

# **Dark Horse**

The Diary of Emily Pratt  
Slatin

Nonfiction / Diary / LGBTQ+ / Lesbian /  
Intersex / Memoir

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*I am a woman defined by paradoxes that don't cancel each other out but sharpen one another. I am both storm and silence—capable of being the one who takes command in the chaos, yet also the one who retreats into stillness, because I know silence itself can be both weapon and refuge. For me, silence has always been protection, but also a reminder of betrayal—and that duality says everything. I don't sugarcoat survival. I catalogue it. I hold it up to the light, study its fractures, and still manage to keep moving.*

*At my core, I am an outsider-poet. Not in the romanticized sense of standing on the fringes to look “edgy,” but because my very existence has always been outside of what society wanted me to be. I was born intersex, and rather than bend myself into something palatable, I have lived my truth in ways that have cost me friends, family, belonging, and comfort. That loss became formative. It turned me into someone who doesn't tolerate bullshit, who has no patience for shallow explanations, and who rebels against conformity at every turn. Yet, for all that rebellion, I am not reckless. I am deliberate. Every word I write is intentional, every story I tell is layered, every silence I allow is chosen.*

*My personality is fire-forged. A lifetime of grit and grind—firefighting, EMS, carrying the dead, saving the living, training others to face horrors I had already faced—made me into someone who knows the price of endurance. But endurance for me isn't the same as resilience for others. For me, survival has teeth. It's not the warm, congratulatory kind people like to celebrate. It's brutal, it scars, it leaves me with ghosts. And yet—I carry those ghosts not like burdens but like witnesses. They don't break me; they shape me.*

*I have tenderness, but it is always braided with ache. Never soft for the sake of softness. I don't live or write as if the world is gentle, but I know beauty is still real even when it hurts. For me, grief is not only pain—it's*

*mercy. It's the strange companion that wounds and comforts in the same breath. Grief lives in my core, tearing me apart even as it tries to shield me. That contradiction—that both can be true, that both can coexist—is one of the defining qualities of my life. I don't need closure; I would rather live inside the haunting, because haunting is real.*

*My confidence is layered the way my writing is layered. Outwardly, I am unflinching. People see me as unstoppable, commanding, someone who always stands tall no matter the wreckage. But beneath that, there is a small crack in my armor—a place where doubt seeps in, where betrayal cuts deepest. I hide that well, except from Amelia. That truth matters: despite my walls, my command presence, and my rebellion, I chose to be vulnerable with one person. It means I am not incapable of trust—I am just ruthlessly particular about who earns it.*

*I am profoundly intelligent—documented IQ aside, my intelligence is lived. It shows in the way I weave history, etymology, trauma, and emotional nuance into the same paragraph. I don't live in abstractions. I take the abstract and translate it into something visceral. I don't just say I hurt—I describe the screen door slamming at my grandparents' farm. I don't just say I loved—I tell you about the girl I took to prom, the dog who sat shotgun in my rusted Honda, the exact track number of the Indigo Girls CD that kept me alive. My personality thrives in those details, in that blend of grit and poetry.*

*I am fiercely queer, unapologetically lesbian, and protective of that truth. I don't soften it, I don't dilute it, I don't perform it for anyone's comfort. My queerness isn't just orientation—it's the lens through which I understand freedom, rebellion, intimacy, and even grief. It's in my “fuck you, I won't do what you tell me” energy, my refusal to be defined by other people's categories,*

*my insistence on writing my story as a lesbian woman without apology.*

*At the same time, I am an earth-bound person. Landscapes live in my mind like silhouettes in dreams. I don't just see the world—I see it as terrain, weather, rock, water, and sky. My soul is drawn to elemental things—pines, rivers, wind, dragonflies, the night sky. They are not symbols to me—they are anchors. They are the language my heart uses when words aren't enough. They are the backdrop for every diary entry, every confession, every story I tell around the metaphorical campfire.*

*Above all, I am a storyteller. Not in the sense of constructing plots, but as someone who narrates to survive. My diary entries, my confessions, my quotes—these are how I keep myself intact. I don't write to escape reality—I write to face it, to press my hands against its sharp edges, to keep from disappearing into silence. That is who I am: I turn pain into language, language into memory, memory into proof. Proof that I was here. Proof that I survived. Proof that my voice cannot be silenced.*

*If I had to compress all this into one truth, it would be this: I am a storm-forged outsider-poet whose life is equal parts grit and ghost, a woman who survives by telling the truth even when it hurts, and who finds beauty not in perfection, but in the haunting ache of what remains.*

To Amelia—

You are the human embodiment of the  
myth I tried to create.



***This Page Isn't Yours. It's Mine.***

I came out as a lesbian online in 1996. I was sixteen years old, living in Stamford, New York—population 1,411. In a town that size, secrets don't stay quiet. Everyone knew. No one asked. They already knew me as a girl named Emily. Everyone did—except for my father.

When he found out, he threw me out with \$800, a beat-up 1991 Honda station wagon, and a single trunk packed with everything I owned. My only safety net was a summer job washing dishes at the same camp I'd attended for years as a child. That was the day I stopped waiting to be rescued. That was the day I

became the girl who knew—if anyone was going to do the saving, it would have to be her.

What follows are my diary entries, just as I wrote them on RescueGirl557.com. I didn't edit for neatness, theme, or aesthetic. They're raw. They're uneven. They're real. This is how I survived. This is what it looked like. And if you find pieces of yourself in these words, I hope you realize you're not alone—and that your myth is still unfolding.

Some loves anchor you. Others vanish like breath on glass—seen only for a moment before they fade. She was smoke. I loved her like a wish I whispered into the dark, already knowing it would never echo back. And maybe that's what made it sacred: a love that never needed permission to exist. The kind you carry like a letter you'll never send. The kind you keep writing, even when you already know the ending. I've had more names than most people have excuses.

Some were forced on me. Some were shouted across firegrounds or stitched onto uniforms. Some showed up on academy rosters, trauma logs, or state records—paper trails telling a

version of the story that never fit. But paper lies. Or worse—it hides.

Here's the truth.

I was born female. That's what my birth certificate and hospital records said. XX chromosomes. No ambiguity in the genetics. No ambiguity in the result. My body developed female, on its own. No hormone therapy. No surgery. No reassignment. Just biology, doing its own rare thing. I didn't correct it. I didn't alter it. I just lived in it.

At sixteen when my medical file was finally presented to me, the doctors stared in confusion—because I was thrilled. A genetically female teenager with male genitalia, grinning ear to ear, not in shame, but in *recognition*. They couldn't understand how I could claim it all as part of my womanhood. But I never needed their understanding. My body was mine, and I was always her.

But my father—who never accepted me, not once in my life—gave me a boy's name anyway. Out of bitterness. Out of denial. Out of his inability to see the daughter standing right in front of him. That name stalked me like a scar. It showed up in hospital forms, was stitched

onto gear tags, repeated by people who should've known better. But everyone else—everyone who actually knew me—called me Emily. Because that's who I've always been.

Before the paperwork caught up, I used to sign everything *Dark Horse*. On folders. On the backs of photographs. Inside the covers of books. It wasn't a nickname—it was a survival flare. A whispered middle finger to a world that didn't know how to say what I was out loud. The people who mattered understood. The rest never would.

I was eight when the doctors first offered to fix me. There was nothing broken. I had long brown hair and a shy smile I only wore when I felt safe. I was already known as a girl named *Emily* to everyone. I didn't need convincing. But in that sterile office under fluorescent lights, the doctors said I should consider surgery—"cosmetic," they called it. To make me look more like the other girls.

But I *was* a girl. Everyone saw it. Everyone treated me like one. Everyone but my father. And now, the medical world was doing what he couldn't—carving his denial into me, one incision at a time.



They used words like *appearance* and *normalization*—as if I needed to be brought in line with something that wasn't me. As if my anatomy, exactly as it was, somehow disqualified me from my own gender.

They smiled. They reassured. They used pamphlets with cartoon girls and promised me that afterward, I'd look "right." I nodded because I thought that's what I was supposed to do. I was eight. I didn't understand I was being sold something.

The surgery wasn't for function. It wasn't to correct something that caused me pain or distress. It was for *passing*. It was for their comfort. It was to erase the part of me they didn't want to see. And I let them—because I was a child, and no one told me I was allowed to say no.

They didn't ask if I liked my body. They didn't ask if I felt wrong. They just offered a fix and expected me to be grateful. And I've carried that silence ever since.

I was born with a penis. A small one. A penis that barely developed through a natural female

puberty. It works. I can feel pleasure. I can function sexually. But I was born sterile. Completely and irreversibly. To me, it's always felt more like a large clitoris than anything else. It never challenged my womanhood. It's just part of the body I was born with. And it always made perfect sense to me—more than it ever made to them.

I have ovotestis—right against the pubic bone. Small. Undeveloped. Palpable if you know what you're feeling for. My scrotum never formed. It's flat. Smooth. Anatomically “ambiguous,” they called it. But it never confused me. Only them.

They ran the tests. Ultrasounds. Chromosomal karyotyping. Hormone panels. Imaging. Every single one said the same thing: female.

No Y chromosome. No male internal structures. Slight uterine tissue. No vaginal canal. But no confusion in the outcome—female body, rare form. All natural. No modification. No transition. Just me. What baffled them most was how I wasn't confused. But that was their failure, not mine.

I didn't transition—I *corrected the record*. I didn't reinvent myself—I *stopped apologizing*. I didn't "find myself"—*I've been right here the entire goddamn time*.

I showed up for every fire, every overdose, every suicide attempt. I climbed ladders, cut people out of wreckage, taught trauma medicine to men twice my size. I kept people alive even when I was hanging on by a thread. And when the shift ended, I came home, pulled on my flannel, and sat comfortably in the skin that always belonged to me.

As for the name my father forced on me? I buried it. Quietly. No eulogy. No stone. It was never mine. It saw too much. It carried too much. It nearly drowned me. Now it's *Emily*. Because it always was.

And this page? This page isn't a preface. It isn't a soft entry point. It's not a sentimental easing-in before the story tears itself wide open.

This page is a reckoning. A declaration. A name tag stitched into a flannel shirt that fits better than any uniform ever did. I'm not asking for permission. I don't need your approval. Despite having male-looking genitalia, I have always

identified—and still identify—as female.  
Entirely. Unquestionably. Irrevocably. That is  
not in conflict with my body. That is how I live  
inside it. I'm just letting you know—*Dark  
Horse signs her fucking work now.*

—Emily Pratt Slatin

***December 14, 2024—Stamford,  
New York (Mom's House)***

*“Every sentence I write drags me closer to  
truth.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

It's nearly 4 AM, and the house is unbearably quiet. I'm here alone, surrounded by the same walls that stood witness to a childhood I've tried so hard to forget. My father bought this house, but it was never a home—it was his domain, his kingdom of control. He's been gone for many years now, but the weight of his presence still clings to every corner.

My mother never stood up to him, never shielded me from his anger or his fists. She wasn't cruel, not in the way he was, but her indifference cut just as deep. When I needed her, she turned away. When I cried out for help, she told me to stop being so dramatic. Now, she's confined to the sterile halls of a nursing home, lost in a fog of age and time. Part of me wants to forgive her, but the rest of me wonders if she even wants or deserves my forgiveness.

