wanted to ask the love of his life to marry him there too.

Then he lowered himself onto one knee.

A photographer he had arranged was already waiting with the group. I did not notice her.

I barely noticed anyone.

My hands began shaking. For one second, I asked whether this was really happening, which was not my most intelligent question considering the man kneeling in front of me with a ring.

He told me he would always love me. He thanked me for bringing hope and excitement back into his life.

Instead of standing gracefully and offering my hand like a woman who understood proposal photography, I knelt down with him.

I only wanted to be close.

We ended up on the ground, hugging, while the photographer and a group of tourists waited for us to remember that this was also a visual event.

It was not elegant.

It was us.

Only after the ring was on my hand did I fully see what he had chosen.

The center stone was larger than anything I would have selected for myself, but the two smaller stones beside it mattered most. They had belonged to his mother, passed down to her by her grandmother.

The ring carried pieces of the women in his family before I had officially joined them.

Months later, during our engagement celebration at Tyler's parents' house, I remembered the concert date I had refused to promise away.

The empty space I had protected had quietly become part of this life. So many small noes had made room for that yes.

But safety did not erase what I still carried.

Not long after the engagement, Tyler and I had our first real argument.

The disagreement itself was not serious, but it touched something much older than the moment. I became overwhelmed and shut down instead of explaining what had been triggered.

I went into the bedroom and locked the door.

Tyler tried to speak to me from outside. I sat alone, crying, frustrated by the argument and even more frustrated by how deeply it had affected me.

Then I started hitting my own head.

It was something I had done before when emotion became too much for me. The movement was almost automatic, as though the feeling needed somewhere physical to go. While I was doing it, another thought appeared.

I have not healed. Not completely.

I had left the people who hurt me. I had learned to choose myself. I had found someone safe.

And there I was, locked in a bedroom, hurting myself because I did not know what else to do with what I felt.

Shame replaced the anger almost immediately.

What normal person does this? He is going to think marrying me was a mistake.

Tyler heard the sound and found a way to unlock the door.

He did not look at me with disgust. He did not call me dramatic, unstable, or difficult.

He came toward me and held me.

He let me cry. He spoke calmly. He tried to understand what had happened instead of using it against me.

He asked me not to hurt the person he loved.

The sentence stayed with me.

To him, the person I was hurting mattered.

Finding a safe person had not automatically made me feel safe inside myself. Tyler had not created the reaction. He was simply close enough to witness it.

And he stayed.

As we planned our future, we learned that beginning the immigration process while I was already in the United States made the most sense. That meant marrying legally sooner than we had expected.

Tyler immediately began asking what we needed to do.

A proposal belongs to rings, photographs, and stories people retell.

Immigration belongs to forms, signatures, addresses, and documents that do not care whether the proposal was romantic.

Watching Tyler move directly from “Will you marry me?” to “Where do we file this?” made me understand that he was not only imagining a wedding.

He was building a life.

I began to realize that I might not return to Indonesia to live.

My family was happy for me. My mother was sad too because we had always shared so much of daily life, but she was also relieved. She believed I was with the right person.

Realizing that I might not return to Indonesia also meant leaving behind the career I had built there. A few years earlier, that would have been much harder to accept. This time, it felt different.

While I was waiting for my green card to come through, I could not leave the United States. Of course, that was exactly when I received an offer for a role in a major American action series filming in Toronto. At the time, they were looking for a Eurasian woman around my age who spoke both Indonesian and English, and apparently I fit what they had in mind. The actress who would play my mother was also someone I had admired since I was a child.

I could not take the role because of my green card process. And when I thought about it, four months of filming in Canada would have been difficult too. Tyler and I had only just managed to live in the same country. Were we really going to do long-distance again?

Okay, maybe I was just trying to make myself feel better.

Still, passing on the role was not easy. Opportunities like that did not come around every day. But honestly, I was happy. I was with the person I loved, and my life still felt full.

On December 30, 2024, we went to complete what we thought would only be paperwork for our civil marriage.

Tyler was certain we were only signing documents.

I had searched online and seen photographs of people in wedding clothes, but he explained that those must have been couples who had chosen to hold ceremonies there.

“We’re just doing paperwork,” he said.

I did not fully trust his legal analysis, so I wore a simple white dress. Tyler wore a black sweater he wore all the time.

When we arrived, he looked around at everyone dressed properly.

"Why is everyone so dressed up?"

His parents and his sister, Mindy, came as witnesses.

We signed forms, confirmed information, and followed instructions. Then someone asked when we wanted to do the ceremony.

"Not today," we said. "Our wedding is in April."

That was when we learned that signing the documents was not enough. We still had to exchange legal vows there to become married.

Tyler immediately regretted the sweater.

There was no time to prepare personal vows. We repeated the required words from a sheet of paper, slightly confused, slightly underdressed, and trying to understand how our paperwork appointment had suddenly become a wedding ceremony.

It was chaotic.

It was not glamorous.

It was very sweet.

When it ended, we were legally married.

For a while, the word wife felt strange in my mouth. Whenever I introduced Tyler as "my husband," I experienced a small moment of disbelief.

I have a husband. I am someone's wife.

The words carried more weight for me than he probably understood.

Marriage had not always felt simple in my mind. For years, it had been tangled with memories and questions I did not yet know how to name.

But this was different.

I knew where I was.

I knew what I was signing.

I knew the person beside me.

I had been allowed to say no, disagree, become overwhelmed, and reveal that I was not as healed as I had hoped.

And I was there because I wanted to be.

I looked at the marriage certificate.

This time, it was real.

8

The Day I Could Not Feel Myself

On January 12, 2025, thirteen days after I became Tyler's wife, we found the house where we wanted to begin our life.

We had been looking casually for months. Some houses were beautiful in the way hotel lobbies are beautiful: perfect lighting, clean kitchens, no evidence that a human being had ever dropped a sock.

I could admire them.

I could not imagine us inside them.

Then we entered this house.

"This one," I told Tyler. "I like this one."

It felt warm rather than staged. I could picture our things in the rooms, our quiet mornings, our awkward dance parties, and our future children making the kind of mess real-estate photographs carefully avoid.

The neighborhood felt peaceful. People greeted one another outside. Most importantly, it was close to Tyler's parents. After moving across the world from my own family, I loved the idea that our children might grow up near at least one set of grandparents. We decided to make an offer almost immediately.

Afterward, we planned to buy sandwiches and eat them at a park.

Nothing dramatic.

We were simply happy, discussing food and the possibility that we had just found our home.

Tyler was driving, and I sat beside him. When we reached a red light, he brought the car to a complete stop.

Then I heard brakes behind us.

Loud.

Sudden.

Too close.

Before I understood what was happening, another vehicle crashed into us from behind. My head struck the side of the car near the window. The area above my eye hit hard. The back of my head struck something too, although I could not tell what.

"What happened?"

One second, we had been talking about sandwiches.

The next, the world had moved without asking us.

The impact pushed several cars together. Our car took the worst of it and could not be driven.

The police arrived. The car was towed. Tyler called his parents to pick us up.

An officer asked whether I needed medical attention.

"No, I'm fine," I said automatically.

Then I looked toward the people behind us.

"What about him? Is he okay?"

My head hurt, but my first instinct was still to make sure everyone else was fine.

There was no blood. I had not lost consciousness. I could stand and answer questions.

In my understanding of injuries, this meant I was okay.

Once we reached our condo, I held ice against my head. When the immediate chaos ended, exhaustion moved through me.

"I'm going to take a nap."

Sometime during that nap, I woke up crying.

There had been no dream. No frightening thought.

I was simply awake and crying, as though my body had started an emotion without consulting me.

Tyler understood before I did that something was wrong.

I did not feel traumatized by the accident. I was not replaying the impact or thinking about how much worse it could have been.

I did not know why I was crying at all.

That was what frightened me.

The physical symptoms followed.

Headaches.

Dizziness.

Sensitivity to light.

Difficulty focusing.

Sometimes my vision seemed slightly doubled.

I kept offering myself small explanations. Maybe I was tired. Maybe I had looked at a screen for too long. Maybe I needed another nap, which was beginning to sound like my solution to everything.

The emotional symptoms were harder to explain away.

I had experienced depression before, but this felt different.

During my earlier depression, I had once described my life as a car I was sitting inside but no longer driving. My body continued moving through the days while I watched from the passenger seat.

After the accident, even that image felt too present.

It was as though only a small part of me remained inside my body, just enough to speak and respond when someone said my name. The rest had gone somewhere I could not reach.

I knew I was there.

I just could not feel myself being there.

Sometimes I looked around the room and repeated the same sentence.

I am here. I am here. I am here.

Nothing felt fully real.

Not the house.

Not my marriage.

Not the people speaking to me.

Not even my reflection.

I still knew that I loved Tyler. I knew we were newly married and building a life I had chosen. I could remember being happy.

I simply could not reach the feeling.

That was more frightening than sadness.

My bachelorette trip made the change impossible to ignore.

Some of my new friends in America had planned a trip to Texas for me. They had traveled to celebrate me, and I wanted to give them the version of myself they had come to see.

I tried.

I smiled. I joined the activities. I remembered to react when something was funny.

I knew what a happy person at her own bachelorette trip was supposed to look like, so I attempted the role.

Inside, I felt nowhere.

They had made all that effort, and I was becoming the person who brought down her own celebration. I wanted to explain that I was not ungrateful or bored.

The truth was stranger.

I did not feel as though I was fully present enough to be either.

I am here. I am here. Please be here.

Tyler understood that the changes had begun after the accident. Even so, I hid the worst of them at first.

I had spent most of my life functioning through things I could not explain. I had worked while heartbroken, smiled while depressed, and performed confidence while privately wondering whether I had any.

I did not want our marriage to begin with Tyler worrying that the woman he had just married was disappearing in front of him.

I told myself it would pass.

It did not pass quickly enough.

The more I checked whether I felt present, the more absent I seemed. Panic made the distance larger. I began wondering whether I had finally reached the life I wanted, only to lose the ability to experience it.

Eventually, pretending became more frightening than speaking.

One night, I looked at Tyler.

“I don’t think I’m okay.”

Then I burst into tears.

I told him everything.

That I felt physically present but emotionally missing.

That most of my soul seemed to have left my body.

That I was terrified I would never find my way back.

He listened without telling me that I should be happy because we had just married, found a house, and begun a new life.

Gratitude could not repair an injured brain.

Immediately after the accident, I underwent a CT scan to check for bleeding. The result was clear, but the doctor said I might still have a concussion.

At the time, the word might felt almost reassuring. A concussion sounded temporary. Something that would pass.

But the symptoms did not pass.

We began looking for more answers.

This time, I underwent an MRI.

The doctor told me I had a traumatic brain injury. A TBI.

He explained that the damage to my brain involved areas associated with vision, memory, and emotional regulation.

The vision part made sense.

The emotional part explained too much.

When I asked how long the effects might last, he could not give me an answer. The brain was complex, he said. There was no way to know exactly how long recovery would take.

Great.

There was relief in knowing that I had not imagined it. There was also fear in learning that the problem lived somewhere I could not simply reason with.

I could not give my brain a motivational speech and expect it to reorganize itself through gratitude.

The diagnosis gave us a name.

It did not give me a way home.

Tyler had once told me about a hypnotherapist who had helped him.

Yes, he was the person whose story had first made me curious enough to try hypnotherapy years earlier.

Back then, it had sounded interesting in the way other people's unusual experiences sound interesting. Apparently, hypnotherapy had been sitting quietly between us long before either of us understood how much it would matter.

Now he brought it up again.

"Do you remember the hypnotherapist I told you about?"

I did.

I thought I was about to meet someone who might help me recover from a brain injury.

I did not know that the accident was only the first door we were going to open.

9

You Are Here

About a month or two after the accident, Tyler drove me to meet the hypnotherapist who had once helped him.

Simon came with us.

Tyler walked me upstairs and introduced me before leaving to wait nearby with our dog. The hypnotherapist was a blonde American woman, probably in her fifties. She greeted Tyler warmly, then bent down to say hello to Simon as though he were part of the appointment too.

She seemed kind immediately.

Her office felt completely different from the borrowed room where I had tried hypnotherapy in Jakarta. This space belonged to her. It had been arranged with care, not like a temporary room someone happened to be using that afternoon.

The lighting was dim without being dark. There was a comfortable sofa covered with cushions, a folded blanket, bohemian details, and the faint scent of aromatherapy.

Nothing about it felt theatrical.

It was simply cozy.

I wanted to relax, but since the accident, speaking English had become more stressful. Focusing required more effort, and the effort itself made me self-conscious.

Can she see that I am struggling to concentrate?

Can she tell my eyes are not focusing properly?

Does it look like I am thinking too slowly?

Does she think I do not understand her?

The more I worried about appearing unfocused, the harder it became to focus.

I tried to explain what had been happening since the collision.

I repeated what I had finally told Tyler: I was physically present but absent from my own life, as though most of me had left and only enough remained to keep functioning.

I am here. I am here. I am here.

She listened, but she did not spend much time discussing the mechanics of the crash or the medical details of the brain injury. Instead, she became interested in what I believed.

What was I telling myself when the fear appeared?

What did I believe had happened to me?

How might changing the belief change the feeling?

I did not understand how a belief could repair the sensation that I was disappearing from my own body.

But I was frightened enough to try.

She asked me to lie down.

I settled onto the sofa beneath the blanket while she began guiding me through the process. She asked me to imagine light entering my body through my feet and traveling slowly upward.

I tried to follow.

My mind kept talking.

Am I doing this correctly? Am I supposed to see the light clearly? What color should it be? Should I feel something? Can she tell that this is not working?

Part of me was afraid of losing control. Another part was afraid I would remain too much in control for anything to happen.

I had attempted hypnotherapy before, but during that session in Jakarta I had spent most of my time thinking about the therapist suppressing a cough and the hard plastic chairs beneath me.

This room was comfortable. This woman seemed experienced.

Still, my mind refused to become quiet.

She asked me to imagine that I was walking through a forest.

I constructed the scene piece by piece.

Trees.

A path. Darkness between the branches.

Then she told me that somewhere along the path, I would find a mirror.