I didn't come here to stir up old memories, but the house seems to have a way of pulling them to the surface, whether I'm ready or not. Tonight, I found an old photograph of myself in my father's desk, along with a lot of old medical reports from doctors, dating back to the months following my birth. I don't know why I opened it—maybe I was looking for some kind of connection, perhaps a bit of closure, or at the very least, something to explain the tangled mess of emotions I can't seem to unravel.

In the photo, I'm eleven years old. My long brown hair tumbles down past my shoulders, framing a face I barely recognize. I'm smiling, but it's the kind of smile a child wears when she knows she's being watched. I can see it now—the tightness in my jaw, the wariness in my eyes, as I'm standing in front of my parents house. Even then, I was bracing for something, though I didn't know what.

That was the last year I was allowed to look like myself. The next year, my parents decided I wasn't who I was supposed to be. My father hated that I was soft, hated the way I carried myself with a feminine gentleness he despised. My mother didn't argue when he decided it was time for me to be fixed. Cured of my female

affliction, as he used to call it. They cut my hair, stripped me of my identity, and found a doctor who would inject testosterone into my then eleven-year-old body.

I stare at the photo now, trying to find the girl I used to be. She looks so distant, like a stranger I might pass on the street and never think of again. But she's not a stranger—she's me. Or she was. Before they forced her into hiding. Before they tried to erase her.

It's strange to mourn someone who isn't dead. The girl in the picture is still alive, and well. I've spent years trying to rebuild myself from the fragments they left behind, but some pieces are missing, perhaps lost to time, or buried too deep to find.

I wonder what she would say to me now, if she could see who I've become. Would she be proud that I survived? Or would she grieve for the parts of us that were taken away? I want to tell her I'm sorry—that I fought as hard as I could, even when it felt like there was no fight left in me.

The clock ticks on, each second pulling me closer to morning. The sky outside is starting to

lighten, but I don't feel ready to face the day.  
For now, I'll stay here, holding this photograph  
of the girl I once was, and the woman I will  
continue to be.



## ***December 21, 2024—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)***

*“Vermont skies strip you bare and dare you to  
keep standing.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

Life rarely follows a script. I map out my plans, draft my intentions, and envision the endings I want, yet somehow, the story I’m living seems to always take creative liberties with the plot. Unexpected twists, moments of sheer beauty, and the occasional heartbreak scatter themselves across the pages, often leaving me wondering who’s holding the pen.

I think about this often—what if I could rewrite the ending of a chapter in my life? One that feels incomplete or concluded in a way that didn’t sit quite right with my heart. What would I do differently? Would I turn heartbreak into a love story? Rewrite a goodbye into a hello? Or maybe, instead of longing for a different outcome, I’d let the chapter stay as it is and embrace the lessons it taught me.

There are moments in my life I wish had gone differently—decisions I replay in my mind, imagining alternate outcomes. But the truth is,

I know the endings that matter most are the ones I haven't lived yet. Those are the ones I still have the power to create.

I've come to realize that every single day is a chance to begin a new page. I'm learning to sit with uncertainty, to let go of the need for everything to be planned. I must trust that my story is mine to shape. Life throws its fair share of surprises my way, but even then, I get to decide how I'll respond, how I'll feel, and what meaning I'll take from it. No matter what, I want my story to reflect the love, resilience, passion, and joy that comes from knowing I'm living as my truest self.

I'm writing my own ending. If something feels unresolved, I'm writing the closure I deserve. If I've left a dream gathering dust, I'm bringing it back to life. And when I look in the mirror, I want to see the person I've always aspired to be—not someone waiting for the perfect moment, but someone who chose to begin again.

Right now, I'm at a crossroads, aware that I need to start making decisions about what I truly want—decisions that will shape the first day of the rest of my life. It's daunting, and I know I'm not ready.

Perhaps, readiness isn't something that arrives fully formed. Maybe it's less about feeling perfectly prepared and more about having the courage to take the first step, even when you're not sure of the outcome. But admitting that I'm not ready feels significant, too—it's an acknowledgment of where I am, and it gives me space to reflect, without pressuring myself to rush into answers.

I have choices to make and paths to explore, yet also I realize that uncertainty doesn't mean failure. It means I'm still growing, still learning, and still trying to define what truly matters to me. It's okay to not have it all figured out right now. Life is messy, so, sometimes the first decision is simply to give myself permission to not be ready—but to keep moving forward anyway.

## ***December 26, 2024—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)***

*“My photographs are promises to myself not  
to forget.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

There’s an unshakable nostalgia in chasing after a feeling you can never quite reclaim—a bittersweet longing for a moment, a sensation, or a state of mind that’s slipped through your fingers, leaving behind only the faintest traces of its existence. It is both a blessing and a curse of human nature to yearn for what once was, to revisit it in memory, and to wish, futilely, for its return.

When I think about the feelings I’ve chased, it isn’t the monumental events that call to me but the quiet, unassuming ones. The warmth of a summer afternoon when the world felt infinite. The way the air smelled during a thunderstorm in my childhood, when I didn’t yet know the weight of responsibility or heartbreak. The inexplicable excitement of the first time I accomplished something I didn’t think I could. These feelings are ephemeral, fragile things—unbidden and fleeting in their arrival, slipping

away before we even realize how much we'll miss them.

And so, we chase. We run after these ghosts, hoping that if we replicate the circumstances just so, we'll catch the tail of that emotion once more. Sometimes it's a place we revisit, believing that geography holds the key to our hearts. Other times it's a person, a song, a scent, or an experience we try to recreate, hoping to summon the magic that once lived there. But no matter how hard we try, something is always missing.

What's cruel about this pursuit is how it tricks us into believing it's achievable. We convince ourselves that if we just keep going—keep trying, keep searching—we'll eventually find it. What we fail to grasp is that the feeling we seek is not just a product of the moment, but of who we were when we first felt it. And therein lies the catch: we are no longer the same.

Time changes us, whether we like it or not. The innocence of a child marveling at fireflies on a warm summer night cannot be recaptured by an adult who knows too much of the world's harshness. The thrill of a first kiss is dulled by the knowledge of all the heartbreaks that

follow. Even happiness feels different after you've known deep sorrow—it's tempered, quieter, and more cautious.

But is this hopeless? Perhaps not. I've come to believe that chasing old feelings isn't entirely futile. While you may never get back exactly what you lost, the pursuit itself is meaningful. In retracing your steps, you learn to appreciate the moments as they were, instead of what you wish they could be. The act of remembering becomes an art—a mosaic of fragmented but beautiful pieces.

Sometimes, you even stumble upon new feelings. In the same way that no two sunsets are identical, no two moments in life can ever be the same. You may never relive the exact joy of childhood wonder, but you can find a different kind of joy in seeing it through someone else's eyes. Even if you never feel the exhilaration of a first kiss again, but you can savor the quiet intimacy of a love that endures.

I often wonder if part of our relentless pursuit is rooted in fear—fear that the best of life is behind us, that the most profound feelings have already been felt. But if there's one thing I've learned, it's that life has an extraordinary

way of surprising us. Just when we think we've felt it all, something new stirs our hearts—a moment of unexpected beauty, a connection that deepens beyond measure, a small but significant shift in perspective.

So, chase the feeling if you must. But know that you're not chasing something that's lost—you're chasing the memory of who you were. That person, like the feeling, exists only in the past. Instead, live more fully in the present. Feel deeply, love fiercely, and embrace the fleeting nature of the emotions that make life worth living. Perhaps the beauty lies not in getting the feeling back, but in allowing it to move you forward.

## ***January 3, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)***

*“Oblivion takes the records, not the legacy.”—  
Emily Pratt Slatin*

New Year’s Day 2025 came and went, much like the turning of any other calendar page. For most, it was a time of reflection and anticipation—a chance to dream up resolutions, set lofty goals, and marvel at the blank slate of possibility that a new year promises. Friends and strangers alike often speak of fitness plans, career advancements, and personal reinventions. The air buzzed with hope for the future. Yet for me, 2025 marked the end of an era.

On January 1, 2025, a quiet erasure began. The records, milestones, and triumphs of my career, carefully chronicled over decades, passed into obscurity. For years, I had known this day would come. Professional records are, after all, ephemeral. They are kept for so long as they are deemed necessary by systems and administrative governmental policies, then shelved, purged, or lost into oblivion. Still, knowing this inevitability did little to soften the



sting of realizing that the proof of my career had all but disappeared.

As the clock struck midnight and the world celebrated the dawn of a new year, I found myself steeped in a bittersweet reverie. My career was more than a list of certifications, or a collection of performance reviews. It was a lifetime of experiences—moments of triumph, and heartbreak, acts of service and resilience, of bravery and loss. I had fought fires, saved lives, and eventually trained others to do the same. My hands bore the scars of the work, and my heart carried the weight of memories that would never find a line in a ledger or a place in an official archive.

The knowledge that the tangible evidence of my work had been swept away after just five years of retirement left me questioning how much of what we do truly endures. Our society places such emphasis on records, accolades, and measurable accomplishments, yet the most meaningful aspects of a career—the human connections, the lessons learned, the quiet impacts—are often intangible. They cannot be cataloged or preserved, but they linger in ways that records cannot. All that's left are the faces

and the names of those I worked with, regarded as family, and lost along the way.

For the past few days, I mourned the loss. Not because I needed the validation of my past—I have long been at peace with the work I’ve done, and the life I’ve led—but because those records felt like a tether to a part of myself that I’ve held so dear. My career is now reduced to bragging rights from another lifetime, or perhaps some forgotten dream. Yet at the same time, I’m constantly questioning whether or not I’m deserving of them. I’m left wondering who I even was back then, and perhaps more importantly, how these experiences have made me the person that I am today. The era of my public safety career suddenly seemed to slip further away, into permanent obscurity perhaps, as though it might have belonged to someone else entirely.

But as I sat with these thoughts, I realized something profound: while the records may have faded, the impact remains. My career lives on in the people I’ve helped, the lives I’ve touched, and the lessons I’ve passed on. The weight of my efforts is carried forward in ways I will never fully see but can take comfort in knowing exist.

So, as the world around me embraced the promises of 2025, I allowed myself to let go. Letting go of the records did not mean letting go of the memories, the growth, or the essence of who I became through that chapter of my life. Instead, it meant stepping into this new year with the same courage and purpose that defined my past, ready to write the next chapter without the need for validation from the archives of yesterday.

I took solace in my own personal journey of letting go—my life is so much more than paper trails, memories and life lessons are felt, lived, and remembered—not just by us but by the world we’ve left our marks upon. The records may vanish, but the legacy endures. Here’s to a new year, and to the stories still yet to be written.

**January 9, 2025—New York City  
(Childhood Home, 11 Bank  
Street)**

*“The streets I grew up on were harsher critics  
than any professor.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

As I stand on the cusp of selling my childhood home in New York City, I find myself thinking a lot about growing up in Greenwich Village in the 1980s. The sights, sounds, and even the smells of the neighborhood are etched into my memory. Those cobblestone streets, the street performers in Washington Square Park, and the corner delis where the scent of fresh bagels.

For me, it was the perfect place to grow up, even if it wasn't exactly perfect by conventional standards. It taught me resilience, gave me a front-row seat to humanity in all its forms, and provided me with enough stories to fill a lifetime of notebooks. It was a place that shaped who I am and fueled my love for storytelling.