I imagined it attached to the trunk of a tree. It looked old, with an ornate frame that reminded me of lace, the kind of mirror that might have belonged to another century.

She asked me to look at myself.

That was where she lost me.

I stared into the imagined mirror and saw only darkness.

I tried to create my reflection.

Of course I knew what I looked like. I had spent most of my life in front of cameras. I had seen thousands of photographs of myself. I had watched my own face on television, cinema screens, advertisements, and social media.

But in that moment, I could not picture it.

I tried to assemble the pieces. My eyes. My nose. The shape of my mouth.

Nothing stayed.

It was as though I had never seen my own face before.

Meanwhile, the hypnotherapist continued speaking.

Her voice moved forward through the exercise while I remained beneath the tree, staring into a reflection that refused to appear.

I did not interrupt her.

I should have said, I am lost. I cannot see anything. Can we go back?

Instead, I stayed quiet.

What if I interrupted the process? What if she felt she had wasted her time? What if I made her believe she had failed?

Even while paying someone to help me, I was still trying to protect her from the possibility of disappointment.

She continued speaking for what felt like another half hour.

I heard her voice, but I could not follow it. I remained trapped at the first image, trying to force a face into the dark glass.

Near the end of the appointment, she brought me out of the exercise and began asking what I had seen.

That made me even more nervous. For a moment, I considered inventing something.

I could tell her I had seen myself looking sad or frightened. Both answers would have sounded believable.

But I had come because I was tired of pretending to be fine.

Lying would make the entire appointment useless.

“I couldn’t see myself,” I admitted.

She looked at me carefully.

I explained that I had followed her into the forest and found the mirror, but the reflection had stayed dark. I had remained there while she continued speaking.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I couldn’t concentrate.”

She did not appear disappointed.

She told me it was okay.

Then she said it was interesting that I could not create a clear image of myself at all.

There might be a reason for it. Something we needed to explore.

I left the office more confused than when I had arrived.

Tyler was waiting nearby with Simon.

Once we were back in the car, I told him the session had not worked the way his had.

“I don’t get it,” I said. “I didn’t feel anything disappear. I couldn’t even focus.”

His experience had sounded powerful and immediate. Mine had consisted mostly of lying beneath a blanket,

worrying whether I was doing hypnosis correctly, and failing to imagine a face I had seen my entire life.

Part of me believed hypnotherapy probably worked through suggestion or the placebo effect.

I was willing to accept a placebo.

At that point, I did not care why something worked. I only wanted to feel normal again.

The problem was that even the placebo did not seem capable of entering me.

A week later, I returned.

Before the second session began, I apologized.

“I really had trouble focusing last time,” I told her. “I’m sorry.” Again, she did not treat my difficulty like failure.

She used a similar process. I lay down. She guided me through my body, the light, and the slow movement inward.

My mind still spoke, but this time I managed to follow her voice.

I remained aware of the room. I knew I was lying beneath a blanket while a woman sat nearby speaking to me. I did not lose consciousness or surrender control.

I simply became focused enough to follow the images.

At one point, she asked me to observe myself from outside my body.

I imagined a woman standing there.

Her face was still blurred, as though my mind refused to finish drawing her, but I knew she was me.

The woman said she did not feel as though she was there. She felt absent.

The version of me watching her responded.

You are here.

The exact words have softened in my memory, but the feeling remains.

One version of me was frightened that she had disappeared. The other stood beside her and reminded her that she had not.

You are here. You are in your body. You are safe. You are well.

The hypnotherapist repeated affirmations while I followed the scene.

I am here. I am present. I am well.

Something about the idea slowly began to seem almost funny.

If I was not here, then where was I?

I was the one noticing that I felt absent. I was the one afraid that I had disappeared. Some part of me had to be present in order to observe the absence.

The thought did not remove the sensation.

It did something smaller, but important.

It made the fear less convincing.

When the session ended, the room looked exactly the same. The blanket was still over me. The hypnotherapist was still sitting nearby. My eyes still struggled to focus, and I did not feel transformed.

But the belief that I had somehow vanished no longer felt unquestionable.

When I met Tyler afterward, I told him the second session had been better. “I think I’m starting to get the feeling of it,” I said. He noticed that I no longer looked as frightened.

The hypnotherapist explained that sometimes the effect of a session continued after a person left the room. Not necessarily as a dramatic revelation, but as a thought or feeling that settled differently over time.

Afterward, I began writing down what had happened and searching for the science that might explain it.

My vision did not recover quickly.

Focusing remained difficult, and my eyes took longer to improve. But emotionally, something had begun to loosen.

I stopped treating every strange sensation as proof that I was disappearing.

I still checked myself. I still repeated that I was there. I still had moments when the distance frightened me.

Only now, another thought existed beside the fear.

What if I have been here the whole time?

10

I Am Back

Then one ordinary afternoon, I was in our backyard playing with Simon.

There was nothing remarkable about the moment. I was not meditating. I was not repeating affirmations or checking whether I could feel my body.

Simon was running around the yard, thrilled by something only he understood. I watched him move across the grass, stop, look back at me, then suddenly change direction. I played with him without thinking about myself.

Then I noticed something.

I was not observing the moment from somewhere far away.

I was inside it.

I was not reminding myself to be present. I was not checking whether my body felt real or repeating that I was still there.

I was simply there.

The moment had already been happening before I recognized it.

That was what made the realization so strange.

I had spent so long waiting to feel normal again that I assumed I would recognize the exact second it happened. I imagined there would be a clear separation between the version of me who felt absent and the version who returned.

Instead, the distance had been closing so gradually that I had not noticed.

The afternoon in the backyard was not the moment I came back.

It was the moment I realized I already had.

I looked at Simon moving through the grass, and the thought came quietly.

I am back.

There was no music or dramatic release. Just a backyard, a dog, and the strange luxury of feeling normal.

By the time I returned for the third hypnotherapy session, the fear of being absent was no longer the most urgent problem.

Before the first two appointments, I had sent the hypnotherapist notes explaining what I wanted to work on. The request had been simple and desperate: help me feel as though my soul was still inside my body.

Before the third session, I sent nothing.

She asked why.

“I’m better,” I told her.

I no longer spent every hour trying to prove I existed. Once that fear loosened, I could see the older questions waiting underneath it. “What do you want to work on now?” she asked.

I told her I wanted to understand why I was the way I was.

No achievement had ever turned into confidence. I could build a career, reach goals I once thought impossible, and be loved by people who saw something in me I still could not see in myself. The reassurance lasted for a moment, then disappeared before it reached the place where the doubt lived.

I also seemed to keep finding myself in the same position with different people. Romantic partners, friends, relatives. I was often the one who understood, forgave, adjusted, and allowed everyone else more space than I gave myself.

“I don’t know whether I attract controlling people,” I said, “or whether I just stay available to them longer than someone else would.”

She did not answer immediately.

She asked me to lie down.

I settled beneath the blanket. Her voice softened. For a moment, I thought I had fallen asleep.

Then the office disappeared.

PART III

The Rules I Never Chose

11

The Girl by the Green Fence

At first, there was only darkness.

Not mysterious darkness. Not the kind that opens into another world. Just the inside of my eyelids. It was one o'clock in the afternoon. Outside, the day was bright, but the hypnotherapist's room remained dark and cozy.

"Take a slow breath in."

I breathed in.

"And breathe out."

I breathed out. She asked me to notice the sofa beneath me, the pillow under my head, and the blanket over my legs. I could feel all of it.

Am I supposed to stop feeling it?

"Imagine a soft purple light above you."

I waited. Nothing.

I don't see any purple light.

I tried to make one appear. A faint purple shape formed somewhere above me, hovering against the darkness, but it looked less like healing light and more like a UFO.

Close enough?

She asked me to imagine a peaceful path.

No path appeared.

I tried to build the path myself inside my imagination.

But a foot appeared.

Then darkness.

A yellow tent.

Darkness again.

Mickey Mouse.

Mickey Mouse? What is he doing here?

The darkness slowly took shape.

The outline of a bedroom began to appear. The walls. The bed. The cabinet in the corner. I recognized all of it before I understood why.

On the bed, a very small girl was curled into herself, her knees pulled tightly against her chest. Her face was buried between them. Both hands covered her ears.

Beyond the door, two adults were arguing. Their voices cut over each other, growing sharper and louder. The girl stayed folded in on herself, her shoulders shaking as she cried, as though she were trying to make herself as small as possible.

I could not see her face.

But I remembered that room.

That was me.

Then the room vanished.

Wait.

Then I heard children.

Small voices rose and fell through the wall. Laughter. A sudden shout. Feet moving across a floor. I could hear that they were speaking, but not clearly enough to understand the words. For a moment, I wondered whether the voices were part of the hypnosis. Then I remembered that the room beside hers seemed to belong to a therapist who worked with children. The hypnotherapist said something about letting the sounds fade into the background.

Damn. I can't concentrate.

I tried to push the voices farther away. Instead, my body grew heavy, as though I were sinking into the sofa. The darkness shifted. Someone was walking away from me. Not along a peaceful path. Across a playground. My mother. The sound of children rose again. I recognized my mother's back before I understood where I was. Shoulder-length black hair. A red coat. The slightly hesitant way she walked when she knew I was watching her leave.

The rest of the scene slowly assembled itself around her.

Oh. This is in Belgium.

The kindergarten stood among trees near our home in Brussels. The playground was made of dark, uneven dirt beneath the ordinary gray light. Each classroom had its own bright color. Blue. Yellow. Red. The colors looked almost too cheerful against the weather. Outdoor stairs led toward the gate. My mother was walking toward them.

Wait. Where is she going?

I tried to move toward her, but something held me in place. The scene went black. The hypnotherapist was still talking about the path, but I could no longer follow her words. Then the playground returned. I turned around. A teacher was holding the hand of a little girl. When the child began pulling away, the teacher crouched and wrapped one arm around her from the side, trying to comfort her while keeping her from running after the woman in the red coat. The child's face was blurred. But I knew who she was. She was crying so hard that her entire body had forgotten how to do anything else.

I know this scene.

My mother took another step toward the stairs. The child stretched both arms toward her.

That's me.

I was three years old. Before starting kindergarten, I had barely spent time around other children. I did not understand how they entered a playground and immediately seemed to know where to go, who to follow, or how to join whatever was already happening. They ran toward one another without hesitation. They shouted names. They chased each other between the trees. It was as though someone had explained all the rules before I arrived. I remembered wondering how they knew what to do. Until then, there had always been my mother. Now a woman whose face I could not remember was kneeling beside me while my mother continued toward the gate.

One moment, I was looking at the little girl. The next, I was inside her. The teacher's arm tightened gently around my side. She was speaking close to my ear, probably

telling me that my mother would come back, but I could not hear her over the sound coming from my own mouth. I was not shouting words. I was only crying. My mother turned near the stairs and gestured for me not to cry. Her own face looked sad, as though leaving hurt her too. She promised she would return. I knew she would come back.

That was not the problem. The problem was that she was still willing to leave me there until then. Children passed us without stopping. Small shoes disturbed the dirt. A coat brushed against my arm. Somewhere behind me, someone laughed. The playground continued as though my world were not ending in the middle of it. I cried harder. I had shown my mother how badly I did not want her to go. I had shown her with my face, my voice, my arms, my entire body.

She still kept walking. My stomach tightened. Then I vomited onto the ground. The playground disappeared. Everything went black. The hypnotherapist's voice continued from across the room, calm and far away. She reminded me not to force anything, to allow whatever appeared to appear. In the office, my body had not moved. Inside the memory, I had just thrown up into the dirt. The playground returned in fragments.

My mother's red coat moving toward the stairs. The teacher reaching for my hand. My mouth open in a cry. The gate. My mother returning later. Then another morning. The same playground. The same stairs. The same goodbye. Then another.

The mornings moved so quickly that they stopped feeling separate. They folded over one another until they became a single repeated scene. For about a week, I cried. Then, one morning, I did not. The scene became still. I was outside the child again, watching her stand where she had screamed before. Her face was still unclear, but I knew it was mine. No teacher needed to kneel beside her now. No one needed to hold her hand. My mother walked toward the stairs.

The little girl watched. The teachers looked relieved.

Is that when I stopped crying?

For years, I had remembered it as proof that I had become brave. After kindergarten, I decided I would not cry in front of people anymore. I thought that made me tough. But watching the child now, I understood something different. She had already shown my mother everything she knew how to show. I don't want you to leave. I'm scared. Please stay. She had cried until she vomited. My mother still had to go.

The child watched the red coat disappear up the stairs. Her face barely changed.

Oh.

She did not stop crying because it stopped hurting. She stopped because she understood that crying would not make my mother stay. I moved closer.

"Hey."

The little girl did not turn. Maybe she could not hear me. Maybe I was not really there. I wanted to kneel beside her. I wanted to explain that my mother was not abandoning her, that children had to go to school, that she would return exactly as she had promised. But three-year-old me did not need an explanation of school. She needed someone to understand how long a morning could feel when you did not know where to stand. The hypnotherapist's voice drifted into the scene again. I knew she was still speaking, but the words dissolved before I could hold on to them.

What is she saying?

Dark-green lines appeared across my mother's back. At first, I thought the image was breaking. The lines sharpened. Horizontal. Vertical. Metal squares. A fence. My mother disappeared behind it. The kindergarten playground remained beneath my feet. Dirt.

Trees. The brightly colored classrooms behind me. On the other side of the dark-green fence was the elementary-school playground. It was much larger than ours. The

ground was concrete instead of dirt, and the children seemed to move faster, shout louder, take up more space. They were bigger. Next year, I would be one of them. I stood near the far end of the fence, where the two playgrounds almost touched.

I remember this.

Not the date. Not what had happened before it. Only the feeling of standing alone and allowing time to pass. I liked being alone. Or at least, I knew how to be alone. I could disappear into my own head for long stretches, watching other people while inventing thoughts that had nothing to do with where I was. Sometimes I stood near the fence facing the road, hoping I might see my mother walk past. Our house was close to the school. I imagined that if I waited long enough, she might suddenly appear on the other side. That day, I was facing the elementary-school playground.