But not everyone appreciated the experiences I brought to the table. Take, for instance, my college English professor from sophomore year

—a man whose name I won't mention but whose arrogance has lingered in my memory like an uninvited guest at a dinner party. He was born and raised in West Virginia, and had never set foot outside his home state. Despite his limited geography, he seemed entirely convinced that he knew more about New York City than I did.

The moment that really stuck with me happened when I submitted a paper about my experiences growing up in the Village. When I got my paper back, the grade wasn't what stunned me—it was his comments. He had scribbled some dismissive remarks about how my romanticized view of the city lacked credibility. He even suggested that my writing felt unrealistic, which was rich considering the man had never been to New York City and was basing his understanding of it on movies and TV shows.

I approached my professor after class and in a particularly haughty tone during one of our conversations, he told me, "You'll never make it as a writer."

According to him, I was doomed because I had an impeccable work ethic, didn't smoke, didn't

drink, and refused to adopt the stereotype of the brooding artist who stumbles into class late wearing a leather jacket.

At the time, his words stung, but not in the way he probably intended. They didn't shake my confidence so much as they left me baffled. Why was he so fixated on this clichéd vision of what a writer should be? Did I really have to destroy my liver, adopt a nicotine habit, and invest in a leather jacket to be taken seriously?

Fast-forward to today, and I think it's safe to say he was wrong. I've spent years building a career as a writer. I never needed anyone's approval to validate my path. My work ethic, my dedication, and aversion to tobacco and alcohol have gotten me farther than his judgment ever could.

Reflecting on my childhood home and those formative years in the Village, I realize just how much those experiences shaped my storytelling. Life is gritty, messy, complex, and often full of unexpected twists and turns, and so is writing. Authenticity doesn't come from fitting into someone else's mold—it comes from living your truth and putting it into words.

So, as I prepare to say goodbye to the house where it all began, I do so with gratitude—for the city that shaped me, for the doubters who pushed me to prove them wrong, and for the life I've built on my own terms. Sorry, Professor, but I think I've done just fine without the cigarettes, the booze, or the leather jacket. And if you're reading this, let me remind you of something you clearly didn't understand: the best writers don't just write about life—they live it.

**January 12, 2025—New York City  
(Childhood Home, 11 Bank  
Street)**

*“I’ve carried victories in one hand and  
loneliness in the other.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

Dreams are like distant stars, shimmering in a vast expanse of possibility. For me, achieving my dreams was a journey of relentless pursuit, guided by an unyielding belief in myself and the life I envisioned. Yet, I never anticipated the cost of this pursuit—my family, my friends, my work connections, and the sense of belonging I once took for granted.

Achieving my dreams has been an uphill climb—a path paved with grit, determination, and limited alternatives, where success was the only viable option. Yet, that same road has left me standing alone, with only memories of the people I once knew.

From an early age, I knew I was different. My aspirations didn’t align with the conventional paths laid out before me. While others sought security in familiar routines and predictable outcomes, I felt a pull toward something



extraordinary, undefined yet deeply personal. I dreamed of crafting a life that reflected who I am—a polymath, a creative, a hero, and above all else, a free spirit who was curiously uninhibited by societal expectations.

The road to my dreams wasn't paved with support or understanding. Instead, it was fraught with skepticism, judgment, and oftentimes outright rejection. As I poured myself into mastering photography, writing, firefighting, and teaching, I found that my growth often created a chasm between myself and those around me. While I expanded my horizons, others seemed to view my evolution as a betrayal of the shared past we once knew.

Success requires sacrifices—some obvious, others hidden. I expected sleepless nights, long hours, and the occasional stumble. What I didn't expect was how my pursuit of purpose would clash with the comfort zones of those around me. I wanted more than what was familiar or expected. And for many, that was unsettling.

As I grew, I began to notice the quiet withdrawal of friends who couldn't—or wouldn't—understand the choices I was

making. Some drifted away because my priorities no longer aligned with theirs. Others outright distanced themselves, intimidated by my determination or frustrated that I no longer fit into the mold they once tried to place me in.

I remember each time friendships quietly dissolved, not with dramatic confrontations but with a gradual fading into silence. Calls go unanswered, invitations to social gatherings or hang outs stop coming, and the shared laughter of yesterday becomes a distant echo. Some can't understand my relentless drive, while others perhaps felt left behind or overshadowed by my achievements. The very things that made me feel alive and true to myself became barriers to connection.

Losing people I once cared about was a pain I carried silently. My best friend, Matt was the first one to suddenly leave my life sometime in 2002, followed by a slow erosion of friendships over the years to come. It's not easy to admit that success can feel hollow without those who once celebrated your wins and consoled you in your losses. There are nights when I question whether the sacrifices were worth it, whether

dreams alone can ever replace the warmth of shared memories and the comfort of belonging.

But eventually, I discovered the resilience to stand alone, the courage to keep going even when the road was lonely. Achieving my dreams taught me that the most authentic relationships are those that embrace your evolution, not resist it. I learned to value quality over quantity, to cherish the rare connections that endure not because of proximity or convenience but because of a deep, mutual understanding.

This morning, as the soothing melody of *Mandolin Rain* by Bruce Hornsby filled the room, I found myself transported back to my boarding school days. I remembered the quiet moments in my dormitory, staring out the window or lost in my own thoughts, with the song playing softly on the radio. It struck me how deeply nostalgia can weave its way into our lives, and not always as a reflection of joy, but often as a bittersweet longing for something more—moments we wish we could rewrite or relive.

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

On February 1, 2025 at 6:43 PM, Amelia sent  
me a text message...

*I've spent four years drowning myself in  
reverie, fantasy, and artifice. But right now, I  
need to focus on reality. I have discovered a  
girl out of time, a Bohemian free spirit meant  
for a New York forty years ago. She is trying  
to reach the top just to see if she can do it, and  
raise others up along with her. She is exactly  
who I always aspired to be. But I reached for  
the sun, and came crashing down to earth.  
And an angel came and plucked me from the  
ditch, and held me tight until she saw my  
heart wandering. Only to find the right spark  
at the right time. And soon as I admitted I  
needed to move on, she was ready to give me a  
parachute and pay forward the amazing  
opportunity that she gave me. She never has to  
worry again about being alone. She will never  
be alone again. I don't deserve such kindness.  
But she does.*

*What you have given me is something that  
MUST be paid forward. And there is no one  
more deserving. I know you can't see it  
yourself, but i do. And I've NEVER been*

*wrong. My ex girlfriend was just the best I could do at the time. But I NEVER settled for you. YOU ARE AMAZING!!! But now, my time has come. I am a Phoenix, and I must fly free, and save the world along with the greatest fucking woman that was ever born on this earth.*

*The new moon has Jupiter burning bright right next to her. This is meant to be. This week I am going to make her an offer she can't refuse.*

***February 8, 2025—Stamford,  
New York (Mom’s House)***

*“Unstoppable isn’t what I do; it’s who I am.”—  
Emily Pratt Slatin*

I’m not built for mediocrity; anything less than my personal best is unacceptable. If something is worth doing, then it deserves my full force, my entire intellect, and my unwavering focus. I don’t fear obsession; I embrace it. I understand that greatness often requires extremes, and that mastery often demands an almost unreasonable level of dedication. I don’t just break the mold, I reject the very idea that it should even exist. Most people follow the prescribed path—school, college, career—because people are told that it’s the only way. The power of speak is only effective when the prey is weak. My strength allowed me to see it for what it was: a system that is designed to create workers, not thinkers. I never needed a piece of paper to validate what I already knew—that I was built for something greater. My ability to learn, and adapt was far and beyond what any institution could provide. I mastered multiple fields, thrived where others faltered, and built a life on my terms. I proved the

system wrong, carved my own path, and ended up leagues ahead of those who followed the rules. Success, for me, was never about checking boxes. It was about being unstoppable. And I am. From the moment I entered this world, I've been running full-throttle, relentless, and never settling for anything less than everything. While others were content with mediocrity, I was already pushing limits, testing boundaries, and proving that rules were nothing more than suggestions—suggestions that never applied to me, and never will. I don't slow down, I don't ask for permission, and I sure as hell refuse to ask for approval. People have tried to tame me, contain me, and control me. My family rejected me, yet I am relentless, and entirely unapologetic. The world doesn't decide if it's ready for me—I'm coming full-throttle, unrestrained, and unstoppable as ever.

***February 10, 2025—Stamford,  
New York (Mom’s House)***

*“In the end, we are all ghosts haunting  
someone else’s story.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

There are ghosts among us—not the ghosts often rooted in folklore, nor the ones one would expect to haunt and linger in old house, but the ones we often create through our own existence. We carry them only in quiet moments, such as the way a song that we haven’t heard in awhile gives us pause just long enough to conjure up nostalgia. Some ghosts are the people we have lost, though some are the versions of ourselves we have left behind.

I have lived long enough to know that ghosts do not always haunt us in the way we expect. Sometimes, they arrive softly, while other times, they crash into us like an unexpected wave, dragging us under before we even have time to catch our breath. They are found in unsent letters, in emails and text messages that were never deleted, or in the way certain places feel too emotionally heavy to revisit because of the memories we often attribute to them.



And then, there are the ghosts we become.

We have all been ghosts in someone's story, it's a facet of life that is inevitable. People change, they drift apart; while some ghosting is intentional, it is far more often caused by circumstances beyond our control. Sometimes, it happens so slowly that we barely notice, until we realize it has been years since the last conversation. Other times, it happens all at once—an unspoken decision, a necessary goodbye, or a sigh of relief after letting go of something we held onto for too long. Perhaps we are still haunting an old friend, a lost love, a family member who never understood why we left. Perhaps they still see us in the details of their everyday life, even if they would never say so out loud.

I think about the version of myself that existed at eight, sixteen, at twenty-six, and at forty. A woman who was born to a demanding father who was incapable of seeing her for who she was. Her ghost still lingers in places I seldom think about, and no longer visit. I have written over her in so many ways, but she is still there, a ghost watching from the corners of my memory. I wonder if she would recognize me now, but I am certain she would approve.

The ghosts we carry, and the ghosts we become are not always burdens. Sometimes, they are reminders of love, of lessons learned, of a life that was lived fully, even if it did not always feel that way in the moment.

There are no exorcisms for memory. No rituals that erase the past. And maybe that's a good thing. Maybe the weight of the ghosts we carry is what makes us who we are.

**February 14, 2025, 6:57 AM—  
Middletown Springs, Vermont  
(Home)**

*“Every dawn asks the same question: will we  
choose kindness, or convenience?”—Emily  
Pratt Slatin*

It’s a peculiarly early Sunday morning for me, the world outside still shrouded in the quiet darkness of the pre-dawn hours. As I sit here still in bed, a thought lingers in my mind: the more things change, the more they stay the same.

This phrase echoes through the generations, each one pointing fingers at the one before, blaming them for the world’s woes. But really, aren’t we all just a continuation of a cycle, a pattern as old as time itself? Our current chapter, the Information Age, has us enthralled with numbers and statistics. Our worth, once measured in character and deeds, is now quantified in likes, followers, and digital validations. These arbitrary numbers are a strange new currency of self-esteem, where our social interactions are distilled into metrics,

becoming a scoreboard for something as intangible as human connection.

In today's world, we seem to be irresistibly drawn towards a binary system, a sort of black-and-white worldview where there's little room for the gray. Anything that deviates slightly from the norm, any idea or person that dares to tread a different path, is quickly labeled as an outlier, something to be wary of. It's a disturbing trend, this fear of the unorthodox, as it stifles creativity and diversity, elements so crucial to the growth of society. We're quick to judge, to shun, to label anything remotely different as suspect, and in doing so, we close the doors to understanding and empathy.

This tendency to polarize extends into our fascination with celebrities and political figures. We elevate them to near-divine status, worshiping them as if they're infallible gods, not humans with flaws and complexities. In our eyes, these figures become larger than life, and we often forget that they, too, are susceptible to mistakes and misjudgments. This idolization blinds us to their humanity, creating a dangerous illusion that they are beyond reproach or criticism, and we dismiss any

notion of their fallibility, forgetting that they, like us, are just human.

Then there's our approach to crisis and tragedy. We send thoughts and prayers, a phrase that has become almost reflexive in the face of adversity. We shift the burden of action to a higher power, an imaginary deity, referencing a religious narrative where divine intervention once played a pivotal role, but that seems conspicuously absent now. This is a passive approach, one that absolves us from taking concrete action. We wait for a savior who, according to beliefs, made the ultimate sacrifice millennia ago, but we hesitate to make even the smallest sacrifices ourselves. Instead of being assertive and proactive, we retreat into prayer, often failing to recognize that change often requires our hands and hearts, not just our hopes.

In this climate, anger has become the new normal. It's as if we're simmering in a cauldron of discontent and frustration, ready to boil over at the slightest provocation. This pervasive anger is more than just a fleeting emotion; it's become a cultural undercurrent, a defining trait of our era. It manifests in our politics, our social interactions, even in the anonymity of

the digital world. We're quick to ignite, to lash out, often without fully understanding why we're so enraged. It's a concerning trend, one that threatens to erode the very fabric of our society, replacing dialogue and understanding with blatant animosity and division. In recognizing this, perhaps we can start to address the roots of this anger, to find a way back to a more empathetic and patient way of interacting with our world and each other.

The irony is not lost on me—the systems we've designed to streamline our lives, to connect us more deeply, often do the opposite. They complicate our existence, creating digital personas of only our attractive attributes, and superficial interactions. The simplicity we sought is now forever buried under layers of complexity.

As I sip my morning coffee, the warmth reminds me of the ghosts of my past—the people I once knew, are now mere shadows in my memory. They are like silhouettes in dreams, where everything seemed better, simpler, and ideal. In my mind's eye, the past held disagreements which were fleeting, and harmony was always the norm. But perhaps, these are just the rose-colored glasses of

nostalgia, painting a past that was never as idyllic as it seems now.

Our modern society seems to thrive on conflict, as if it's a stimulant we can't live without. We witness a constant struggle for superiority, where cutting others down is a ladder to success. Loyalty and trust, once the cornerstone of human relationships, now seem like relics of a bygone era, often mocked or seen as naivety.

In this early morning solitude, I wonder if we can ever break free from this cycle. Can we find a way back to genuine connections, to a world where our value isn't dictated by digital scores? Maybe, in acknowledging these patterns, these flaws in our modern times, we can begin to weave a new narrative. One where trust isn't a joke, and our lives are measured in moments of genuine, unquantifiable joy.

In these moments of early quiet, as the world around me slowly awakens, I feel a renewed sense of purpose and clarity. It's as if the dawning day offers a gentle nudge, a kind encouragement to shed the weight of yesterday's mistakes, and carry forward only the lessons learned. It's an invitation to

embrace the day with a heart open to possibilities, to face our challenges with a blend of grace and resilience, and to keep one's heart open with kindness and understanding.

As I sit here, watching the sun rise, I'm filled with a sense of hope and determination. Perhaps, today can be a step towards something better, and I have the determination to make that hope a reality. Every day is a chance to nurture the best parts of ourselves and to extend that warmth and compassion to those around us.



***February 14, 2025, 8:30 PM—  
Middletown Springs, Vermont  
(Home)***

*“Every child born into the world alone finds a  
tree that listens.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

When my parents moved me to our second house, I was instantly drawn towards a hundred year old maple tree in the back yard. As the years went by, the tree became my inspiration, my childhood joy, and the one spot I would always run to whenever I needed a good cry. I would often imagine being hugged and comforted by it's sheltering arms, an imaginary comfort throughout all the times I felt alone.

On various occasions, I would talk to the tree. Trusting it with my deepest and darkest secrets, my hopes, my dreams, my fears. A trusted confidant. The ideal listener. A faithful friend that can't run away. A connection that I knew would always be there, patiently waiting, almost anticipating, if not lovingly commanding my return.

The inspiration the tree selflessly gave me eventually lead me to refer to it as my dreaming tree. As I grew, I would lay in the grass beneath the tree and gaze up into it's lofty branches. I would dream of how my life and love would be. Sometimes for just a few precious moments, on other occasions, for hours at a time. Remembering my mothers words when I told my parents I wanted to be a writer and my mom encouragingly asking me what I wanted to write about.

As the years went by, I would take shelter from the hot summer sun sitting at the base of the tree and write in my notebook. When I couldn't get the words to come out, I would take a break from my writing to stand upon the cluster of roots, sometimes walking in circles around the tree, my hand gently dragging against the aged and weathered bark.

As I grew, my childhood dreams we no longer hollow; I fell in love, I found my purpose, I went away in hopes of turning my dreams into reality.

I will never forget the day my mom called me on the phone to let me know that my dreaming tree had died and it needed to be taken down. I

begged her to at least leave the stump behind so that I would remember the exact spot where my dreaming tree once stood.

I returned as soon as I could, after the tree was removed, and said to myself, here stood my dreaming tree, staring at the ground covered in fresh sawdust and the lifeless stump surrounded by thriving green grass. Once again I tried to comprehend and visualize what it would look like if it were still there, overcome with emotion as I imagined how the tree had leaned over as it died as if its sheltering arms were reaching out in sadness and sorrow that the young girl had grown and left it behind. The dreaming tree had died and all that was left was nothing more than a figment of my imagination that it was still standing, much like a little ghost for the offering.

I wasn't there one morning when my father passed away, one February morning. My father dreamed that one day his only child, a daughter, would be successful, and always insisted that I attend the finer schools to give me the best chance at life. He had kept a childhood drawing I had made of the tree that I so admired, though I will never know for sure if he was ever aware of its true significance. I'm

sure my father knew how much my dreaming tree meant to me, but of course, he never told me.

The child who grows up an outcast and different is the one who daydreams beneath their own special tree, of castles and kings and fabulous places far far away, who will ultimately go on to be extremely successful at life.

**February 14, 2025, 9:59 PM—  
Middletown Springs, Vermont  
(Home)**

*“Life’s most profound truths often hide behind quiet moments—in subtle glances, unspoken words, and the spaces between chaos and calm. It’s there, in the stillness, that we discover who we truly are.”—Emily Pratt  
Slatin*

It’s strange how the smallest moments in life can leave the most indelible marks. I’ve long believed that the vast majority of life happens not in grand gestures or monumental decisions, but in the fleeting seconds that we often overlook. There’s a peculiar, poetic beauty in these unnoticed fragments of existence, easy to miss if you aren’t paying attention.

Take, for instance, a single moment from my childhood. I was eight years old, standing barefoot on a sun-warmed spot in my parents’ back yard, watching ants navigate the cracks of my favorite tree that I called my dreaming tree. The air smelled of summer—freshly mowed grass baking under the sun’s relentless heat. It

was an unremarkable day, just an ordinary afternoon in the life of an adolescent girl. Yet, in that moment, I remember feeling completely alive. The world felt vast and endless, holding infinite possibilities. And though I didn't know it at the time, that moment would stay with me to recall in my darker moments—reminding me how life can feel full even when nothing extraordinary is happening or it seems everything is due to be lost for good.

As adults, we become conditioned to think that only the big milestones matter. Graduations, weddings, promotions, retirements—these arbitrary societal markers we're told to remember as way-points of a life well-lived. So, what about the in-between moments that we often overlook and forget? What about those nights I spent staring at the stars, or foggy mornings when the haze is just enough to soften the hardness of cold hard reality.

I often think about the idea of presence—of truly existing in the here and now. It's especially difficult in a world rife with distractions. We rush from one obligation to the next, chasing deadlines and dreams, always reaching ahead to the next thing. But in doing so, how much do we miss? How many small,

perfect moments slip through our fingers  
simply because we aren't paying attention?

***February 15, 2025, 6:41 AM—  
Middletown Springs, Vermont  
(Home)***

*“I was raised by fire, saved by love, and  
steadied by the land.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

My earliest memories are of being a small child sitting on the marble floor of our Greenwich Village apartment. There was something comforting in the coolness of that floor, in its immovability, in its seeming lack of opinion or judgment. It was a respite from the complexities of life in a large city with multiple families living in upstairs apartments under one roof. All my difficulties felt as if they could be put aside for a few moments in that little corner, next to the refrigerator. I could take comfort in the simple, repetitive task of sorting and stacking colorful blocks, ignoring the struggles in the wider world around me.

I remember my crib, white railings with balloons painted on an acrylic headboard, with a tattered stuffed animal watching over me from atop its quilted mattress. I remember being in that crib, looking out into a bright white world of possibility. I had a stuffed



animal I named Frog, who only had one beady eye to suggest dreams beyond my imagination, as the family dog chewed off the other eye. I remember feeling a sense of safety and love in those moments, my parents around me but just out of reach, holding me in an intangible way.

As I got older, that crib became my cage. But, as I grew, I soon learned how to climb out of my crib and explore the apartment. It was mostly up to me to figure out how life worked. For me, life has always been a journey of transformation and self-discovery. Though teachers may have hated me, and family members may have misunderstood me, I took solace in knowing that I don't need anyone's approval to be myself. My worth comes from within, and I can be just as beautiful as I am unique. But, it took me decades to learn this.

I still remember visits to the pediatrician, and the doctor telling my parents that I was, "a gifted child who would grow up and be different." At the time, I had no idea what that meant, but I always felt something inside me was different.

I have always felt like an outsider, a misfit in a world I never asked for. People look at me with

judgmental eyes, attaching labels and placing me into boxes of their own choosing, the majority of which I never wanted to be a part. My heart still feels the weight of their stares, and my soul continues to ache from their disapproving glares.

The world I was born into has changed so much in the years since I was young. When I was a child, I worried about school and making friends, but now I worry about how the world I came into has gotten too scary.

The overwhelming pressure to succeed from my parents eventually took a toll on me, leaving me feeling anxious and inadequate. I began to feel that I had to constantly prove my worth and measure up, as if to gain acceptance. High school seemed like nothing more than a life-postponing milestone that I had to make it through as quickly as possible in order to escape the competitive environment.

From college admissions to job opportunities, the rat race has become an unavoidable part of life. I graduated high school without any accolades, or awards. I was given only a diploma to signify that I had fulfilled some irrelevant standard. I had to constantly remind

myself that my worth was not determined by titles and awards, but rather by how I choose to love and care for myself and the world around me.

After a few years of working unrelated jobs, I finally landed my first job was as an Emergency Medical Technician and Firefighter. My career in the fire department lasted a total of twenty-two years. For two decades, I saw humanity at both its best and its worst.

I saw the harm that people inflict on each other on a daily basis, but I also witnessed hope. I saw people horrifically mutilate and dismember their own children, yet I also helped deliver babies to loving parents who were struggling to have a child of their own for so long. I saw entire families lost in a single moment of unimaginable tragedy, and the joy on children's faces when they came to the fire just to look at the fire trucks.