Children moved in groups across the concrete. They shouted to one another and changed direction as though pulled by invisible strings. Their bodies always seemed to be moving toward someone. Mine stayed where it was. I was watching little Aurélie from outside again. Her face was still blurred. She stood near the fence, somewhere else inside her head, watching everyone and waiting for the school day to move forward without needing anything from her. An older boy was walking with two girls. He was only one or two years older than she was, but at five, that was enough to make him seem much bigger. His hair stood in stiff spikes. His jaw looked unusually large for his face.

Years later, I would think he looked a little like Sid, the mean child from *Toy Story*. He also looked a little stupid. That thought belonged to adult me. Five-year-old me only saw an older boy making two girls laugh. They were walking toward her from several meters away. Little Aurélie watched them. The boy noticed. He lifted his chin and tilted his head sharply.

What?

He did not say it. He did not need to. It was the expression people used when they wanted to know why someone was looking at them, except his face made it feel less like a question and more like a warning.

Look away.

She did not. The boy left the girls a few steps behind and continued toward her. Not running. Not smiling anymore. Just walking directly toward her as though he had already decided something.

Oh no.

I remember what happens next.

Move.

Don't stand there.

He reached the fence. Then he punched her directly beneath the chest. Once. Hard. The pain reached me before the memory fully returned. Little Aurélie's body folded forward. Her hands moved instinctively toward her stomach. Her mouth opened, but the air had disappeared. For several seconds, she could not breathe. Pain spread through the center of her body, followed immediately by confusion.

What the hell?

That thought belonged to adult me. The child had only one question. *What did I do?* She remained on her feet. Or tried to. Even without air, even without understanding what had happened, some part of her was already trying to make her body look normal. Do not make a scene. Do not attract attention. The boy looked pleased with himself. He glanced back at the two girls, waiting for them to laugh.

They did not. Their expressions changed immediately.

"What was that for?"

One of them hurried closer.

"Are you okay?"

Little Aurélie nodded without looking at her. She was still trying to pull air back into her lungs. The other girl stared at the boy with open disgust. He tried to laugh.

"It was funny."

It was not. The girls turned away from him and began walking together. For a moment, he remained where he was, caught between following them and pretending not to care. Then he hurried after them. Little Aurélie stayed beside the fence, bent forward, one hand pressed beneath her chest. Her face was still blurred. She did not cry.

“It’s okay if you want to cry.”

She tried to straighten herself before anyone else could notice. No teacher came. No one had seen what happened. The playground was too large, and she had been too quiet. Even then, she wondered whether she had done something wrong. Had she stared too long? Had her face looked strange? Had she somehow invited him to come closer? I moved toward her.

“Hey.”

She did not hear me.

“It wasn’t your fault.”

Nothing. I looked at her more closely. She was so small. Her face remained unclear, but I could see the rest of her: thin legs planted in the dirt, dark hair, and a small body trying to recover before anyone could notice that she needed help. I reached for her shoulder. My hand stopped before it touched her. There was something between us. Not a wall. More like the distance between a person and an image on a screen. I could see her, although I still could not see her face clearly.

I could stand beside her. I could not enter the scene. She slowly straightened and moved away from the fence. She did not run toward a teacher. She did not follow the girls. She simply found another place to stand alone. Then she disappeared into her head again. The fence began to dissolve.

No.

Wait.

I’m not done.

The dark-green metal squares stretched wider. The older playground bent behind them. The concrete folded

upward, the dirt beneath my feet fell away, and the entire school collapsed into the darkness between one breath and the next. Something cold closed around my wrist. I looked down. A bracelet.

Where did that come from?

Children were standing in a circle. A girl stood in the middle of them. I recognized the way everyone watched her before I recognized her face.

Oh my God.

That's Esther.

12

The Bracelet

Esther did not need to announce that she was in charge.

No teacher had officially chosen her, although she was clearly our teacher's favorite. There had been no discussion, no vote, no moment when the other girls agreed to follow her. Everyone simply knew. She was six, like the rest of us, but she already carried herself as though being listened to were the natural order of things. Her long brown hair fell in waves down her back. She had green eyes and a strong build for a girl our age. Even the way she stood seemed certain. When Esther moved, the other girls followed. When she laughed, they laughed. Before reacting to anything, they looked at her face to find out how they were supposed to feel.

Little Aurélie stood near the edge of the group. Her face was still blurred, but I knew the child was me. Not outside the group. That mattered. Sarah stood near the edge too. Neither of us was central. We hovered close enough to be included, both quietly working to remain there. When Esther first allowed me to join them, I did not wonder why she had chosen me. I only felt relieved that someone had opened the door. Finally, I knew where to stand.

The elementary-school playground was much larger than the kindergarten playground I had left behind. The ground was concrete. Children ran in every direction, their voices bouncing off the school buildings and mixing with the scrape of shoes against pavement. The girls moved through it as one small unit. Esther in front. The others around her. Aurélie and Sarah following closely enough not to be forgotten. They laughed, and little Aurélie laughed too, sometimes before she understood

what was funny. Then she made a strange face. The girls laughed harder.

She made another one.

Oh.

I remember why you're doing that.

Little Aurélie had discovered the version of herself that was useful to the group. Esther was the leader. Aurélie was the funny one. Sometimes they laughed with me. Sometimes they laughed at me. At six, the difference did not feel important enough to risk losing the laughter altogether. I laughed too. Being laughed at still felt closer to belonging than being ignored.

"You don't have to do that."

I tried to move toward her, but the playground shifted with me. Every step I took left the same distance between us. Little Aurélie made another face. The girls laughed. She smiled, pleased that she had done her job. The scene jumped. Now there was a tree stump near the edge of the playground, beside a football field where the grass had grown too long. It was the remains of a real tree, cut flat across the top and low enough for a child to climb onto without help. That afternoon, it had become a stage. Esther stood in front of it with several bracelets gathered in her hands.

They were cheap plastic bracelets made to look like strings of pearls, each one a different bright color. The kind of thing an adult might find at the bottom of a toy drawer and throw away without thinking. But they belonged to Esther. So every girl wanted one. There were not enough for everyone. One girl would leave without a bracelet. To make the decision seem fair, Esther announced a game. Each of us would stand on the tree stump and say beautiful things about her. The girls who praised her best would receive one.

This is such a weird game.

No one else seemed to think so. One girl climbed onto the stump.

“You’re so pretty.”

Esther listened seriously, as though judging a competition she had not created for herself. Another girl took her place.

“You have the most beautiful hair.”

Esther smiled. Then it was little Aurélie’s turn. She placed one foot on the stump and pulled herself up. From there, she was slightly taller than Esther for once. I stood beside her, although she still could not see me.

Don’t do too much.

“You look like a beautiful goddess,” she began.

Esther smiled immediately. She liked that.

“I’m not even kidding. Your green eyes are unreal.”

The other girls watched.

“Your hair is so perfect.”

Okay. Enough.

“You’re just better than everyone else.”

Aurélie.

But the compliments kept coming. Each one was sincere. That was the painful part. She was not inventing things because she wanted the bracelet. She genuinely believed Esther possessed everything she did not. Beauty. Strength. Certainty. The ability to enter a playground and never wonder where she was supposed to stand. The ability to decide who belonged.

When the game ended, even little Aurélie knew she had won. She stepped down from the stump and waited. The other girls received their bracelets first. Esther gave one to a girl. Then another. Then another. Little Aurélie watched the bright plastic circles disappear one by one. She was the last girl still waiting. Esther looked at the bracelet left in her hand. Then at Aurélie.

She paused. It was only a second, but I felt it from where I stood.

She doesn’t want to give it to you.

Esther had created the game. By her own rules, Aurélie had praised her best. So she held out the final bracelet

with the reluctant expression of someone surrendering something she had hoped to keep.

"Here."

Not warmly. More like, Fine. Take it. Little Aurélie understood. She knew Esther did not really want her to have it. She took it anyway. Her entire body changed. I still could not see her features clearly, but I could feel her happiness.

Oh, baby.

She was so proud. Not because the bracelet was beautiful. It was plastic pretending to be pearls. She was proud because she had been chosen. She had been chosen last. Esther had given it to her reluctantly, only after she had proved herself. Still, it felt like being chosen. I wanted to tell her it was only a bracelet. But it was not only a bracelet to her. It was proof that she had performed the correct version of herself.

She had said the right things. She had made herself useful. She had earned her place. I reached toward her wrist. Again, my hand stopped before I could touch her.

"Don't make it mean so much."

She turned the bracelet slowly, admiring it from every side as the plastic pearls caught the gray daylight. The playground blurred around her. For a moment, there was only the bracelet circling her wrist. Then my father's hand closed around mine. The distance between little Aurélie and me disappeared. I was inside her again. We were walking toward the school together, and I had to take quick steps to keep up with him.

"Dad, she didn't take them," I kept saying.

My voice sounded frightened, but I would not stop.

"Dad, she didn't."

The Flippo's had come from my cousin. They were small collectible discs found inside bags of chips, and I had an entire binder filled with them. I loved opening it just to look at the rows of different pictures. At school, Esther asked me for some almost every day. I always gave them

to her. One at first. Then another. Then several. My father had noticed that the binder was becoming emptier. He knew I spent nearly all my time with Esther, so it was not difficult for him to guess where they were going.

But I needed him to believe she had not done anything wrong. More than that, I needed Esther to know I had defended her.

"She didn't take them," I said again. "I gave them to her."

That part was true. I had handed them over myself. It had never occurred to me that saying no was one of the available choices. We entered the elementary-school playground through the fence door. Esther was already there. The moment she saw my father approaching, she looked at me. She knew. My father walked directly toward her.

"I know you're the one who keeps asking Aurélie for her Flippo's," he said. "She isn't a store. If you want your own, buy them yourself."

Esther looked up at him with the sweetest expression she could produce. Her shoulders softened. Her green eyes widened. Even her voice changed.

"Yes, sir."

"No, sir."

"Of course not."

She looked so innocent that, for one second, I almost wondered whether my father had accused the wrong child. Then he turned away. I watched him walk toward the fence door. Esther waited until his back was facing us. Her expression changed. The sweetness disappeared first. Then her hand closed around my hair. She pulled hard and held it. Pain spread across my scalp. We remained facing my father as he walked away.

If he turned around, Esther would see him move and have enough time to release my hair. She could pretend we had been playing. I knew I would pretend too. That frightened me more than Esther's hand in my hair. Not

because I thought my father would be angry with me. Because Esther had already been embarrassed once, and I did not want him to embarrass her again.

“Are you going to tell your dad this too?” she asked.

Her voice was low and furious. She kept hold of my hair. The bracelet was still around my wrist. Even then, I did not take it off. Eventually, Esther released my hair. My scalp continued to burn after her hand was gone. It was the first time she had hurt me physically. It was not the last. The memory flickered. I was outside little Aurélie again.

Another day. Esther’s hand moved across her face. A slap. For one second, neither of them reacted. Little Aurélie did not seem to understand whether Esther was angry, joking, or waiting to see what she would do. Then Esther laughed. Little Aurélie looked at her face for instructions. Esther was laughing. So Aurélie smiled. Black.

Another day. Esther’s fingers twisted into her hair. Black. Esther laughing with the other girls. Black. Aurélie laughing too.

Leave.

She stayed. The memories changed quickly. Esther changed more slowly. When they were alone at Esther’s house, she could feel like a real friend. Without the other girls watching, Esther did not always need to prove that she was above her. They played. They talked. Sometimes Esther was kind enough that little Aurélie could convince herself the cruel version of her was not the real one. Then they returned to school. The other girls gathered around Esther.

And she became someone else. Or maybe she became more of herself. Little Aurélie never knew which version she would get, so she kept trying to earn the nicer one.

Please leave.

Little Aurélie walked back toward her. She took her place beside Esther again. The colorful bracelet remained around her wrist, even after the other girls had stopped

wearing theirs. I do not remember how long I kept it on. Long enough for it to stop being part of a game. Long enough for it to become something else. A reminder that Esther had chosen me once. Proof that I belonged to her group. Proof that whatever happened afterward could not erase that moment on the tree stump. The stump disappeared.

The concrete playground softened beneath my feet. For one second, I felt the sofa supporting my body again. The knitted blanket over my legs. My fingers resting against its thick loops.

Okay. I'm still here.

Then blonde curls filled my vision. Sophie. The girl turned.

Why is my mind bringing me to her now?

She stood differently from everyone else, as though the ground belonged beneath her. She did not keep checking other people's faces before deciding what she was allowed to think. I remembered that about her immediately. Sophie looked toward little Aurélie. Before either of them could speak, someone stepped into the space in front of them. A boy. His face was blurry at first. Short brown hair. A familiar stance.

No.

The image sharpened.

Damien Beyens.

13

Sophie's Question

The other children called him Cookie BN, after the biscuit brand.

He stood outside the classroom door as though he had nowhere urgent to be, even though nearly everyone else had already gone inside. Little Aurélie was eight now. I was watching her from outside again. Her face was still blurred. Sophie stood beside her. Beyens looked at little Aurélie. Then he opened his mouth. I knew what he was about to say before I heard it.

Don't.

"All brown people are criminals," he said.

His voice had a mocking rhythm.

"Criminals. Criminals."

There it was. The exact sentence. No beginning to the conversation. No argument before it. He simply looked at her and said it as though he were announcing something everyone already knew. Little Aurélie said nothing. She stood there and let the words remain between them.

Say something.

She did not. Maybe she was waiting for the moment to pass. Maybe she believed that if she gave him nothing, he would lose interest. Then Sophie turned toward her.

"Why do you let people walk all over you?"

Little Aurélie looked at her. For a moment, the question sounded like blame.

Is she saying it's my fault?

But Sophie did not look cruel. She looked genuinely confused, as though she had found Aurélie standing beneath something heavy and could not understand why she had not stepped away.

“Why do you let people walk all over you?” she repeated.

The question moved through the child, not as wisdom yet, but as embarrassment. She wanted Sophie to think she was brave too. Little Aurélie looked back at Beyens, searching his face as though it might tell her what she was supposed to do next.

What am I supposed to say?

Beyens leaned slightly closer.

“What?” he said.

Then the mocking rhythm returned.

“Criminal. Criminal.”

Little Aurélie tried to make herself look less afraid than she felt.

“Shut up, Cookie BN.”