I saw convalescence and athleticism, people holding grudges, and others giving forgiveness. I have seen the beginning and the end of everything, and everything in between. I saw the worst things in life that nobody should ever

see, along with beautiful things that everyone wishes they could see.

I was eventually promoted to Lieutenant-Specialist in the Fire Department. In that role, I saw the world becoming increasingly more volatile, a place where justice is rarely served and cruelty is normalized. Hatred and inequality seemed to grow every day. Where I once could at least see fleeting hopes and possibilities, I began to only see a world full of suffering, disappointment, and anguish. When it all simply got too dark to bear, I simply turned in my resignation, and left to pursue creative endeavors.

One day, I simply got into my car, and drove away from my New York home. I drove to Boston to meet Amelia, and we took a road trip together. I felt safe in her presence, and she radiated with light and hope. I sought solace in nature, finding comfort in the simple beauty in the mountain views of Maine, feeling the warmth of her gentle hand against my skin. I connected with her almost immediately, and discovered a new found strength I thought was forever lost to the ravages of the many traumas I endured during the course of my career.

I felt blessed to find companionship in someone who shared similar experiences and understood exactly what I was going through. We laughed together, and cried together, bonding over our pain as we shared stories of our struggles and victories. She provided me with an anchor when life seemed too overwhelming, giving me love and support that buoyed me up and kept me going. It wasn't easy to return from our temporary refuge and face the harshness of the world once again, letting go of all our loose ends from the life we left behind.

I bought an old farm in Vermont as a way to find our peace, and to make good on the promise to myself that one day I would settle down. Amelia and I moved in together, and after a few months, I asked her if she would marry me and be my love in the hills, valleys, and streams of Vermont. In the summer we explore the landscapes and get lost in the mountains and rivers, marveling at the beauty of nature. And every morning the sun rises early, painting the sky in an array of orange and pink hues. When the sun sets, the sky is painted in hues of yellow and purple, and when the sun goes to bed, the stars and moon light up the night sky.

I'm constantly reminded that aside from our loving relationship, we are alone. Everyone I once knew wanted something different out of life, and Amelia and I lost all of our friends when we married. It seems that people oftentimes don't understand us. I am totally in love, and lost in admiration, and yet, I cannot let go of the beauty of being part of a larger whole—the joys of having lifelong friendships, sharing good times and bad, until finally my friends drifted away and are now lost forever.

Being different is oftentimes isolating and alienating; everyone is different in some way. Amelia and I are perhaps different in every way. But, as long as we keep each other close and remember that we don't need anyone else to make us complete, we will be okay, even in the scariest times. We make a strong unit, made stronger by our love and courage. We can face any storm and make it through; together we can be powerful, always, and forever, no matter what.

**February 15, 2025, 1:08 PM—  
Middletown Springs, Vermont  
(Home)**

*“Sky above me, Earth below me, a fiery  
passion forever burning within me.”—Emily  
Pratt Slatin*

I have always been a little different. Even as a young child, when other girls were content with playing princesses and tea parties, I found myself more engrossed in embarking on imagined adventures, climbing trees, and dreaming of the vast, untouched world beyond my backyard. It was a divergence that sometimes isolated me, a tiny ripple in the fabric of conformity that set me apart. Yet, I cherished this difference. I nurtured it. Even then, I understood it as a flame, a flicker of an identity that was distinctively, and blatantly unapologetically, mine.

Throughout my life, that flame, my distinctiveness, has defined me; it has directed my actions and decisions. Everything I do, I do with an unfathomable depth of commitment, investing the full essence of my heart and soul without reservations. Everything I do, I do with

a loving compassion, and I am never satisfied with a half-hearted effort. Each task, each challenge, was an opportunity to explore my capabilities, to push the boundaries of what I believed I could accomplish. It was this passion, this dedication, that catapulted me into a journey of self-discovery and growth.

While my peers walked their predefined paths, I dared to wander, dared to stray from the tried, tested, and mundane. My world has always been viewed from a slightly skewed angle, teetering on the brink of entropy and chaos, but brimming with an unmatched vibrancy and curiosity. The world to me is an enigma, free-spirited and unrestrained, often reckless and wild, and full of secrets. There were no straight lines or strict rules, only a wondrous sphere of colors and possibilities that waited to be embraced and understood.

Often, this perception led me to places others deemed too dangerous, choices too risky, and decisions too reckless. Yet, I found in each step, each gamble, I found a certain kind of freedom that was exhilarating. I danced on the edge of precipices, bathed in the thundering echoes of the wild, and whispered back secrets to the wandering wind. I was untamed, a force to



reckon with, mirroring the wild world that I so dearly loved. This was a journey of rebellion, a journey of transformation where I found myself living, breathing, and becoming the most vibrant version of myself.

At times, the journey was fraught with trials and tribulations, times when the world around me seemed too vast, too unforgiving. Moments when I questioned my path, my very identity, and my faith. And yet, in each of these moments, I found strength, a resilience that I never knew I possessed. I discovered that the heart that beat wildly within my chest, much like the relationship between the sun and moon, was not one to be easily silenced. It pounded with an unrelenting rhythm, a resounding anthem of survival, resilience, and indomitable spirit.

Through the highs and lows, through the calm and the storm, a metamorphosis took place. I emerged from the cocoon of my doubts, my fears, soaring high on the wings of my newfound courage. I grew, I evolved, and I emerged into the most beautiful version of myself. It was not a beauty that could be captured in glossy magazine pages, or defined by narrow societal standards. It was a beauty

that was deeply rooted in my spirit, mirrored in my dreams, ever present in my actions, and guided by the innate passion that had been my guiding star.

Finally, I stood tall and proud, the girl who had grown up different, now a woman who had dared to be herself. Amidst a world that sought uniformity, I was a splash of color, a beacon of individuality. From the girl who climbed trees and dreamt of adventures, of far away places, and of castles and kings, had grown into a woman who had lived those adventures, a woman who had tasted the elixir of life in its purest form and found herself profoundly changed.

As I ventured forth, the flame of my identity burned brighter, illuminating my path, defining my success. The heart that once bled in dedication now throbbed in triumph, an ode to a journey that had been every bit as turbulent as it was enlightening.

I realized that the true measure of my success lay not in the material wealth that I had amassed, but in the breadth and wealth of experiences that had shaped me. The success

was not in the destination, but in the journey itself that had led me there.

From being a little different to being my unique self, from giving my heart and soul to everything I do, from being free-spirited, reckless, wild, full of secrets to being the most successful and beautiful version of myself—I am a living testament to the power of embracing one's uniqueness—the power of being oneself.

My story is a testament to every woman out there who dared to be a little different, who dared to dream, to explore, and to grow. It is a celebration of all the women who had the courage to be themselves, who had the courage to let their distinctive flame burn bright.

In retrospect, I realize that I have not just been a little different, I have been a lot different. And that has made all the difference. I have not just lived; I have thrived, emerged victorious against all odds, and found beauty in every corner of my existence.

To all the women reading this, remember, we are not just surviving; we are thriving. We are not just beautiful; we are stunning. We are not

just successful; we are victorious. And in being ourselves, in embracing our distinctiveness, we find our strength, our success, and our beauty.

**February 15, 2025, 4:36 PM—  
Middletown Springs, Vermont  
(Home)**

*“Some things last longer than forever was  
meant to — but never long enough.”—Emily  
Pratt Slatin*

I used to write in riddles, and I used to write in rhymes; my body ached to write the words, the prose is what kept me alive. I write into the dark veil of the night, and in another set of chances, I'd take the ones I've missed. All the times in which I spoke into the silence, and whenever I do it seems I don't speak, except to cry out and wait for an answer. I came into this world alone, marked in constellation, and when all else is gone, I will still be here. There's a ceiling in the darkness, I am but a lifeless face that you'll soon forget.

There's a monster living under my bed who whispers words like thunderbolts of lightning, whenever the west wind moves. If I'm still breathing, then I suppose that I'm the lucky one, even though I breathe through corrupted lungs. Setting fire to my insides and watching myself burn like midnight machines, until I

catch daylight, and in the brilliant light of morning, it feels good to be alive.

Now unburdened and becoming the person I was supposed to be, I still don't know what forgiveness is. If dreams were thunder and lightning was desire, I'd still live my life with reckless abandon like a displaced cosmonaut. I became accustomed to living life as if always reaching for the light. The rest is in the details, like an image often seen on television, where all I need to know is that things are going to look up. Somewhere along the line, I must have slipped off track, like tattoos and memories pinned down in a photograph album.

These are the tears, and the dreams I'll dream instead. I know I could have loved you, but you would not let me. I wrap my fears around me like a blanket with a shyness that is criminally vulgar. This is a new beginning, traveling unfamiliar rivers and roads; it feels like boarding a downtown train that takes me to new and unfamiliar places where a writer can live a thousand lives. These voices in my head get loud, and my wish was granted for someone who would save me from the nothing I'd become.

You said you wanted everything, then you took everything from me, pointing angry fingers at me, burdening me with the weight of feeling like I could never give you enough. Now, you disappeared, and I now feel a different kind of weight, the burden of becoming someone brand new. The loveless fascination with all those yesterdays, it is the slaughter of the meek, the godlike technique, and the ever present feelings of the heart.

I remember years ago when you told me not to go into the children's home, but I went ahead, if to do nothing more than to defy you. For that moment, I was clothed only in obscenities, rain soaked in the summer heat, and I could find no comfort in this world. You told me many lies, and I missed miles and miles of roads I should have seen, even though the truth was plain to see. It was my underlying condition that made you so angry, the fault in my genetics, for which I could do nothing about. These are the ramblings of a lunatic, getting so much attention, and the carnage of covering you up with affection. There were wolves in the house, and while I was hoping for the best, I was anticipating and expecting the worst. As I wandered through my playing cards, to you I became the joke. I lost myself; it was the

broken parts that I needed to see. How did this fall apart? I waited for your call, while you stole my glory and tried to prevent my escape. I know the truth now, like echoes of angels that won't return; is this the prize that I've waited for?

When was the last time that you felt good? Why was it that you only wished for the things that you didn't need? The long awaited answer, the thoughts from the big chair, I was the unsuspecting victim whose soul crumbled like a pastry under softly spoken lies, when you gave my mind a new disease. Behind the scenes, I started threading the needle, a photograph on the dashboard of forgotten dreams, and when I was ready to run away, I drove off in my car. Should I write it in a letter and give you the secrets you request? Don't offer questions, as I will retreat with my suitcase of memories, off to become the girl I needed to be since so long ago that I can no longer remember when, now trying to make up for lost time. You tried to tear my world apart with mindless filler, your esoteric words disguised as reverie. A means to an end.

I was a mere shadow of a man you selfishly wanted me to be, a man who never was, a man



I never will be. When you tried to take me I was not there. In the end, it's the heart that matters more, and I am unable and unwilling to censor my tears. The things I wish I could have told you, a cautionary tale of how things are rarely as they could be, or should be. Times have changed, and so have you, and it's fucking depressing that in unrequited love, my love is vengeance that is never free. How much of this can I put up with? The resentment, ghosts of empty promises where something's always wrong, and it's always my fault.

These are the words I've never said, a page in a book that you've never read, and now that I've moved on, these are the dreams I'll have instead.