Oh my God.

I remember this.

It was not a clever response. It was not even a new insult. Everyone already called him that. But this time, it came from her. The quiet girl. The girl who usually looked away and waited for the moment to end. Something in Beyens’s face changed. I recognized the expression before he moved.

I know what comes next.

The distance between little Aurélie and me disappeared. I was inside her again. Beyens stepped closer. Then he drove his knee between my legs. The pain arrived before my body understood what had happened. I folded inward. My knees pressed together. My hands moved instinctively between them.

What the hell?

Beside me, Sophie moved immediately. No warning. No discussion. She turned and kicked Beyens hard in the leg. A short, dull thud. He stumbled. Sophie did not look frightened afterward. She did not check whether anyone had seen. He had hurt me, so she hurt him back. To her, it was that simple.

Beyens moved away. Sophie stayed beside me. The classroom door remained open. The school day continued as though nothing had happened.

That's it?

There was no dramatic fight. No teacher ran outside. No circle of children formed around us. I walked into the classroom slightly folded, trying not to draw attention to the way I was moving while I waited for the pain to pass. I had spoken. I had finally defended myself. And I had still been hurt.

So what was I supposed to learn from that?

The scene disappeared before I could answer. By the time I got home, the pain was gone. The question was not.

Why me?

My father was sitting in front of his computer, one of those large square machines that occupied most of the desk. The screen cast a pale light over his face. He looked at me.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

The answer came too quickly.

He knows.

"What happened at school?"

"Nothing."

He did not turn back to the computer. He kept asking. At first, his face stayed calm. I took that calmness as a sign that telling him would not lead to anything beyond the conversation. So eventually, the story came out. Beyens's sentence. What I had said back. The knee between my legs. Sophie kicking him. My father listened without interrupting.

Only after I had finished did he reach for my school agenda.

Oh no.

"No, Dad."

He opened it on the desk.

"Please don't write anything."

He picked up a red pen.

“Dad, please.”

He began writing. I watched the red ink move across the page, each line making the story feel more real and more dangerous.

Now she’s going to know.

Now Beyens is going to know I told.

The room shifted. My father disappeared. The computer screen became the pale surface of my teacher’s desk. School was over. The classroom was almost empty. Chairs had been pushed beneath the tables, and the noise of the day had drained from the room. Beyens stood near me. My teacher sat behind her desk with my agenda open in front of her.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

I don’t know.

I stared at the floor. The answer should have been simple. He had hurt me. A teacher was supposed to know. Children were supposed to tell adults when something bad happened.

So why didn’t you?

I did not answer. Maybe because telling would make it real. Maybe because it would become bigger than I wanted it to be. Maybe because once an adult knew, I could no longer pretend it had not affected me. Beyens was standing there too. That made it worse. What he had done to me was being discussed in front of him, as though my pain had become another embarrassing object placed on the teacher’s desk. My teacher turned toward him. She told him to apologize. He looked down at the floor.

“Sorry,” he said quietly.

The word barely reached me. He did not look at me. He did not sound sorry. It was obvious that he was saying it only because the teacher had told him to. The apology did not repair anything. It only made the moment more uncomfortable. Afterward, he mocked me for reporting him.

“Daddy’s little girl.”

My father had written to the teacher because I had not told her myself, and somehow that became another reason for Beyens to laugh at me. The scene moved outside. Children were leaving through the gate with their parents. Beyens stood beside his mother. She looked at me coldly. Not curious. Not apologetic. Cold. As though I had done something wrong by telling. As though her son had been pulled into trouble because of me.

For one second, I felt ashamed. Not of what Beyens had said. Not of what he had done. Of being the reason adults now had to deal with it. Sophie’s question returned.

Why do you let people walk all over you?

The school gate disappeared. Everything went black. But Beyens’s voice remained.

All brown people are criminals.

Criminals.

Criminals.

Something moved beneath the darkness. A blue school agenda. Not mine. Louis’s. He was sitting near the radiator in class. His agenda lay close enough for me to reach. I slid it behind the radiator. I remembered doing it because I wanted to see what would happen when he could not find it. The image vanished. A different room formed around me.

My ballet school. My mother and I had arrived on the wrong day. The room was empty and dark. There were no children changing into ballet shoes, no teacher waiting for us, and no music coming from the studio. Only a Disney magazine someone had left behind. I noticed it immediately.

“Can I have it?”

My mother shook her head.

“No. It isn’t ours.”

But I saw hesitation in her face.

“Please?”

She said no again.

“Please, please.”

I kept asking because I had already sensed that her answer was not final. Eventually, she gave in. Maybe she decided it was only a magazine. Maybe she thought whoever had left it behind was not coming back for it. I did not know what she was thinking. I only knew what I had seen. She had told me the magazine did not belong to us. Then she took it anyway. In my child’s mind, she had taken something that was not hers. It felt like stealing.

And seeing her break a rule she had just explained to me felt exciting. The ballet school went black. A pair of glasses appeared in my hand. They belonged to my friend’s mother. I opened a drawer. Placed the glasses inside. Closed it again. Another flash. A bathroom at the doctor’s office near our home in Brussels. A key in my hand.

I hid it behind the toilet. Later, the doctor asked whether I had taken it.

“Not me.”

You knew it was you.

Then a transparent purple Game Boy. I could see its shape clearly, the inside faintly visible through the plastic. I had stolen it. The memories arrived too quickly to settle. Louis’s agenda. The Disney magazine. The glasses. The key. The Game Boy. They lined up in front of me like evidence.

Things I had hidden. A lie I had told. Something I had stolen. Some of the memories were childish pranks, done because I wanted to see what would happen next. I wanted to watch someone search for something I knew they could not find. For a moment, I controlled the scene. Some were more serious than others. All of them were wrong. But they were not proof of what Beyens had called me.

No.

None of it had anything to do with the color of my skin.

Then why is my mind putting them together?

The memories kept returning anyway. As though one cruel sentence had opened a file inside me. As though the moment someone accused me of being bad, my mind immediately began searching for evidence that perhaps he was right. It was not examining Beyens's cruelty. It was examining me.

See?

You have done bad things.

You have lied.

You have stolen.

My mind was building a case against me. It was collecting every memory that could make his words feel less random. But Beyens had not known any of those things. He had not looked into my past and discovered a secret. He had not known about Louis's agenda, the glasses, the key, or the Game Boy. He had looked at my skin.

That was all. The evidence disappeared. For a moment, there was only darkness. Then something flat appeared in front of me. A photograph. Rows of children stood beside one another. A class picture. The darkness released me from the child's body. I was watching from outside again. I moved closer.

The photograph sharpened slowly. There was Lutgart. She was Black. Then there was me, with brown skin I did not yet know how to name. I recognized little Aurélie by the oversized red sweater, her dark hair, and her brown skin. Her face remained blurred. The sleeves of the sweater swallowed part of her hands. She stood among the other children, trying to arrange her small body correctly for the camera. Most of the other faces were pale, many framed by light hair. They seemed to belong inside the photograph without having to wonder what their faces meant.

Then there was me.

Oh.

I kept looking at the girl in the red sweater. Not at the things she had done. Not at Louis's agenda or the stolen Game Boy. Only at what made her visibly different from almost everyone around her.

I am brown.

Beyens's voice returned.

All brown people are criminals.

Criminals.

Criminals.

Stop.

Shut up, Cookie BN.

I wanted to look away, but the photograph remained in front of me. My eyes kept returning to the brown-skinned girl in the oversized red sweater. Her face was still blurred. But the rest of her looked so small. Small enough to believe that if someone said something cruel with enough confidence, there might be a reason. Small enough to search herself for it.

Was this when I began seeing myself through other people's eyes?

Something moved behind the photograph. At first, I thought another child was stepping forward. But the shape was taller. Older. A different version of me.

Wait.

I leaned closer. The photograph trembled. The rows of children began to blur.

What is that?

The hypnotherapist's voice reached me from somewhere beyond the image.

"Take another slow breath."

The photograph vanished.

No.

Wait.

I tried to pull it back. The oversized red sweater. The brown-skinned girl whose face I still could not see. The taller shape forming behind her.

But the darkness had already closed.

Whatever I had almost seen was gone.

14

What My Mind Was Showing Me

The class photograph disappeared.

For a few seconds, there was nothing. No school. No children. No oversized red sweater. Only darkness, and the hypnotherapist's voice guiding me back toward the room. Slowly, the office returned. The sofa beneath my body. The blanket over my legs. The children's voices beyond the wall. Then I opened my eyes.

Nothing had changed. Still, I did not move. I stared at the ceiling, trying to understand where I had just been. My hand moved toward my wrist. There was a bracelet there. For one confused second, my body reacted before my mind did. Then I looked down. It was not Esther's. It was the bracelet Tyler's mother had given me when I first moved to America. I ran my fingers over it anyway.

The plastic pearls from the playground were gone. The feeling that I had to earn them was not. The hypnotherapist waited until I sat up.

"How was that?"

I was not sure what to tell her. Had anything actually happened? Maybe I had simply fallen asleep and dreamed about kindergarten, which felt strangely unimportant compared with everything I had expected hypnosis to uncover.

Should I even mention it?

"I think I fell asleep," I said.

She explained that hypnosis could sometimes feel that way. Even when the conscious mind drifted, another part of the mind could still be listening.

"Did anything come up?" she asked. "Any images? A dream?"

I hesitated. A playground. A bracelet. Children I had not thought about in years. None of it seemed important enough to report.

This is going to sound so random.

"Maybe," I said.

She waited.

"I saw my entire school."

The sentence sounded ridiculous enough to make me laugh. Then I told her what had happened. Not every detail. She did not need a full tour of my elementary school. I gave her the shortened version and explained how one memory had somehow led to the next. She listened without interrupting. When I finished, I still did not understand why any of it had appeared.

"It was so random," I said. "None of it seemed big enough to explain anything."

There had been no single disaster. No one memory that looked large enough to explain who I had become. Just school. Children being cruel. Me trying to belong. Me doing things I knew were wrong. A collection of moments I had stored as ordinary. She looked at me for a moment.

"Do you see the pattern?"

No.

That was the problem. I could see the memories. I could not see what they were trying to show me. She asked me to stop thinking only about what had happened and consider what the child in each memory might have learned from it. Not what had actually been true. What she might have believed was true. I thought about the first mornings at school. My mother had not abandoned me. She had taken me somewhere safe and returned later, exactly as she promised. Adult me understood that.

Three-year-old me only knew that she had cried, reached for her mother, and made herself sick. Her mother still left. Then one morning, she stopped crying. I had always remembered that as the moment I became brave. Watching it again, it had not looked like bravery. It

had looked like resignation. Showing how I feel changes nothing. The event had ended decades ago. The conclusion had remained.

Then there was Esther. I had wanted a place inside her group so badly that I turned myself into whatever seemed most useful. Funny. Entertaining. Easy to keep around. The bracelet had not simply been a bracelet. It had been proof that I had performed well enough to be chosen. Even though Esther had given it reluctantly, I still accepted it with pride. Belonging has to be earned. And once I had earned a place, I tolerated what it cost to remain there.

The hair pulling. The slap. The laughter. Never knowing which version of her I would get. I looked down at the bracelet on my wrist. This one had been given freely. No competition. No performance. No tree stump. The objects looked similar.

The meaning was completely different. Then there was Sophie. She had asked why I let people walk all over me. I had looked at her before answering Beyens, as though I needed permission to defend myself. When I finally did, he hurt me. Then I told my father, and the problem became larger. The teacher became involved. Beyens gave an apology he did not mean. He mocked me for telling. His mother looked at me as though I had created the situation.

Speaking up comes with a price. Silence hurt. But speaking seemed to create consequences too. Maybe staying quiet had begun to feel like the option that caused the least disruption.

Then came the memories of everything I had done wrong. Beyens had looked at my skin and called me a criminal. My mind had not examined his cruelty. It had examined me. I had lied. I had hidden things. I had stolen something. *Maybe he was right.* Except he had known none of it. He had not uncovered a secret about my character.

He had only seen that I was brown.

“So why did I immediately search for proof against myself?” I asked.

She said that children sometimes search themselves for explanations when they cannot understand why something happened. Because if the problem is inside them, perhaps they can fix it. If the problem was me, then maybe I could prevent it from happening again. Be quieter. Be better. Be easier. Do not make anyone angry. Blaming myself had never felt safe. But control was different. If I had caused something, I could convince myself that changing might stop it from happening again.

The other possibility was harder to accept. I could behave perfectly and still be hurt. I could be kind and still be rejected. I could defend myself and still be attacked. Someone could treat me badly without there being anything inside me that explained why. None of it had been my fault. The thought should have comforted me. Instead, it frightened me. If it had not been my fault, then all the ways I had reshaped myself could never have guaranteed my safety. Being quieter could not protect me.

Being funnier could not make someone love me properly. Understanding another person's pain could not stop them from causing mine. All the adapting, performing, apologizing, and making myself easier had never been a perfect shield. It had only been the best strategy a child could create with the information she had.

The memories had not shown me one event that created everything. They had shown me the beginnings of a filter. A way of interpreting the world before I even realized I was interpreting it. The events ended. The conclusions stayed. Over time, those conclusions stopped feeling like conclusions. They became rules. Through that filter, another person's disappointment meant I had done something wrong. Someone crossing a boundary meant I had failed to explain myself properly. Someone hurting me meant I should search for the pain that had caused them to behave that way.

For other people, I always found context. For myself, I found blame. I had called it kindness. Sometimes it was

kindness. There was nothing wrong with remembering birthdays, avoiding pointless arguments, or wanting people to feel comfortable. But kindness and fear could look exactly the same from the outside. Both could look like patience. Both could look like forgiveness. Both could look like staying. Only I knew whether I was saying yes because I wanted to, or because I was afraid of what might happen if I said no.

Oh.

I had not been born without boundaries. I had simply practiced overriding them until I could no longer hear them clearly.

"How do I change something I do before I even notice I'm doing it?"

She told me I could not change a rule I still mistook for the truth. First, I had to recognize it. Not judge it. Not hate the child who had created it. She had been trying to understand the world and find a way to feel safe inside it. It was not my fault that those conclusions had formed. But now that I could see them, I did not have to keep treating them as facts.

"How do I know when it's happening?"

"Notice when your answer changes."

I thought about how often I said, "It's fine," before checking whether it was. How quickly I could make my disappointment smaller. How naturally I could explain why someone else needed something more than I did. The first answer might be what I actually wanted. Then the old filter would arrive.

What if they are disappointed?

What if they think I am difficult?

What if they leave?

The second answer often came so quickly that I mistook it for the first.

"I don't always know what I want," I admitted.

"Then begin with what you don't want."

That sounded easier.

“Notice the first no,” she said. “Even if you still say yes afterward.”

I repeated the words silently.

Notice the first no.

An alarm sounded near her chair. Our time was up. For a second, that felt absurd. I had just watched years of old rules reveal themselves inside an elementary school, and now another client needed the room. She reminded me not to force myself to understand everything immediately. There would be time. I stood, moved the blanket away from my legs, and gathered my things. Outside the room, the hallway seemed unusually bright. I sat with a cup of water while I waited for Tyler to pick me up. Before her next client went inside, the hypnotherapist appeared again.

“Don’t think too much today,” she said.

I looked at her as though that were a very ambitious request. She laughed.

“Focus on your wedding. It’s your day. Have the most fun.”

My wedding. I had been so deep inside childhood that I had almost forgotten the life waiting for me outside the office. Tyler. Our families. The vows I still needed to memorize. The dress being made in Indonesia. I looked down at the bracelet on my wrist.

Notice the first no.

At that moment, it sounded like something I would have to practice later.

I did not realize I had already missed one.

It was being sewn into my wedding dress.

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Look Around You

After the third hypnotherapy session, I began noticing old patterns in places that had nothing to do with therapy.

The next place I found one was inside a wedding dress.

Tyler and I were already legally married, but April was the wedding we had actually planned. At the courthouse, we had repeated whatever we were told to say, both of us slightly afraid we might get the words wrong. This time, we would write our own vows and say them in front of everyone we loved.

Before the wedding, an Indonesian designer I knew offered to make my gown.

"When you get married one day, let me make your dress," she had told me.

I had worn one of her designs for a photo shoot and loved it. It was covered in sequins and looked beautiful on camera, but for my wedding I wanted something completely different. I sent her several reference pictures of light, flowing dresses with lace and very little decoration.

"Can you make something like this?" I asked.

"Of course. This is easy," she said. "I'll make the party dress too."

I told her one dress was enough. Changing clothes in the middle of my own wedding sounded like another task I would somehow have to prepare for.

"No, darling. You need two."

"Okay," I said.

Apparently, agreeing was still easier than continuing the conversation.

Close to the wedding, she sent me a video of the finished gown.

I watched it once.

Then again.

It was covered in sequins.

Did she send me the wrong video?

"Is this the party dress?" I asked.

"No, that's the wedding dress."

"Oh."

It was beautiful. It was also much grander than anything in the photographs I had sent.

"I thought it would be a little more simple," I said carefully.

She explained that because I was a celebrity, she had imagined something more dramatic for me. Something people in Indonesia would expect to see.

I understood what she meant. We had simply imagined two completely different brides. Hers arrived surrounded by light and applause. Mine wanted to move freely and not require assistance every time she needed to use the bathroom.

I asked whether some of the sequins could be removed.

She agreed, but by then the wedding was getting close. I started worrying about how much work she had already done, whether she would feel hurt, and whether choosing another gown would make me seem ungrateful.

So instead of saying, *This isn't what I wanted*, I said everything was fine and asked when she could send it. She assured me the sizing would be fine because she had my exact measurements.

A few weeks before the wedding, the dress arrived in California.

It was much too big.

During the fitting, the seamstress pinned layers of fabric around me while I looked at the other gowns hanging throughout the shop. Many of them were light, simple, and flowing, almost exactly like the references I had originally sent.

My own dress was the heaviest gown I had ever worn. It was beautiful, but it seemed more prepared to be the center of attention than I was.

As she gathered the fabric behind me, I thought about the memories that had surfaced during hypnotherapy.

The green fence.

Esther's bracelet.

Beyens.

The things I had hidden.

Moments I had dismissed because none of them seemed important enough on their own.

So small things really can shape you.

Then another thought followed.

And I'm still doing it.

I had known exactly what I wanted, but the moment someone wanted something different for me, my own preference had become negotiable. Even for my wedding, disappointing myself had felt easier than disappointing someone else.

I looked at my reflection while the seamstress continued pinning the dress.

I have to stop doing this.

I was still going to wear the wedding gown. I had already agreed to it, it was being altered, and once it fit properly, it really was beautiful.

But there was still the second dress.

The designer had insisted on making an after-party dress too, even though I had said from the beginning that one dress was enough.

When it arrived, it was also far too large and even more heavily decorated than the first.

The seamstress examined it from every side.

"This would be almost impossible to alter," she said. "We would basically have to rebuild it."

Normally, I might have heard that as a challenge.

Okay. How do we make it work anyway?

This time, I heard it as permission.

I did not have to force myself into another dress simply because I had already said yes.

“Then we won’t alter it,” I said.

The sentence was small. Nobody was harmed. Nothing collapsed.

I bought a simple dress from Amazon instead.

On the morning of April 25, I did not wake up thinking about marriage.

I woke up thinking about Simon.

Our dog had suddenly become sick. He was weak, trembling when he tried to stand, and seemed only partly aware of what was happening around him.

Tyler and I panicked.

Everyone we trusted to watch him was supposed to attend the wedding.

The morning became a series of phone calls and updates.

Who could take him to the veterinarian?

Who could stay with him?

Was he getting worse?

There was no time to become nervous about the wedding because all of our nervousness had gone directly into the dog.

By the time I arrived to get ready, I was still checking my phone.

My mother was in the room with me, along with Tyler’s mother and his sister, Mindy. The room itself was calm. Hair and makeup happened around me while I waited for news about Simon and silently repeated my vows.

I had written them in English, which still was not the language that came most naturally to me. They were also long enough to make me regret my own ambition.

For almost a month, I had practiced them in my head. In the shower.

While getting dressed.

Before falling asleep.

I had repeated them so many times that the sentences had started appearing in my thoughts without being invited.

There were also meatballs in the room, and they were very good.

That is one of the clearest details I remember from getting ready.

A sick dog. A speech I had memorized like an examination. Hairspray. Family.

And meatballs.

Before it was time to walk down the aisle, we finally received good news.

Simon was doing better.

Tyler's father had been going back and forth between the veterinarian and the wedding, trying to be present for both. Knowing Simon was safe allowed part of me to finally arrive at the wedding too.

Then I put on the dress.

Once everything was finished, I looked at myself in the mirror.

I'm really getting married.

Technically, I already was.

My hair created one final problem. The stylist had left before the ceremony and forgotten to leave enough pins to secure the veil. We used whatever we could find and tried to make it work ourselves.

The veil sat slightly crooked and did not feel especially committed to staying on my head.

My mother and father walked with me.

To reach the aisle, I first had to go down a staircase. I had already warned everyone that I would not be descending like a princess. I was going to hold both sides of my dress and watch my feet.

The dress was large, the veil was questionable, and I had no intention of beginning married life by falling down a staircase in front of everyone we knew.

"When You Wish Upon a Star" began to play.

The first thing I looked at was not Tyler.

It was the stairs.

Once I reached the bottom safely, I finally looked up.

Tyler was waiting for me.

The moment I reached him, he took my hand, and I immediately felt calmer.

The day before, we had rehearsed exactly where everyone was supposed to stand. There was a small round platform at the front for Tyler, the pastor, and me.

Tyler forgot.

He led me directly in front of it.

The pastor ended up standing alone on the platform behind us, like he had won first place in a competition none of us knew we had entered.

I noticed immediately.

Correcting it would have required stopping the ceremony and explaining that the groom had forgotten the blocking, so we stayed where we were.

Then everyone looked at us.

I had spent years in front of cameras, but this felt different. There was no director telling me where to turn. No one was waiting to capture one usable version of the moment. There would be no second take.

My thoughts began moving everywhere.

Was the veil still attached?

Was Simon really okay?

Did everyone notice we were standing in the wrong place?

Had the pastor asked us something?

I realized I was barely listening.

Tyler held both of my hands.

“Look around you,” he whispered. “Everything is so beautiful.”

I looked.

The sky was clear. The light was soft. Everyone we loved had gathered in one place. My parents stood nearby.

His family was there. Our friends had come to watch us choose each other.

He was right.

It was a perfect day.

My thoughts became quiet long enough for me to enter it.

Then it was time for the vows.

I had brought the paper with me, but I was afraid that if I looked down, I would lose my place. I had practiced for a month. Tyler's eyes made me calmer than the page did.

So I looked at him.

"Two years ago, I remember being in my room one night saying a prayer, asking for my person to come into my life," I began.

"And the next morning, God gave me back pain."

People laughed.

"I thought, well, that's not exactly what I was asking for. But God knew exactly what He was doing. He gave me the perfect excuse to slide into your DMs."

I told him that from the moment we began talking, it had felt as though I had known him forever. When we finally met in Bali, I had simply known.

That's it. That's the one for me.

The distance between Indonesia and California had once made our future feel like a crazy dream.

"But look at us now," I told him. "We made it."

Standing in front of him still felt slightly unreal, but I knew I was exactly where I was meant to be.

I promised to love him, to stand beside him through good times and bad, to remain faithful, to laugh with him, dream with him, and grow old with him.

"And while we're still young," I said, "let's enjoy every moment of this beautiful life we're building together." I ended by telling him that I could not wait to see the amazing husband and, one day, the best father I already knew he would become.

I remembered every word.

I did not need the paper.

After the ceremony came the speeches.

My father wanted to give one.

That alone made me smile.

For years, I had believed he might refuse to attend my wedding if he disliked the person I chose. Now he was not only present, he had voluntarily taken a microphone.

Once my father had a microphone, he became extremely comfortable.

His speech continued.

Then continued a little more.

He moved from one subject to another with the confidence of someone who believed the audience had come specifically to hear him speak.

From our table, Tyler and I looked at each other.

Should we take the microphone?

My father appeared to be doing stand-up comedy now.

He was happy, so we let him continue.

During the reception, I still caught myself scanning the room.

So many people had done so much to make the day happen that I wanted to make sure everyone was enjoying themselves and nobody felt forgotten.

But beneath that familiar habit, I was happy. The people we loved were all in one place, the day was beautiful, and for once, there was nowhere else I wished I could be.

After our first dance, I changed into the simple dress I had bought from Amazon.

It was the first thing I wore that day because I had chosen it entirely for myself.

Immediately, I felt more like myself.

I could move. I could breathe.

I began walking around the reception and speaking to as many people as possible. I did not want anyone to feel excluded, but now it no longer felt like a responsibility I was carrying.

I was actually enjoying myself.

The formal part was over.

No one was waiting for me to say anything in perfect English.

No one was watching me make a promise.

I was simply talking to people I loved.

That was when I felt most like myself.

At one point, Tyler and I stepped away from the crowd for a moment and looked back at the reception. Everything had gone well.

The weather had stayed beautiful.

Our families were happy.

The ceremony had survived the misplaced platform.

My veil had stayed attached.

Simon was recovering.

"It was beautiful," we said.

For once, I did not immediately look around to see whether everyone else agreed.

After the reception, friends invited us to continue celebrating at their house. We went, but we did not stay long.

We were exhausted.

More than anything, we wanted to go home and see Simon.

Our wedding night ended with us taking care of our sick dog.

We made sure he was comfortable, then finally went to bed.

I was too tired to shower. My hair was still stiff with hairspray, and somewhere inside it, several bobby pins remained hidden.

I slept with them there.

16

Who Does She Think She Is?

At my next appointment, I told the hypnotherapist about the dress.

Not the heavy one everyone had spent so much time preparing. The simple dress I had ordered from Amazon and changed into after the speeches. I told her how quickly I had known it felt more like me. How clearly I had heard the first no. How, for once, I had not immediately translated it into yes.

"How did that feel?" she asked.

"Good."

She waited.

"Relieving."

She kept looking at me. She really believed in silence.

"And uncomfortable," I admitted.

"What felt uncomfortable?"

I thought about opening the Amazon package. The light fabric. The absence of beading, drama, and everyone else's expectations.

"It felt like I had gotten away with something."

"What had you gotten away with?"

"Choosing what I wanted."

The answer sounded ridiculous once it was outside my head. Not false. Just too dramatic for a dress. She made a note, then asked me to lie down. This time, she asked me to imagine ten steps leading downward. I saw four. Maybe five, if the gray shape at the bottom counted. An improvement. She began counting. With each number, she asked me to go deeper.

The steps disappeared beneath me until there was no staircase at all. Only darkness. Then a photograph appeared. It floated in front of me against the black. A

class picture. Children arranged in rows, their faces turned toward the camera. I moved closer. The photograph was old. Its colors had faded slightly, but I recognized it immediately. I had seen it many times as a child.

Every face was visible except mine. My face was still blurred. Then I noticed little Aurélie sitting beside the photograph. There was a pair of scissors in her hand. She opened one blade and placed its edge against her face in the picture.

What are you doing?

She pulled it across the paper. Scratch. A thin white line appeared. She did it again. Scratch. Another line crossed the first.

Stop.

I moved toward her. Her hand remained steady. The movement was slow and deliberate, as though this were not an act of anger but a task she had decided needed to be finished. Scratch. Scratch. Scratch. She did not touch anyone else. Only herself.

Why are you doing that?

She did not answer. Maybe she was not trying to erase herself. Maybe she had not thought that far. Maybe looking at her own face created a feeling she did not understand, and damaging the image was easier than naming it.

Then why only yours?

The photograph blurred. Now it lay on a table. My mother held it in both hands.

“Why would you do that?”

Little Aurélie looked down at the white lines covering the place where her face had been.

“Nothing.”

Tell her.

My mother waited. The child said nothing else. How could she explain something she did not understand

herself? I ruined my face because it made sense at the time. No child would say that. Maybe no child could.

The photograph disappeared. Scratch. The sound continued in the darkness. Scratch. Scratch. Scratch. Then it stretched into a soft mechanical whirr. A camera winding. Click. Flash.