**February 15, 2025, 7:49 PM—  
Middletown Springs, Vermont  
(Home)**

*“Every heartbreak is just a beginning wearing  
the mask of an ending.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

Day breaks, the lost girl inside wakes, the birds sing, the wind blows through the trees, and the angels sigh. My mornings in Vermont begin early with the rising sun, my days often occupied with my own pursuits of untamed introspection as I try to unravel the mysteries of life, followed by early nightfall to hang the stars and moon upon, and until I see another day as the sun rises, I am feathered by the moonlight. The promise of another day on the horizon guarantees that the days ahead will never change for me at all.

Introspection is my muse, my preoccupation, my heartbreak. I awoke on this cold December morning remembering my fathers’ words as he read me nursery rhymes when I was a small child, “one for sorrow, two for joy, three for girls, four for boys, five for silver, six for gold, seven for a secret never to be told.” I remember all the books he used to read to me, chosen at

random in the beginning, and as I grew, I began to make my own selections. Winter is a curious season in which life slows down, and I tend to stay inside most of the time, which in turn gives me a lot of time to think and reflect upon the year.

It was in June of this year, 2020, that I wrote *A Little Ghost For The Offering*, which came to fruition during a series of brief almost fleeting moments of clarity before a handful of traumatic events became so insurmountable that my only solution was to vanish. The article set a precedent, a personal standard of writing I should expect as a derivative of my abilities, and nothing less. It was this article that also became the catalyst to the beginning of my new relationship with Amelia, and when I decided that my relationship with Angie had finally run its course, I drove to Boston, picked up Amelia, and then together we traveled to Maine for a much-needed vacation.

These are the days I will remember for all my life; the morning sunrise delivers the promise of a brand new day in which several minutes will be inevitably spent dreaming of distant memories lost and out of time, the echoes of angels that interrupt the silence, curious as to

how the years went by in a blur leaving behind snapshots of moments froze in time. My father's words whispered in my ear as he tucked me in at night now so inaudible that they seem distant and faded. I woke this morning, not sure if I was still in a dream, as it has been my lifelong experience that the good times never stay, coupled with cheap thrills that eventually fade and lose their luster. Children grow older, friends drift away, and every time I stand before the looking glass, I realize that I'm going through changes and that I'm growing older, too.

I still remember being small, and sitting on my fathers' knee in the kitchen in front of the refrigerator of my childhood home, and how he would always promise me that I would live a wonderful life. And as the years went by, I watched my father struggle to provide me with only the best things that life had to offer. He spoke of hardships in his own life, not only as a testament to his own personal resilience but as an ominous warning if by some chance his teachings would spare me from misadventure. If someone were to ask me what changed in 2020, the honest legitimate answer would be everything.

I have come to the conclusion after a lifetime of observation, that most things in life will not last forever, and oftentimes what we desire and covet is that which we truly do not need. I held onto the past for far too long in search of deeper understanding, yet it still remains impossible for me to definitively express in words how I truly feel. There have been times in my life when I have been too hard on myself, as I try to find not only the answers to questions but perhaps, more importantly, my purpose in life. These are the questions without answers, and if I had to give everything to find them, I wonder just how far I would go. Lately, I've lost sight of my purpose. When I was eight years old, I thought that my purpose was to be a prolific writer who would one day have the ability to change the world. At age eighteen I thought that my purpose was to help people, so I became a Firefighter and Emergency Medical Technician. Then at age thirty-eight, I realized that my purpose lies beyond the realm of traditional employment, and I began to chase my passion for creativity.

Today, I have finally decided to devote my life to writing, photography, and love, and in doing so, will show Amelia the love that she deserves and the beauty that she possesses. I had to

leave behind everything I once knew so well, and start over again somewhere completely new. My dreaming tree has died, I became a stranger to myself and my own life, there was absolutely nothing left for me in New York. One fateful day in 2020, I left and I probably won't be back. I took an enormous risk, threw my future to chance, and in the end, it became the single greatest decision of my life.

***February 15, 2025, 10:53 PM—  
Middletown Springs, Vermont  
(Home)***

*“Writing doesn’t heal—it witnesses.”—Emily  
Pratt Slatin*

It is curious how one’s fears change as we grow older. When I was a child, I had the typical and classic childhood fears; fear of the dark, fear of death, fear of getting hurt, but above all else, I had an irrational and overwhelming fear of mirrors. Fear is the emotional paralytic that draws us near, and is oftentimes the fear I cannot hide.

I never wrote much about my fears growing up. I remember in my teenage years I wrote about my fears of growing old, being alone, and never finding love. Perhaps my greatest fear, which still permeates to this day is the fear of being judged, and although I’m not insecure, I still care far too much about what other people think.

This year was a productive one, yet when autumn comes around, I have a bad habit of evaluating, over-analyzing, and picking apart

that which I created, moreover that which I still plan to accomplish before the end of the year, knowing full well that I create more plans than I could ever possibly, or humanly accomplish. Today I thought about all the stupid things I said this year. Things, for which I believe with absolute conviction were quickly forgotten, though because I still remember saying them, I'm still irrationally affected by them. When I was younger, I longed to be an adult, now as an adult, I long to have my childhood back, if only for a day of fun and freedom, and a total lack of responsibilities.

Winter arrived suddenly and unexpectedly this year. It began with a storm that came in strong, shook the trees, and blew away all of the autumn leaves, then took away an otherwise perfect blue sky, and turned it into to a mockingly sad hazy grey.

It seems the older I get, the more my mood and feelings are dependent on the seasons, and just like my mind, they are always changing. I cannot remember the last time I was happy, at least in recent years, all I seem to focus upon is the very distant past filled with happier times. Distant and faded memories of a much earlier



and easier time in my life, before I unavoidably got caught up in all that life has to offer.

I decided to visit my childhood home one Sunday afternoon and gaze upon the tree stump where once stood my dreaming tree. It was once a large maple tree, perhaps the biggest and the tallest one to stand on my parents property, and to me, the most beautiful. Standing in front of the stump made me sad to realize that it was now dead and would now only exist in my memory.

It was the last day of October that I went to visit a family friend; an elderly woman who had helped raise me, and someone who I had admired almost my entire life. After the passing of her late husband, Clayt, and her two best friends, Frank and Carol, I knocked at her door. While all the little children were walking around her neighborhood, dressed in store-bought Halloween costumes collecting candy, my visit, a social reunion, somehow seemed exponentially more important.

I knocked at her door, and after a few passing moments she answered the door, recognized me immediately, and a tear appeared in her eye. A sudden hug followed and she whispered

in my ear that she had missed me and that I should come and sit for awhile.

We talked for awhile, as the minutes slowly turned into hours and as I gazed into her eyes, I was able to summon the courage to let her know what she meant to me, and how she was the last surviving elder whom I considered to be one of my childhood heroes. I will never forget how good it felt to sit on her couch and cry in front of her for the very first time; a moment to finally grieve the loss of her husband, and her two best friends, all of them I considered to be family, and who I perceived to be grandparents to me.

There was an unforgettable relief that surrounded me, and at that ephemeral moment the front door which hadn't closed all the way, suddenly flew open with a gust of wind and slammed shut as if to signify the closing of a decades-long chapter in my own life, a loss which will never be forgotten that is now gone forever and can never be replaced.

As I got up to say goodbye it occurred to me that someday, all my heroes will be ghosts. From that point forward, it occurred to me that I should always tell people how much they truly

mean to me and how much I truly love and respect them before it's too late.

***February 24, 2025—Erie,  
Pennsylvania (Hotel Room With  
Amelia)***

*“Not every ghost is born of death — some are  
left behind in beds we never belonged to.”—*

*Emily Pratt Slatin*

Some moments in life feel like they belong in a dream—sharp, surreal, drenched in the kind of reckless abandon that only makes sense in retrospect.

It started with a dare, a playful nudge from my girlfriend as we walked past an unfamiliar house in Upstate New York. The place was immaculate, almost unnervingly pristine, the kind of house that looked like it had never known chaos. Something about it—the bright yellow paint, and the way the windows caught the noontime sunlight, the perfect symmetry of its garden—felt like an invitation.

This was no ordinary house. This wasn't the home of a friend, a lover, or even an acquaintance—it was the house of a stranger, someone we had never met and never would. A ghost in their own life as far as we were

concerned. We didn't know their name, their face, or the sound of their voice. All we knew was that they had left for the day, innocently assuming their world would remain exactly as they had left it.

But for a brief, stolen moment, their perfect home became ours. And then there was the window. Open on a crack with the bottom fringe of the white curtain reaching out below the lip of the window pane. We didn't need words. She smirked, I nodded, I opened the window all the way up, and within seconds, we were inside.

The house smelled like fresh linen, and expensive soap. Everything was perfectly arranged, untouched, as if the person who lived there had just stepped out and expected to return to their home unchanged. The bedroom was the kind you only see in catalogues—crisp white sheets, everything perfectly folded, like a hotel room waiting for its first uninvited guest.

We had wild, unbridled sex on that bed—the kind that leaves a mark, not just on the sheets but on the air itself. The kind that turns order into chaos, passion into proof. The sheets were ripped away in the frenzy, twisted and tangled,

half-hanging off the mattress like the remnants of a storm. Pillows were crushed beneath us, their once-perfect symmetry now distorted, mashed into abstract, unrecognizable forms. The comforter, once neatly tucked and untouched, had been kicked to the floor in a crumpled heap, save for one stubborn corner still clinging to the bed frame as if it refused to surrender completely. The room had started as pristine, untouched—by the time we were done, it was obvious that something had happened there, something raw, something real.

It was fast, desperate, like we were trying to leave a mark on a place that didn't belong to us. There was no way the bed would look the same after, no chance that whoever came home later wouldn't know that something of passion had happened here.

When we finally caught our breath, we wandered into the kitchen, laughing in that post-adrenaline haze. That's when we found the beer—a neat little six-pack sitting in the fridge, waiting for an owner who clearly wasn't us. We took two, because cold beer after wild sex in a stranger's house felt like the only logical ending to the story.

We left cash in the carton. Enough to cover a new six-pack. It felt like the right kind of wrong—as if the universe had a sense of humor, it would approve.

Then we slipped back out the way we came, the house behind us still perfect, except for the evidence we left behind on those sheets.

I never spoke of this incident to anyone. It remained a secret—an unspoken pact—between me and my girlfriend at the time, a shared indulgence wrapped in the thrill of trespass and the kind of reckless passion that only youth allows. For years, the memory lay dormant, buried beneath the weight of time and experience, forgotten like an old song that only resurfaces when the right note is struck.

But now, over some two decades later, it returned to me with startling clarity, unraveling in my mind like a scene from a movie I had almost forgotten I was in. And with it came a question I had never thought to ask before—what went through the mind of the person who came home that day?

Did they step through the door, weary from work, expecting nothing more than the

predictable comfort of their routine, only to be met with an unsettling sense that something was off? Did they pause in the doorway of their bedroom, eyes narrowing as they took in the chaos—the sheets ripped from the mattress, the pillows crushed and distorted, the comforter lying haphazardly on the floor, as if it had been thrown there in a moment of urgency?

Did they stand there in disbelief, retracing their steps, wondering if they had somehow done this themselves and simply forgotten? Or did their stomach drop with the sudden realization that someone else—someone unknown—had been there, had touched the most intimate space in their home, had left behind the unmistakable evidence of passion played out in their absence?

And then there was the beer. Did they open the fridge, reach for a cold bottle like they always did, only to find two missing? Did they hesitate at the sight of the cash tucked neatly in the carton, their mind racing to connect the dots, to make sense of a violation that came with an odd kind of courtesy?