White light swallowed everything. When it cleared, I was standing inside a store. Little Aurélie walked between the aisles with both hands held slightly away from her body. Her palms were visible. Her fingers were spread.

What are you doing?

She was not reaching for anything. She was making sure everyone could see that she had nothing in her hands. An employee stood somewhere nearby. With every aisle, the child became more aware of him. She moved carefully. Too carefully. No one had accused her of anything. No one had stopped her. Still, she made her innocence visible before anyone had the chance to question it. Then Beyens's voice returned.

All brown people are criminals.

No.

I knew better than to draw a perfect line from one sentence to every fear that followed. But his words had given the fear language. Before, I had only felt watched. Afterward, I knew what someone might think they were seeing.

The store faded. My open hands disappeared. Another camera clicked inside the darkness. Flash. When the light cleared, I was older. A photographer stood in front of another class. Children adjusted their chairs and moved closer together. I recognized the shirt before I recognized the girl wearing it.

Oh my God.

That shirt.

It had long sleeves and zigzags in different shades of pink and purple. It was one of two new shirts from the market the week before. It was not expensive. That had

never mattered to me. It was new. It was mine. And it was my favorite. The colors made me feel pretty. The pattern made my body look slimmer, or at least I believed it did. At ten, that was enough to make a shirt feel important.

Little Aurélie smoothed the fabric over her stomach before taking her place in the class picture. There was excitement in the gesture.

You feel pretty in that shirt.

Usually, class pictures were simply taken. I stood where I was told, looked toward the camera, and waited for it to be over. This time was different. For the first time, I was already looking forward to seeing the result. I wanted to know how the new shirt would look. I wanted to see whether the photograph might capture the confidence I felt while wearing it. The photographer arranged the rows. Children shifted closer together. Everyone looked toward the camera. Little Aurélie adjusted herself.

Then she tilted her head. Only slightly. Barely a pose. The camera rose. For one second, her whole body held the confidence the shirt had given her. Not prettier than anyone else. Not special. Just happy to be photographed in something she loved. Flash. The image froze.

This time, you left yourself in the picture.

I remembered how eagerly I had waited for the photograph to be printed. I wanted to see how the shirt looked. Whether the slight tilt of my head had worked. Whether I would like the result. I did. I looked at the photograph and thought I looked nice. There had been no argument inside me yet. No voice asking whether I had tried too hard. No embarrassment about being pleased. Then the scene changed.

A gymnasium formed around us. Shoes squeaked against the floor. Voices echoed against the high walls. Children moved past one another while the teachers prepared whatever activity came next. A girl walked toward Aurélie. Jolien. We were not friends. I could not remember her ever approaching me just to talk before

that day. But I remembered this conversation. She stopped in front of me with the expression of someone carrying information she had been waiting to deliver.

"Hey," she said. "Do you know what my mom said?"

You don't want to know.

She continued anyway.

"She said, 'Who is that? Why does she have to tilt her head like that in a class photo? She thinks she's a model or something.'"

The words were not theatrical. Jolien did not perform them like a movie bully. She simply wanted me to know. Her mother had noticed me. They had discussed me. And they agreed that I had done too much. That I looked like I genuinely thought I was pretty. I stared at her.

The one time you come talk to me, it's to tell me this?

I did not say it. I smiled awkwardly instead. The kind of smile that made it seem as though she had pointed out something embarrassing I had accidentally done. For one second, I almost apologized.

Sorry.

Sorry I tilted my head.

Sorry I liked the shirt.

Sorry I thought I might look pretty.

The gymnasium continued around us, but the noise began falling away. Jolien's mouth was still moving. I could no longer hear her.

Was it that obvious?

Could everyone see that I had tried?

The humiliation was not that I had looked bad. It was that someone had caught me hoping I might look good. The gymnasium disappeared. Now little Aurélie was alone in her bedroom. The class photograph was in her hands. She looked at it differently. The tilt of her head no longer looked sweet. It looked deliberate. Embarrassing. Too pleased with itself.

Maybe Jolien and her mother were not the only ones who thought so. Maybe everyone had seen the photograph

and wondered why I had posed that way. Maybe they were only the ones who had said it aloud. A sentence appeared across the picture. *Who does she think she is?* The words crossed my face. *Who does she think she is?* They covered the pink-and-purple zigzags. *Who does she think she is?* The girl inside the photograph began straightening her head.

No.

She tried to correct the pose after the picture had already been taken.

Leave it.

Her excitement disappeared first. Then the pride. Then the part of her that had wanted to see the photograph at all.

You didn't do anything wrong.

She could not hear me. The photograph trembled in her hands. Then the first class picture appeared beside it. Two white rectangles floated in the darkness. In one, my face had been scratched away. In the other, my face remained, but the girl inside was already trying to undo the fact that she had wanted to be seen.

Oh.

The connection arrived so quickly that I almost rejected it. In the first photograph, I had scratched myself out. In the second, I stayed. But I learned not to look too happy about being there. The photographs grew larger. One on either side of me. The scratched face to my left. The tilted head to my right. I stood between them.

Which one am I supposed to help?

The answer came immediately.

Both.

The darkness opened. I stepped through it and entered the gymnasium again. Jolien disappeared. The other children froze. Only little Aurélie could move. The class photograph drifted down between us. She reached for it. The moment she recognized it, she pressed it against her

chest, hiding the slight tilt of her head as though I might judge her for it too. I walked toward her.

"Hey."

This time, she looked up.

You can see me.

For the first time inside these memories, the child's eyes found mine. She did not look through me. She saw me.

Oh my God.

I had been so focused on whether she could see me that I almost missed something else. I could see her too. Clearly. Her eyes. Her nose. The shape of her mouth. The face that had remained blurred through every memory before this one. My face. She had been me all along. Only now could I see her.

The old question moved through the gymnasium again. *Who does she think she is?* Little Aurélie lowered her eyes. I pointed toward the photograph against her chest. Toward the favorite shirt. The slight tilt of her head. The hope in her expression that the camera might capture something she liked.

"She thinks she's a girl wearing her favorite shirt," I said.

My voice existed inside the gymnasium and somewhere far beyond it.

"She thinks she's allowed to tilt her head."

The child looked at me.

"She thinks she might look pretty."

Her grip on the photograph loosened.

"She's right."

The gymnasium went black. For a moment, there was only my breathing. Then the first photograph returned. The younger Aurélie sat beside it. The scissors were still in her hand.

You again.

I sat beside her. This time, I could see her face too. I did not try to take the scissors from her. That had not worked before.

"You belong in the picture," I said.

She looked down at the white scratches covering her face.

"Even if you don't know what word to use for yourself yet."

Her fingers loosened.

"You are not the interruption."

She looked at me.

"You are part of the picture."

The scissors fell. They touched the floor without making a sound. The two photographs folded inward. The scratched face. The tilted head. Their edges met. For one second, the girls appeared together. One who had scratched herself out of the picture. One who had allowed herself to remain, then felt ashamed for enjoying it. Neither of them had done anything wrong.

The photographs disappeared. Everything became black. Somewhere beyond the darkness, the hypnotherapist must have begun counting me back. I had not heard her. When I opened my eyes, she was already watching me.

Oh no.

Did I actually fall asleep this time?

How long has she been waiting?

I sat up too quickly. She smiled.

"Welcome back."

She handed me water and waited until I could speak.

"What did you see this time?"

I told her about the two photographs. In the first, I had scratched only my own face. In the second, I had left myself there, then learned to feel embarrassed that I had wanted to look pretty.

"What became embarrassing?" she asked.

"Trying."

“Trying to do what?”

“To look pretty.”

I paused.

“To feel good in my own skin.”

The words settled between us. I told her about the store too. How I had made my empty hands visible even though no one had accused me of taking anything.

“I wanted them to know I wasn’t stealing,” I said.

“What did you think they might suspect?”

“That I was stealing.”

“Why?”

I looked down at the water.

“I don’t know.”

That was not entirely true. I knew what answer had appeared. I just did not know whether the connection was real or whether I was forcing it.

“Because I was brown?”

It came out as a question. She did not answer it for me.

“Do you think that was connected to what Beyens said?”

“I don’t know.”

That felt more honest than drawing a perfect line between one racist sentence and every insecurity that followed.

“But his words had given the fear a sentence.”

I thought about the wedding. The heavy dress I had agreed to wear. The simple one I had chosen later. The way it felt more like me from the moment I put it on.

“Maybe that’s why choosing the Amazon dress felt like getting away with something,” I said.

“What did you think might happen?”

“That someone would think I was difficult. Ungrateful.”

I looked down at the water in my hands.

“Or that I thought my opinion mattered too much.”

The old sentence returned. *Who does she think she is?* A bride who thought she should like her own dress. A girl

who tilted her head in a photograph. A child whose face belonged among everyone else's.

"What actually happened when you changed dresses?" she asked.

I thought about the reception. My family laughing. People dancing. Tyler beside me. The night continuing.

"Nothing."

The word surprised me.

"No one said anything bad."

The wedding did not collapse. No one disappeared. The world survived my preference. Before I left, the old question appeared once more. *Who does she think she is?* For years, it had sounded like a warning. Do not pose. Do not try. Do not let anyone catch you enjoying your own reflection. Do not behave as though your preference deserves space.

But now another answer appeared. Not loud. Not dramatic. Just clear. She thinks she is allowed to be in the picture. She thinks she is allowed to choose the dress. She thinks she is allowed to like what she sees.

That was all. I left the office believing the lesson had been about photographs and dresses. Only later would I understand that it was about something larger.

How easily I had trusted other people's version of me over the evidence of my own life.

17

The Apology I Couldn't Believe

One morning, I was alone at home after Tyler left for work when a message arrived.

A friend told me that Stephanie had been arrested in Bali in connection with a drug case.

What?

Only a week earlier, Stephanie had messaged me to say she would finally return the money she owed me. Stephanie had been my best friend.

Or maybe my former best friend.

Or, to be completely accurate, someone I had considered my best friend. I never asked whether she had assigned me the same position.

I had never been someone who collected friends.

If I were a dog, I would be a one-person dog. Give me one person I trusted and I would sit beside her for life.

For a while, that person was Stephanie.

We were close enough that when she began asking me for money, helping her felt obvious.

It did not begin as one enormous request.

It arrived in smaller emergencies.

She was sick and needed to go to the hospital.

Her parents would not help her.

Something else had happened.

Then something else.

Each amount seemed manageable on its own. Each explanation made refusing feel unnecessarily cruel.

I can afford it. She can't.

What kind of friend would I be if I didn't help?

She always had a plan to return it.

Her apartment was going to be sold.

The money would come soon.

The promises were specific enough to feel responsible.

The small amounts became a larger amount, and the larger amount became a mountain so gradually that I did not notice I had been climbing it.

I was not worried.

She was my friend.

Years passed. Stephanie began disappearing and reappearing in my life. Sometimes she answered. Sometimes she vanished again. The promises moved with her.

Eventually, when I could no longer reach her properly, I contacted her aunt.

Her aunt told me I was not the first person Stephanie had borrowed money from. Other people had heard their own versions of the same emergencies. She also told me that some of the money had gone to drugs.

I remember sitting with that information and feeling almost embarrassed by how surprised I was.

The money was not the worst part.

Money could be earned again.

The worst part was realizing that something I had treated as friendship might also have been useful to her.

I had thought I was the person she trusted enough to ask for help.

It turned out I might have been one of the people she knew would say yes.

Still, I did not want to believe that every part of our friendship had been calculated.

Later, Stephanie admitted it herself.

She apologized. She told me that addiction had taken over her life and that some of the money I had lent her had gone there. She said she did not want to live in that dark world anymore. She wanted to live properly.

I wanted to believe her. Not because I needed the story to end with me being right, but because I still cared about what happened to her.

Maybe she had cared about me and used me at the same time. Both things could be true, even if I did not know how to hold them together.

We were no longer close, but I never completely stopped caring about her.

Some time before the arrest, we started talking again through messages. She spoke again about leaving that world behind.

I was happy for her. Genuinely happy. It felt as if I had been given permission to hope that the person I once knew was finding her way back.

Then, in our most recent conversation, she told me she was finally going to return the money.

I had heard versions of that promise before, but this time I wanted to believe her. Maybe because she sounded hopeful. Maybe because I was hopeful for her.

A week later, I was staring at the message telling me she had been arrested.

For a moment, the money barely entered my mind.

I had only just allowed myself to feel relieved for her. I had thought this might be the part where she got her life back.

Instead, she had been pulled into the same world she had told me she was trying to leave.

I was deeply sad.

So she didn't get out.

When I added up the money I had lent people over the years and never received back, I could probably have bought a luxury car.

Apparently, instead of driving one, I had chosen to finance other people's emergencies.

I learned some lessons slowly and at premium prices. I once heard a pastor say that when you lend someone money, you should be prepared to release it. It sounded very peaceful inside a sermon.

It felt less peaceful when the borrower had repeatedly promised, with absolute confidence, that the money would arrive next week.

Still, sitting alone in the house, I knew the invisible invoice was costing me more than the missing money. I decided to try the forgiveness exercise again.

I closed my eyes and imagined Stephanie sitting across from me.

I did not have to invent her remorse from nothing. She had already admitted what she had done. She had already apologized.

In my mind, I let that real apology continue.

"You believed me because you cared about me, and I used that," I imagined her saying.

She told me again that addiction had taken over her life. That she had cared about me, but had still lied to me. That both things had been true at the same time.

"You did not deserve that," she said. "I should never have made my problems your responsibility."

Part of the apology was imaginary, but it grew from a conversation that had already happened. My mind could believe it.

I told her that losing the money had hurt, but discovering that our friendship had become something she could use had hurt more.

Then I forgave her.

It came more easily than I expected.

Forgiving her did not restore the friendship, return the money, or make me trust her again. It only meant I no longer wanted to keep reopening the same invisible invoice inside my head.

Once Stephanie's apology became believable, I let the exercise widen.

I thought about someone from Tyler's past who kept finding ways to remain present long after that chapter had ended.

An earlier version of me would have been furious.

I had never met her. I had never responded. But what she kept doing had still found its way into my life.

Someone at peace with herself would not spend that much energy trying to hurt a person she had never even met.

What she kept doing was cruel. Understanding that did not make it acceptable. It only changed the way I saw it.

The cruelty stopped making her look powerful. It made her look wounded.

Behind the woman who kept trying to hurt me, there was probably a little girl who had been hurt too.

I knew nothing about that girl. I did not know what she had lived through, what she had lost, or why letting go had become so difficult for her.

And because I had never met her, I had no real words to work with.

So I invented the ones I needed to hear.

"I'm sorry," I imagined her saying. "I was hurt, and I kept trying to make you feel it too. You did not deserve that. I should have let go."

Then I forgave her.

Forgiving her did not mean pretending that what she kept doing was acceptable. It meant refusing to let someone else's unfinished feelings keep occupying space in my marriage.

It worked.

I felt better.

That surprised me. I had just forgiven someone I had never even met by imagining the words I needed to hear.

Maybe that was the answer.

Maybe I did not need my first boyfriend to come up with the apology himself.

Maybe I could simply give him the script.

I closed my eyes again.

My first boyfriend.

The one person I had tried to forgive before and could not.

The first time I attempted the exercise, I had imagined him too honestly.

He denied what happened.

He redirected the conversation.

He blamed me.

Even inside my own imagination, he managed to take control of the scene.

This time, I decided to cheat.

I softened his expression.

I lowered his voice.

I gave him regret.

In my mind, I told him exactly what to say.

"You were a child," I made him say.

"I was the adult."

"What I did was wrong."

"None of it was your fault."

"I'm sorry."

I waited for the relief.

Nothing came.

Maybe he needs to say more.

I made him explain himself.

I made him accept responsibility without excuses.

I gave him every word I had once believed I needed.

But the longer he spoke, the less real he became.

His mouth moved, but the voice felt borrowed.

It was like watching an actor who looked like him perform a scene he would never agree to.

No.

I stopped halfway through the apology and opened my eyes.

With Stephanie, I had extended an apology she had already begun.

With him, I was inventing a version of him my mind could not believe.

Maybe forgiveness did not require a real apology.

But at that point, I still seemed to require one I could believe.

18

The Story I Tried to Erase

My next hypnotherapy session was the following day.

This time, I wanted to arrive with a specific question.

The earlier sessions had taken me wherever my mind wanted to go. A school gate. A bracelet. A class photograph. Memories I knew, but had never thought to place beside one another.

Maybe this time I could choose the door.

What do I even want to ask?

I was sitting at home with the television on, still trying to think of something important enough, when Homer Simpson hit his forehead.

"D'oh!"

Oh.

There was something I had never understood about myself.

When I became deeply upset, especially during conflict, I sometimes hit myself.

I did not know when it had started. I did not know where I had learned it. I only knew that it happened quickly, as though I had been moved into the passenger seat of my own body.

One moment I was overwhelmed. The next, my own hand had already reached my head.

Afterward, I was always ashamed.

I would promise myself that the next time I became upset, I would stay calm and control myself. But promises made while calm had very little authority over the version of me who appeared during conflict. I picked up my phone and messaged the hypnotherapist.

For tomorrow's session, I want to understand why I hit myself when I become extremely upset.

I stared at the message before sending it.

It felt strange to admit, even to someone whose job was to help me understand the parts of myself I could not explain.

Then I pressed send.

The next day, I was back in the treatment room.

“You sent me a question,” she said.

I nodded.

“I want to know why I do that.”

She did not ask me to guess. She only asked me to lie down.

I settled onto the sofa and closed my eyes.

I will not try to reconstruct every image that appeared during that session. Some came clearly. Others moved past before I could hold them.

At first, I saw my first boyfriend. I saw fragments from the relationship that began when I was fifteen, memories I had spent a long time keeping separate from the rest of my life.

Then one scene held.

I was eighteen, standing in front of him while he was angry.

I knew that anger.

I knew the change in his face, the shift in the room, the feeling of waiting for something I could not stop.

I knew what usually followed.

Before he could hurt me, I began hitting my own head and face.

Watching it again was unbearable.

Then the logic of it reached me. It was not reasonable, but it was simple enough for a frightened mind to believe.

Look.

I understand.

I am already hurting myself.

You do not have to.

Some part of me had believed that if I punished myself first, he might decide he no longer needed to.

The punishment had already been completed.

There was nothing left for him to do.

Except it did not stop him.

I was crying before I opened my eyes.

My face was wet, my chest hurt, and for several seconds I could not speak. The hypnotherapist waited until I could breathe again.

When she asked what had come up, I told her about the memory.

For years, I had remembered that version of myself with embarrassment. I had thought she was unstable, dramatic, impossible to understand.

Now I saw what she had been trying to do.

She had not wanted to hurt herself.

She had wanted him not to.

Saying it aloud changed the memory.

What I had carried as evidence that something was wrong with me had once been an attempt to survive something that was wrong around me.

It was a terrible strategy, but it had been a strategy.

I had been eighteen, standing in front of someone I loved and feared, trying to negotiate with violence before it arrived.

Years later, whenever conflict became overwhelming, my body still reached for the same response.

The person in front of me was no longer him. The danger was no longer the same. But the reaction had survived.

My mind knew the past was over.

My body had never received the message.

The earlier sessions looked different to me after that.

My childhood had not caused the abuse. It had not invited it, justified it, or made me responsible for his choices.

But before I met him, I had already learned to fear making people angry, to look for the fault in myself, and to mistake endurance for love.

He had not created every vulnerability inside me.

He had found them and used them.

For years, I had kept that relationship in a sealed room inside my mind. I thought refusing to enter it meant I had escaped it.

Instead, its contents had followed me into my fear, my relationships, and the moments when my own hands repeated what they had once learned to do under threat.

I had treated silence as evidence that the story was finished.

Silence had only allowed it to continue without language.

I thought about the class photograph and the scissors in my hand.

As a child, I had tried to remove my face from the picture. Later, I tried to erase an entire period of my life in much the same way.

Destroy the surface.

Remove the evidence.

Pretend the girl had never been there.

But she remained beneath the scratches.

The fifteen-year-old who wanted to be chosen.

The eighteen-year-old who tried to protect herself by becoming her own punishment.

The adult who still carried both of them without understanding why.

The hypnotherapist suggested that perhaps I needed to face the story instead of continuing to live as though it had never happened.

The thought frightened me.

Then I remembered the psychologist in Jakarta asking what I used to enjoy.

Writing.

Before my life became something I needed to survive, I had loved turning thoughts into stories. Writing had given shape to things I could not say aloud.

“Do you think writing about it would help?” I asked.

She said it might.

The story already existed inside me. Writing could place it somewhere I could see it. It could give the memories a beginning, an order, and perhaps eventually an ending.

For years, the relationship had existed inside me without any of those things. Only scenes I avoided, feelings that arrived without explanation, and a version of myself I could not forgive.

Writing would require me to return to all of it.

But perhaps it would also allow me to leave.

I could not change what had happened to her.

I could not reach back through time and pull her out of that room.

But perhaps I could finally stop abandoning her.

I could write her story.

PART IV

The Story I Gave Away

19

The Story I Almost Kept

That same day, I began writing.

Not a book.

I took out a notebook and started with pointers.

Fragments.

Places.

Sentences I still remembered.

Things I had spent years trying not to remember.

At the top of the page, I wrote:

This is something I have been trying to forget.

Then I began listing what happened.

I did not think about readers. I did not think about chapters, publication, or whether any of it was written well.

I was trying to understand my own life.

When the notes became too long for the page, I moved to my laptop.

I began at the beginning.

That surprised me.

I had expected the memories to arrive in broken pieces. Instead, once I placed the first scene on the page, another followed it. A room returned. Then a sentence. Then the expression on someone's face.

I remembered what happened next.

And what happened after that.

The story had been stored inside me more coherently than I realized.

For years, I had experienced it as fragments. A sudden fear. A reaction I could not explain. A memory that appeared and disappeared before I could look at it properly.

On the page, the fragments began forming a timeline. *This happened.*

Then this happened.

He said this.

I believed him.

I stayed.

My body reacted before I reached the worst parts.

My hands trembled while I typed. Heat traveled through me until I felt almost feverish. Sometimes I had to stop and walk away from the laptop because I could feel myself returning to the room I was describing.

I knew I was safe.

I knew I was no longer fifteen.

But my body did not always understand the difference between remembering danger and being inside it again.

Sometimes I cried.

Sometimes I stared at the screen without moving.

Then, when I could, I continued.

I did not edit myself for an audience because there was no audience.

The document was private.

I wrote details I would never have told anyone. I wrote the things I was embarrassed to admit, including moments that made me look naïve, weak, or impossible to understand.

At least, that was how I had judged the girl inside them.

I wrote what he did.

I also wrote what I did afterward.

How I made excuses for him.

How quickly relief could make me forget fear.

How one kind moment could convince me that the cruel ones had been misunderstandings.

How often I believed that the next apology would change everything.

Writing chronologically showed me something memory alone had not.

The relationship had not become dangerous all at once.

There had been a progression.

Something small would happen, then something slightly worse. Each time, I adjusted. By the time the situation became frightening enough that an outsider might immediately recognize it, I had already spent years learning how to explain it away.

Confusion became control.

Control became fear.

Fear became something I adapted to.

And eventually, adaptation began to feel like love.

When I lived through it, I experienced each moment separately.

On the page, I could see the pattern.

I could also see how young I had been.

At fifteen, I did not think of myself as a child. I believed I was mature. I thought being chosen by an older person proved that I was different from other girls my age.

I believed I understood love, loyalty, commitment, and sacrifice.

Looking back as an adult, I saw someone else.

A girl trying to navigate an adult's manipulation using the emotional tools of a child.

For years, I had asked why she stayed.

The more I wrote, the less useful that question became.

I began asking something different.

Why was she placed in that situation at all?

For the first time, I did not feel embarrassed by her.

I felt angry for her.

Then, slowly, I began feeling protective of her.

That was new.

I had spent years wanting distance from the person I had been. I wanted to prove that I was smarter now, stronger now, and nothing like the girl who had allowed those things to happen.

Writing forced me to sit beside her.

She was not stupid.

She had been conditioned.

She was not weak.

She had survived with whatever understanding she had at the time.

She had not stayed because she enjoyed being hurt.

She had stayed because the person hurting her had also become the person she waited for to make the pain stop.

I did not understand all of that at once.

It appeared slowly, between sentences.

Each time I wrote an event I had blamed myself for, I could see more clearly where the responsibility actually belonged.

The document grew.

I still did not call it a manuscript.

It was something between a diary and evidence.

Proof that the memories existed outside my body too. Proof that I had not imagined the progression.

Proof that events I had spent years minimizing looked very different when placed beside one another.

Tyler knew I was writing.

He knew the hypnotherapy had brought something back to me, but he did not ask to see the pages. He let the document remain mine.

Eventually, I wanted him to read it.

Part of me wanted his opinion.

A larger part simply wanted him to know.

It was one thing to tell someone that my first relationship had been abusive.

It was another to let him enter the rooms.

I handed him the laptop and immediately regretted it. While he read, I tried to look busy.

I checked my phone without absorbing anything on the screen. I moved around the room. Every few minutes, I looked at his face and then quickly looked away before he noticed.

I wondered which part he had reached.

Does he think I was stupid?

Does he understand why I stayed?

Is this too much?

I had never allowed anyone to see the entire progression before.

When Tyler finished, he closed the laptop.

He was quiet for a moment.

Then he told me that the story could help other girls recognize what was happening to them.

Girls who might be confusing control with love.

Girls who might still believe that what they were experiencing was not serious enough to count.

Girls who might see themselves in the younger version of me.

I had been so focused on surviving the memories that I had not considered anyone else reading them.

The thought frightened me immediately.

"Share it?"

Until then, the document had belonged only to me.

It was the place where I could tell the truth without worrying about consequences. I did not have to make myself sympathetic. I did not have to explain why I stayed or prepare answers for people who had never lived inside that kind of relationship.

Publishing it would change that.

Strangers would have opinions about the worst years of my life.

People would examine the choices of a fifteen-year-old girl with the confidence of adults standing safely outside the situation.

I could already hear the questions.

Why didn't she leave?

Why did she keep going back?

How could she believe him?

Why didn't she tell anyone?

I was an extremely private person.

Millions of people might have recognized my face, but visibility and openness were not the same thing. I knew

how to appear in front of a camera while keeping the most vulnerable parts of myself hidden.

This story was different.

There was no flattering angle for it.

I also knew that sharing it could bring him back into my life in some form.

He might deny it.

He might threaten me.

He might find a way to make me feel fifteen again, standing in front of him and trying to defend a reality he had already taught me to question.

I had tried to speak about parts of the story before. Instead of feeling protected, I had watched my pain become controversy.

I was not eager to do that again.

For a while, the document remained on my laptop.

I opened it.

I closed it.

I reread certain sections and imagined strangers reading them.

Some days, I thought Tyler was right.

Other days, I thought the story had already done its job. It had helped me understand myself. Maybe that was enough.

I did not owe the public every wound simply because I had survived it.

But I kept thinking about the girl I had been.

At fifteen, I would not have recognized my relationship in a simple warning about abuse.

I did not think I was being abused.

I thought I was in love.

I needed to see the progression. The small compromises. The confusion. The apologies that made the danger disappear just long enough for me to stay. I needed someone to show me that abuse did not always introduce itself as abuse.

Sometimes it arrived as attention.

Sometimes it looked like protection.

Sometimes it made you feel chosen before it made you feel trapped.

Maybe another girl needed to see that progression too.

What had felt like my private nightmare followed a pattern that belonged to many people.

I returned to the document.

Only then did I begin thinking about what it might become.

For the first time, I read it not only as the person who had lived it, but as someone deciding what another person needed to understand.

Some details were painful but necessary.

Others were private without helping the story become clearer.

I began separating honesty from exposure.

I did not need to publish every wound to tell the truth. I did not want to sell sadness.

I wanted to show the pattern.

The private record slowly became a manuscript.

I organized it.

I removed what did not belong.

I kept the parts that made me want to close the laptop, because many of those were the same parts another girl might recognize in her own life.

The decision still frightened me.

But writing had already changed my position inside the memory.