I imagine them standing in their kitchen, holding that money between their fingers, their



mind teetering between rage and fascination, uncertainty and intrigue. Maybe they told themselves it had to be a prank. Maybe they laughed, maybe they cursed, maybe they sat on the edge of that same bed, running a hand over the rumpled sheets, wondering who we were—what we looked like, how we found our way inside, and why we had chosen their house, their bed, and their beer.

The mystery of it must have gnawed at them, a story with no beginning and no end, only the evidence left behind like a puzzle with missing pieces.

And now, all these years later, I wonder—do they still think about it? Because here I am, remembering it like it happened yesterday.

## ***February 25, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)***

*“The world tried to cage me; I grew wings  
instead.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

I drove like hell through the night, the highway stretching endlessly before me, my headlights cutting through the darkness like a blade. The only sound was the hum of the tires on the asphalt and the music playing on my cell phone. I didn't stop, didn't slow down. I just kept driving, pushing forward even though I was tired and running on caffeine and adrenaline, after driving Amelia back to my farm after looking at a house in Erie, Pennsylvania.

By midnight, I was home—my farm, my land, my permanence. I stepped out of the car and let the cold air settle into my bones, grounding me, reminding me that this place was still here, even if Amelia wasn't planning to stay. I looked out across the snow-covered fields, and then to my favorite tree, the one that forever shades Penfold's grave, the one constant in a world that never stops changing.

Soon, Amelia will be gone. She said she had to move on, that her work here was finished, that there were other people who needed her. I told her I was fine, and she saw through the lie like she always did. She pulled me into a hug, the kind that lingers just a little too long, the kind that says everything that words can't.

She loved me, in her own way. But not all love is built to stay.

And there I was, standing on the now cold and frozen land that will never leave me, trying to make sense of how someone can just walk away from something I was willing to hold onto forever.

Some people are made to stay. Others are made to leave.

Amelia was always the latter, though I didn't see it at first. Or maybe I did, and I just didn't want to believe it.

She loved me—I know that now—but she never loved me in the way I love, in the way that takes root, holds on, refuses to let go even when the storms come. She loved in motion, in transition, in the kind of way that feels absolute

while it's happening but is always meant to end. I don't know if she ever saw this as permanent. Maybe she convinced herself she did for a while, but people like her... they don't settle. They don't plant their feet in one place for too long.

I've never been that way. I never could be that way. I build, I commit, I stay. I don't do temporary.

Amelia does. She sees relationships as chapters in her life, as something that exists for a time, serves its purpose, and then moves on. She told me that outright—that she had helped me, and now she needed to help someone else, as if love is some kind of mission with a start and an end date. I can't think that way. I don't want to think that way. Love isn't a job. It isn't a task to complete before moving on to the next. It's a decision. A promise. A permanence.

I cried in the shower after midnight, and as soon as I grabbed my towel, she hugged me longer than she ever had before, as if that was supposed to soften the blow. Maybe, for her, it did. But for me, it just made everything worse—because that was the moment I knew.

I knew she had already left, long before she ever packed her bags. Her love was like a passing storm that nourishes the earth, allowing life to grow and to thrive, before inevitably passing on to continue nourishing others.

I knew she was already thinking about the next place, the next person, the next version of herself that she was chasing. For the past month, she had been talking about Erie, Pennsylvania as the place where she needed to be. And after weeks of discussion, I knew, without a doubt, that she was never meant to stay.

And the worst part? I probably knew it too, yet never allowed myself to accept this as a possibility.

I don't know how to do halfway. I never have. I live in absolutes—absolute love, absolute friendship, absolute trust—or I simply don't live at all.

I don't love in pieces, and I don't hold people at a distance, waiting for the day they might leave. I don't prepare myself for detachment, and I don't hold back just because something might

hurt later. I don't believe in that kind of love, the kind that's given on a timer, meant to expire the moment someone decides they've "done enough" for you.

When I love someone, it's forever, and always, no matter what. When I call someone my friend, it's without condition, and without limitation. When I trust someone, I hand them everything, legally, physically, and metaphorically, and hope they don't drop it. But Amelia—she wasn't wired that way. I will never know if it is her personality, her autism, or something entirely different, all I know is that this is who she is.

She said she wanted to remain friends, and maybe she believes that. Maybe she thinks she can still exist in my life as something less than what she was before. But I don't do less. I don't do downgrades. A pedestal is not an elevator. I don't do the slow unraveling of what was once whole. Friendship isn't some consolation prize to make leaving easier. And love, once given, does not simply shrink itself down into something smaller just because one person decides they need to walk away.

I wasn't afraid of loving her. I wasn't afraid of trusting her. I was afraid of exactly this—of being left behind while she convinced herself that this was the best thing for me. Of being given something real, something I thought was permanent, only for it to be pulled away because she was ready to move on.

She left because she thought I'd be better off without her. But what I wanted wasn't to be better off—it was to keep what I had. I wanted to stay married, even if we were married as friends sharing a home together, in nothing more than to simply hold onto something tangible that we had built together that mattered.

I love in permanence. I trust in permanence. I build in permanence. And that is why this hurts more than words can explain—because I would have never left.

The world has been trying to break me since the day I was born. It has thrown everything at me—a disordered sexual development at birth, loss, betrayal, abandonment—watching, waiting, betting that I wouldn't make it. But I did. I always do.

I came out as a lesbian at 16, and was kicked of the house by my father. I left home with a duffel bag of clothing, a hand-me-down car with bald tires, with nowhere to go, and no one to turn to. I was told I would fail, told I wouldn't survive, told that I wasn't enough. I found a job at a summer camp where I could live in a tent for the time being, and earn a little bit of money. I learned how to stand on my own before most people ever had to. I fell in love with a girl named Allegra, from Boston, fought for every inch of my life, every piece of stability, every scrap of peace. I was sent to a boarding school, where I would run away to seek a job at a fire department, only to be denied my high school diploma. It didn't matter; I was determined to live life to the fullest, even if in doing so, my prescribed life path differed from what society considered normal.

My differences, the very things that set me apart, the things that made people uncomfortable, skeptical, and sometimes outright cruel—they would become the key to my success.

Doctors labeled me a hermaphrodite, as if I were some kind of anomaly instead of just me.



They spoke about my body like it was a mistake, something that needed to be fixed, or explained away. They told me that I would never fit in, that I would struggle, that I would have to fight for acceptance in a world that had already decided what normal was.

Teachers hated me—not for what I did, but for what I was. I questioned them, challenged them, thought for myself when they expected obedience, and rejected their teachings when I knew that they were wrong. I saw through their narrow expectations, refused to conform, refused to let their limitations define me. They didn't know what to do with someone who was oftentimes smarter than them, someone who refused to bend and break just to make them comfortable.

My so-called friends questioned me, doubted my choices, doubted my identity, doubted my refusal to follow the script that was handed to me. They wanted me to blend in, to disappear into the crowd, to make myself small and palatable. But I was never meant to be small. I was never meant to be a replica of the people around me.

I was meant to be a force. And in the end, the very things that made me an outsider, the things that made people turn away, became my strength. I built my life not despite my differences, but because of them.

They made me unstoppable. And still, the world kept trying. One loss after another. People leaving, people dying, people disappearing like they were never real to begin with. And yet—I am still here.

I have thrived despite what should have destroyed me. I have fought battles that no one ever saw, no one ever understood. I have built something permanent in a world that wanted me to have nothing.

And for that, I will wear my survival on my skin. I'm planning to get a Pegasus tattoo across my chest. A creature that cannot be tamed, cannot be broken, tamed, or restrained. A symbol of everything the world tried to take from me and failed.

I am not someone who falls. I rise. Amelia left, but I am still here. The world tried to keep me down, but I am still here. I'm still thriving, still

doing everything I want, with no obligations, or restriction.

The world told me I would fail, but I bought my land, built my life, and made damn sure that while the world can and did take everything from me, nothing can ever take my land from me again. The Pegasus is a mark of defiance that will remind me of one undeniable truth—I am unstoppable.

I told her I was fine. I tried to say it convincingly, tried to make it sound like the truth, but she saw through it. She always did. And yet, she didn't argue, didn't push me away or demand the truth. She just pulled me into a hug—one of the longest we ever had. It was the kind of hug that lingers, the kind where neither person wants to be the first to let go, the kind where time slows just enough to make you wonder if maybe, just maybe, they'll change their mind.

But she didn't. I knew that no matter what, her mind was made up, and there was nothing I could do to change it. She told me I would be better off without her. That she had to move on, that there were other people waiting for her help. Like she was passing through my life the

same way she always had—like a storm that sweeps in, shakes the ground, and then disappears before you can fully understand what just happened.

She believed this was the right thing to do. Maybe she even believed it was an act of kindness. Maybe, in her own way, she thought she was saving me from something. But what if I didn't need to be saved? What if I just wanted her to stay?

She simply walked away like it was inevitable. Almost as if it was always going to end this way. And maybe, deep down, I knew it too. Maybe I should have seen it coming. Maybe I should have prepared for it. The problem is, I don't live my life that way. I don't brace for impact before I crash. I don't love with one foot out the door. I don't let go just because something gets hard.

But she does. She hugged me like she was saying goodbye forever, even as she promised we would still be friends. But how can you be friends with someone who decided that making someone the center of ones universe simply wasn't enough? How do you step backward

from something that was supposed to be permanent?

The truth is, she left long before she packed her things. And now, the only thing left to do is figure out how to exist in the silence she left behind. Loss has followed me like a shadow my entire life. People leave. People die. People vanish into thin air, as if they were never real to begin with.

But my farm? It stays. I fought so hard for it, driving myself to the edge of exhaustion, through sacrifice, hard work, and clawed my way toward something no one could take from me. Because everything else in my life was stolen, ripped away, or lost to time.

I've watched homes disappear. I've watched people die. I've seen things in my life that there no words exist to describe. I've watched the world try to grind me down until there was nothing left. But I refused. I bought my land, and claimed my permanence.

Amelia said my farm was my birthright, and maybe in some way, she was right. But more than that, it is my proof. My farm is my proof that I survived, proof that I fought back, and

proof that no matter who walks away, no matter how many times the world tries to leave me empty-handed, I will still have this place—this land, this sky, this soil beneath my feet.

She left, and when she did, she gave me the opportunity to follow. But I cannot come with her, my ancestors settled in the area, my friends live nearby, and for the very first time in my life, I am deeply respected for who I am, and what I have accomplished in my life. She took herself out of my life as cleanly as a blade through paper. No ties. No claims. Nothing but a promise that we would remain as friends, and that she would stay in touch, yet it feels like a promise that already feels like an echo of something that won't last.

But my farm? It's still here. The fields still stretch out in waves of green and brown, wild and unbothered. The tree still stands, holding Penfold's memory in its roots. The house still breathes, still settles in the quiet, and no matter where my adventures might take me, it still waits for me to come home, forgetting and forgiving the times I was absent.

The world has taken so much from me. It will not take this. This farm is not just land. It is my

defiance. It is my permanence. It is mine. Forever.

Some people write their stories in ink. Others write them in blood. I write mine in poetic prose.

Before I ever found my voice in words, I found it in August and Everything After. That album cracked something open inside of me—made me realize that pain could be beautiful, that loss could be poetic, that stories weren't just things that happened to other people. Our life stories are ours to tell.