I was no longer the girl waiting for his reaction.

I was the narrator.

I decided where the story began.

I decided which details mattered.

I decided what the reader was allowed to see.

The person who had once controlled my understanding of reality no longer controlled the page.

For years, I had believed keeping the story private protected me.

Maybe it had protected the wrong person.

I looked at the document that had begun as handwritten fragments in a notebook.

It was no longer only proof of what had happened to me.

It was something that might help another girl understand what was happening to her.

And eventually, I let the story leave my laptop.

20

After I Told the Truth

When Broken Strings went viral, my phone no longer seemed to belong to me.

Before I could finish reading one message, another appeared.

Readers sent photographs of pages they had underlined. They told me which scene had made them cry, which sentence had made them stop, and which part of my story sounded so much like their own that they needed to close the book before continuing.

Many of them were survivors.

Some had never told anyone what had happened to them. Some were still inside relationships they had only begun to recognize as abusive. Others had escaped years earlier but still carried the shame as though staying had been a greater crime than what had been done to them.

They thanked me for saying something they had never known how to say.

Sometimes I read a message aloud to Tyler because I could not keep it to myself.

He would look at me, then at the phone, and we would sit quietly for a moment.

Something I had been terrified to place in front of another person was reaching strangers at exactly the moment they needed it.

The story moved beyond the readers I could see on my screen.

Teachers used it to begin conversations about grooming and manipulation. Parents began asking different questions. It was discussed in Indonesia's House of Representatives, the DPR, and for weeks it remained a trending subject across social media.

Everywhere I looked, people were talking about something I had once believed I needed to hide.

After the initial noise died down, the conversation did not end with it. *Broken Strings* continued to be discussed in schools, universities, community groups, and places of worship. Many students made it the subject of their theses and academic research. I still heard stories about the book being discussed in places I had never imagined it would reach.

The public still remembered. But once the attention moved elsewhere, the officials who had spoken so loudly about change gradually fell silent. I struggled to see what had actually been followed through.

At the time, though, the response still stunned me.

Years earlier, when I tried to speak publicly about what had happened, the truth had returned to me like a weapon.

People asked why I stayed.

Why I went back.

Why I had not acted differently.

They examined choices made under manipulation as though they had been made freely.

Speaking had become a boomerang.

When I published *Broken Strings*, part of me expected the same thing to happen again.

I expected people to accuse me of seeking attention or selling sadness. I expected them to search for inconsistencies, question my memory, and place the fifteen-year-old girl on trial.

Instead, they protected her.

Not everyone understood. No story enters the public without being distorted by someone. But the reaction I feared most did not become the reaction that defined the experience.

People were no longer asking only why the child had stayed.

They were asking why an adult had placed her there.

What had once been treated as scandal was being named for what it was.

Grooming.

Abuse.

A misuse of power.

For years, I believed my story would stain me if anyone saw it clearly.

Now people were looking directly at it and returning the responsibility to where it belonged.

He saw the reaction too.

Not long after *Broken Strings* came out, my first boyfriend began trying to frighten me again.

At first, his words were framed almost like concern. He told me to focus on my pregnancy and questioned whether I would even be able to give birth.

I knew what he was doing.

But knowing did not make my body immune to it.

I had chosen to tell the truth, but now there was another life inside me.

Was I wrong to publish the book while I was pregnant? Had I been brave at the worst possible time?

What if the stress affected my baby?

The old fear knew exactly where to enter.

While the book was still trending and people were finally having the conversations I had hoped it would begin, I stepped away from social media.

I needed enough silence to separate his voice from my own.

The messages continued arriving, but I stopped trying to read everything.

I returned to my actual life.

To Tyler.

To the baby growing inside me.

To the quiet rooms of our home, where nothing demanded that I defend what I knew had happened.

Some time later, I thought about the forgiveness exercise again.

The first time, I had imagined him too accurately.

He argued back.

The second time, I had tried to give him a conscience. I made him apologize, take responsibility, and tell me that none of it had been my fault.

But my mind did not believe him.

With Stephanie, I had extended an apology she had already begun.

With him, I had been inventing a version of him my mind did not believe.

This time, I decided he did not have to say anything.

Trying to reason with him had never taken me anywhere. Logic became another argument, another detour, another version of reality I was expected to enter.

So in my imagination, I gave him something else to do. I pictured him sitting across from me.

There were square tiles on the floor between us, and he seemed more interested in counting them than in listening to me.

One, two, three.

He kept counting.

Sixteen, seventeen… eighteen?

Good. He was busy.

I let him.

I did not need him to look at me.

I did not need him to understand.

Whether he heard a single word was no longer my responsibility.

So I spoke.

I said everything I had never been able to say without being interrupted, questioned, or pulled into another version of the story.

I told him what I had carried.

What it had cost me.

How long it had taken me to understand that I had been a child, and that I should never have been made responsible for an adult's choices.

He continued counting the tiles.

For once, I did not try to make him stop.

I was not speaking so he would finally understand me. I was speaking because I no longer wanted the words trapped inside me.

I did not soften them to make him comfortable.

I did not wait for his expression to change.

I did not search his face for proof that I had finally explained myself well enough.

He could misunderstand me.

He could deny everything.

He could continue counting forever.

None of it changed what I knew.

When there was nothing left to say, I looked at him.

“I forgive you.”

He did not answer.

And this time, I did not need him to.

Forgiving him did not mean that what happened was acceptable.

It did not mean I wanted to know him again.

It did not mean reconciliation, trust, or access to my life.

It meant I was done waiting for him to become someone who could give me closure.

I had spent years believing that peace was hidden somewhere inside him.

Inside an admission.

An apology.

A moment of understanding.

But if my peace depended on his participation, then part of my life would always remain under his control.

Whether he was listening or still counting the tiles was no longer my problem.

I did not forgive him back into my life.

I forgave him out of it.

For years, the thought of him had frightened me.

Now he was only a man sitting with his head down, counting tiles as though he needed to make sure one plus one still made two.

I stood.

He was still counting when I left him there.

Then I tried to forgive myself.

For staying. For explaining him to myself long after his behavior had stopped making sense. For every time I had doubted my own fear, minimized what happened, or left myself in order to keep the relationship alive.

None of those things had caused what he did. I knew that now. But some part of me had still been angry with the girl I had been, as though she should have understood then what had taken me years to understand.

So I forgave her.

Not for being abused.

For being human inside it.

For surviving with the understanding she had.

For taking as long as she needed to come back to herself.

When I opened my eyes, nothing dramatic happened. The room looked the same.

There was no sudden lightness, no music, no clear dividing line between the person I had been before the exercise and the person I became afterward.

But something had changed.

For the first time, I had finished the conversation without needing him to cooperate.

Not long afterward, he tried again.

Someone sent me screenshots of stories he had posted.

In one, he said something about me needing to flatten my stomach. Whatever he meant, it was a strange thing to say about a woman who was nine months pregnant.

In another, he said that I would never become a mother.

Before, words like that would have found their way inside me. I would have replayed them, searched for what

he meant, and felt the old need to defend myself. This time, I looked at the screenshots and felt almost nothing.

I waited for the panic.

The need to explain myself.

The urge to prove that he was wrong.

Nothing.

I thought about the square tiles.

Sixteen, seventeen… eighteen?

Hey Siri, play Mean by Taylor Swift.

That was how he looked to me now. Not powerful. Not frightening. Just someone saying cruel, irrational things from a reality I no longer had to enter.

He had found the old door.

He just no longer had the key.

That was when I understood that the exercise had changed more than a conversation inside my head.

His words had reached me again.

They simply could not take me with them.

At the retreat in Bali, they had called it *anicca*.

Impermanence.

Nothing remains exactly as it is forever.

Back then, I had understood it as a promise that pain would pass.

I had not understood that fear could pass too. That someone could continue repeating the same cruelty while its power over me disappeared.

He had not changed.

I had.

The messages from readers kept coming. Some told me they had finally left. Others had spoken to their families, sought professional help, or begun to believe that escape was possible. Their relief made me happier than I knew how to explain.

I had not rescued anyone. I had told the truth through something I loved, and they had used it to recognize the truth inside their own lives.

I had told the truth without receiving his permission.

I had forgiven him without receiving his apology.

Neither my truth nor my peace required his participation.

Forgiveness didn't change the past.

It only stopped it from taking up so much space in my life today.

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The Map They Asked For

The messages did not stop after Broken Strings came out.

But eventually, they began asking a different question.

How did you heal?

I never knew how to answer it in a direct message.

There had not been one moment when I woke up healed.

There was no single door I had walked through and closed behind me.

There had been therapy sessions, mistakes, difficult conversations, relationships that reflected old wounds, and small decisions that did not look important until I saw what they had changed.

There had been dozens of doors.

Some I opened deliberately.

Others I walked through without realizing where they would lead.

How was I supposed to fit all of that inside a message? Still, I tried.

One afternoon, Tyler and I were sitting in a café.

My pregnant stomach had grown so large that it seemed to enter every space before the rest of me. Tyler and I sat across from each other, talking between glances at our phones, surrounded by cups, conversations, and the ordinary movement of people going through their day.

At some point, he got up to play with Simon.

I stayed at the table and opened another reader's message.

She wanted to know how I had healed.

I began typing.

I wrote the smallest version of the answer I could manage. A few ideas that had helped me. A few changes in the way I understood myself.

It was nowhere near everything.

A moment later, she replied.

I never thought about it that way.

Then she sent another message.

Why don't you write a second book about the way you think now? I'm sure it could help many people.

I read it twice.

A second book?

Until recently, I had not even thought of myself as a writer again.

I had written *Broken Strings* because I needed to face the past. Publishing it had come later, after Tyler saw a purpose in the pages that I had not seen while writing them.

This was different.

A book about healing sounded dangerously close to telling other people how to live.

I did not have a universal formula.

I had not followed a perfect path.

Some of the lessons I learned came from therapy. Others came from making the same mistake enough times that I finally became tired of its ending.

I did not feel qualified to give anyone a map.

But perhaps that was not what she was asking for.

Maybe she was asking me to describe the road I had taken so she could recognize some of the landmarks on her own.

While I was still staring at her message, a tissue blew off the table.

I leaned down to pick it up.

There were words printed on it.

Be the change you want to see in the world.

Beneath the quote, the café had printed the name Gandhi.

I sat back up with the tissue in my hand.

Oh.

The timing felt almost too perfect.

The words did not give me an idea I had never considered. They made me pay attention to one that had just been placed in front of me.

A reader was asking me to write again. Not only about what had happened to me. About what had helped me return to myself afterward.

I looked over at Tyler playing with Simon, then back at the message on my phone.

Maybe a personal answer did not have to be universal to be worth sharing.

I did not have to tell anyone, This is how you heal.

I could say, This is what helped me.

That felt honest.

The title came later.

Do You Like What You See?

At first, it sounded like a question about a mirror.

But the mirror was only one place where I had misunderstood what I was looking at.

The question belonged everywhere.

In the people I chose.

In the treatment I accepted.

In the future I believed was available to me.

In the person I saw when I looked inward.

Was I seeing what was actually there?

Or what the past had trained me to find?

For years, fear had arrived so quickly that I mistook it for intuition. Guilt had felt like responsibility. Self-abandonment had felt like kindness. I had searched other people's faces for instructions, then searched myself for the reason whenever something went wrong.

Healing had not erased those instincts.

It had given me enough space to notice them.

Enough time to pause before an old belief became a new decision.

Enough distance to ask whether the danger belonged to the moment in front of me or to something that had happened long before.

That was the map I could offer.

Not a way out that would work for everyone.

Only the places where I had once become lost, and the things that had helped me find my direction again.

Years earlier, a psychologist had asked me what I used to enjoy.

I had searched for an answer as though he were asking about someone else.

“Writing,” I finally said. “I used to love writing.”

Used to.

At the time, I had not realized how much grief could fit inside two words.

Now I woke up wanting to return to the pages. Sentences followed me into the shower, into meals, and into the moments before sleep. Writing no longer felt like another thing people needed from me.

It felt like play.

It felt like mine.

The first book had helped me face the story I had tried to erase. The second would gather the things that had helped me live differently afterward.

Somewhere between them, writing had returned too. Not as proof that I was talented.

Not as another way to be useful.

As a place where I could remain with myself long enough to hear what I actually thought.

Long before that first therapy appointment, I had stood in front of a camera and repeated the same line until we captured a version that looked convincing.

“I’m worth it.”

The camera had moved on before I believed the words.

Now there was no camera.

No one waiting for the right expression.

No one asking me to perform the answer.

Only a blank page.

I placed my hands on the keyboard and typed the title.

Do You Like What You See?

The cursor blinked after the question mark.

I did not know whether I would always like what I saw. Healing had not turned me into someone who never doubted herself, never became afraid, or never heard the old stories again.

It had only taught me not to believe every story immediately.

And, perhaps more importantly, not to leave myself each time one appeared.

For years, I had imagined that returning to myself would mean finding the girl I had been before anything happened to her.

Now I understood.

I did not need to become her again.

I only needed to stop abandoning her.

I began.

One More Thing

I created a small collection of companion journals and workbooks to help you continue this journey beyond the final page.

Scan the QR code or tap here to access the companion journals and workbooks.

bit.ly/4fqHfBv



A Little Note to You

If you made it this far, thank you.

Thank you for staying with me through the memories, the questions, the anger, the confusion, and all the parts of myself I spent years trying not to see.

I began writing this book because I wanted to understand how I became the person I was. Somewhere along the way, I realized that understanding the past is not the same as living inside it. What happened to us may explain parts of who we became, but it does not have to decide who we remain.

Healing can look like finding your voice, leaving, setting a boundary, choosing yourself, or offering compassion to the younger version of you who did the best she could. Sometimes, it looks like forgiveness. Not the kind that erases what happened or asks you to trust again, but the kind that allows you to stop carrying it everywhere.

You are allowed to be angry. You are allowed to grieve. You are allowed to protect yourself. Nothing has to happen before you are ready.

I hope this book reminded you that you are not only the things that happened to you. You are also every truth you faced, every boundary you drew, and every part of yourself you slowly brought home.

Thank you for making it this far.

I love you.
Aurélie