And somehow, my relationship with Amelia mirrored that album—track by track, note by note, like it was always written in the chords of a song I hadn't fully heard yet.

Round Here—A song about searching for something real, about watching someone drift away before you even know how to hold onto them. That was Amelia—always searching, always moving, never quite staying long enough to belong.

Sullivan Street—A song about leaving, about the road stretching endlessly in the rear view

mirror, about love being something you carry with you even when you know it's over. I drove all night to return to my farm, just like Amelia drove away to start whatever comes next.

Raining in Baltimore—A song about distance. Not just the kind you can measure in miles, but the kind that settles between two people before the words are even spoken. The distance that was already there, long before she told me she was leaving.

That album inspired me to write my story. Amelia taught me how to live. And just like *August and Everything After*, she was something that changed me, moved me, left a mark that will never quite fade.

But here's the thing about music—it doesn't stop just because the album ends. The songs still exist. The meaning still lingers. The words are still there, even when the sound fades.

Maybe Amelia was always meant to be like that album—something that came into my life, wrecked me in the best and worst ways, and then left me different than I was before, yet at the same time better off than before?



Richard Bach once said, "here is a test to find whether your mission on Earth is finished: If you're alive, it isn't."

The music keeps playing, and I keep thriving. I'm only 45, and have lived a life that few people believe could be possible, and most never pursue.

The dust has settled. The door has closed. Amelia is gone.

She left with no bitterness, no regret—just the quiet certainty that this was how it was always meant to end. She believes she accomplished exactly what she came here to do, which was to save me from my life path of self-destruction, and now that her role in my life is finished, it is now time for her to move on to the next thing, the next person, her next purpose.

Love, once given, does not vanish. It does not shrink to fit inside new boundaries, does not fade because one person decides it should. Maybe Amelia believes this was the right thing to do, but that doesn't mean it hurts any less.

I will get the Pegasus tattooed across my chest as a reminder of what the world tried to do to

me—and how it failed. A creature that cannot be caged, cannot be grounded, cannot be broken. Because that is who I am. That is who I have always been. This is who I will always be.

Maybe Amelia was always meant to be temporary, but I am permanent. My love is permanent. My home is permanent. My fight is permanent. And no matter who comes or who goes, no matter what is lost, no matter how many times the world tries to knock me down—I will always rise.

## ***March 4, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)***

*“You can exile a person, but you can’t erase the  
girl who still believed she belonged.”—Emily  
Pratt Slatin*

I was twenty-three when they sent me home. Three summers of devotion, three years of sunburns and scraped knees, of singing around the fire and waking up before dawn to make sure my campers were safe, fed, and cared for. I had built my world around the summer camp where I spent every summer since I was a child. Over the years, I believed that these people were my family, and that camp was my home. But one day, they pulled me aside, told me to pack my things, and that was it.

I was let go.

They didn’t say why. Not in any way that mattered. Something about needing to make changes, about decisions that had to be made. I nodded, trying not to let my hands shake as I stuffed my clothes into my duffel bag. I had walked in as one of them, but I left as an outsider, the line between belonging, and

banishment had been drawn in the dust of the camp road. I told myself that this was temporary, and one day, I'd find my way back.

I returned for reunions, for visiting days, and for any excuse I could find, only to pretend that nothing had changed. I wanted so badly to believe that I still mattered, that I hadn't been erased. I smiled at familiar faces, laughed at inside jokes that no longer included me, and slept in the same cabins that were once a part of who I was, but now carried an unfamiliar weight. I was an unwelcome guest in a place I used to call my home.

They tolerated me, but they did not welcome me. I felt it in the way conversations trailed off when I approached, in the polite but distant smiles, in the empty spaces where I used to fit. They had thrown me away. They had removed my pictures from the camp photo albums, tore out all my handwritten contributions to the camp diaries, and rewrote the story of my favorite place without me in it. But despite all this, I still couldn't let go.

I kept showing up, kept trying to earn back something that maybe I had never truly had. I was chasing a version of the past that didn't

exist anymore, clinging to a place that had already let me go.

I still wonder why they did it. Did they think I wouldn't notice? That I wouldn't feel the shift, the slow, quiet rejection that seeped into every interaction? Did they ever miss me the way I missed them? Did they ever wonder if I was okay?

Or, had I been nothing more than a chapter they had finished reading, closed the book on, and placed back on the shelf, forgotten? Will they ever show me the love that nobody else ever has? Or will I always be the girl who tried too hard to belong somewhere that never truly wanted her?

**March 13, 2025—Middletown  
Springs, Vermont (Home)**

*“The sky was a canvas of pastel hues, as the sun descended in a final blaze of glory. The moon, a luminescent orb, rose slowly into the night, casting a mystical glow upon the earth. As the stars twinkled in the inky blackness, the moon and the sun shared a timeless embrace, a dance of light and shadow, of warmth and coolness, of life and death. For though the sun's fiery passion was spent, its legacy burned on in the soft radiance of the moon, a testament to the enduring power of love.”—*

*Emily Pratt Slatin*

***March 19, 2025—Watertown,  
New York (Makayla's Apartment)***

*“Every crow I’ve loved takes flight, and I am  
left beneath a sky of falling black feathers.”—*

*Emily Pratt Slatin*

Out of nowhere, my former niece Makayla—who, decades ago, for all intents and purposes, had become my unofficially adopted daughter—reached out and asked if I could pick her up. The timing was uncanny. She called while I was out with Amelia, and the moment I learned she needed a ride as soon as possible, I wasted no time. Amelia and I jumped into her Ford Bronco Sport, and with the kind of urgency reserved for house fires and last-minute rescues, we raced home.

What followed was an unexpected ten-day stay together at my mother’s house—a reunion neither of us had planned but both of us clearly needed.

I can’t help but marvel at the bizarre synchronicity of it all. Just as Amelia was setting off for Erie, Pennsylvania, and at the same time, my niece called. It was as if the

universe had orchestrated the timing with some cosmic precision, aligning our paths in a way that made no logical sense, yet felt inevitable.

Then, as if the situation wasn't chaotic enough, another twist arrived in the form of a misplaced set of car keys. That first night, I stayed over at my niece's apartment, only to be woken up very early the next morning by Amelia's phone call. She had lost her car keys. And, of course, I had the spare set.

Without hesitation, I threw on my shoes, started up my truck, and hit the road back to Vermont. Half an hour into the drive, just as I was settling into the rhythm of the highway, my phone rang again. It was Amelia.

She found her keys. They were in her bed.

Society hands us a script before we even know how to read it. The sequence is familiar, predictable—like the assembly instructions for a life we never agreed to build.

Family → Acquaintances → Friends → Best Friend → Spouse → (Often) Children.



It's presented as a roadmap, a clear-cut path we're supposed to follow without question. But who decided this was the only way?

The truth is, relationships rarely fit into the tidy little boxes we've been given, at least mine never did. Life doesn't operate in straight lines or predetermined sequences. Some people drift into our lives and settle somewhere between friendship and family, defying labels, existing in the in-between spaces. Some relationships blur the edges between love and loss, connection and departure, arrival and absence.

We like to believe that every relationship has a definition, a category, a purpose—but sometimes, the most meaningful bonds don't belong to any one classification, or other times, they belong to multiple classifications simultaneously. Sometimes, relationships exist simply because they matter. My relationship with Amelia helped shaped me in ways I never expected.

And maybe that's enough. Maybe that's the point.

I always knew I was different in every way; I was born intersex, raised as a girl, and lived a life where my romantic partners were all female. From a very young age, I knew I was a lesbian; that part was never in question. But knowing something and accepting it are two very different things. There's a strange limbo that exists between recognition and full acknowledgment, between understanding and truly owning who you are. And for me, that space stretched across decades.

Why did it take so long?

That's the question that lingers, the one I keep coming back to. The answer isn't simple. It's tangled up in years of societal conditioning, unspoken expectations, and the quiet, suffocating pressure to fit neatly into a world that never quite made space for me.

I wasn't ashamed of being queer. That was never the issue. But there's a difference between knowing who you are in the privacy of your own mind and standing in that truth with unapologetic certainty. Between acknowledging something internally and declaring it outwardly, as if to say, Yes, this is who I am,

and I'm done shrinking to make other people comfortable.

For years, I carried the weight of an invisible hesitation. It wasn't denial—not exactly. More like a slow-burning realization that never quite reached the surface. I let myself exist in a way that was technically honest but not entirely free. And that's the thing about freedom—it's not just about being true to yourself; it's about owning that truth without hesitation, without qualification, without feeling like you owe anyone an explanation.

Although I had come out to my friends and family at age sixteen, now at forty-five years old, I finally stopped holding back. Not because I had some grand epiphany, but because I got tired of carrying the extra weight. There is an incredible lightness in full acceptance, in stepping fully into yourself with no apologies, no disclaimers, no lingering doubts.

Now when I meet someone, I make it a point to let them know up front that I'm a lesbian. And that freedom? It was always mine for the taking. I just needed to be ready to claim it.

Over the course of my life, I've had many relationships—lesbian relationships that, by all outward appearances, fit the traditional mold of romance. They were sexual in the way society expects, in the way relationships are often measured. But physicality is just one layer, and I've always been the kind of person who looks far beyond the surface, always searching for something deeper.

Out of all those relationships, only two ever truly meant something. Two women, in a sea of many, who reached into my soul and settled there. Not because of passion or attraction—though those things existed—but because they understood me in a way no one else ever had. They weren't just lovers. They were something else entirely, something I still struggle to define.

I called them my crows.

Crows are intelligent, fiercely loyal, and impossibly free. They don't belong to anyone, but they choose their connections with careful intent. They remember kindness. They recognize, and fiercely defend their own.

That's what those two relationships felt like—rare, dark-winged things that defied categorization. These weren't just people I loved; they were people who saw me, in all my complexity, and never flinched. They weren't just fleeting chapters in the story of my life. They were permanent ink.

Not every relationship is meant to be forever. Some exist only for a season, leaving behind feathers and echoes and memories that never quite fade. But the crows? They stay with you, even in spirit form, no matter how far they fly.

Her name was Allegra, and she was my first love, and my first crow.

We met when we were both sixteen—two fire-hearted girls standing at the edge of adulthood, reckless in the way that only teenagers can be. I was working my first job in the kitchen at the same summer camp where I'd once been a wide-eyed kid, and she was the kind of person who carried the weight of the future like it was already hers to command.

Allegra was fiercely independent—beautiful in a way that wasn't just physical but magnetic, undeniable. There was an intensity in her, a

certainty that burned in her eyes whenever she spoke about her dreams. She knew what she wanted out of life, and she had no intention of waiting for permission to take it. Every move she made was deliberate, every step part of a larger plan that only she could see.

I recognized something familiar in her—an almost defiant passion, an unrelenting drive. She was the only person I had ever met who matched my level of determination, who understood what it felt like to want something so badly that failure wasn't even a consideration. We were mirrors of each other, reflections cast in different shades of the same relentless ambition.

I fell in love with her in the summer of 1996.

It wasn't the kind of love you question or analyze. It was immediate, like lightning striking dry earth, setting everything ablaze before you even have time to be afraid. She became my first crow—the first person who ever made me feel like love wasn't just something to be found, but something to be fought for.

And if I had to relive that summer a thousand times over, I wouldn't change a single moment.

We kept in touch, but only in the way that restless souls do—sporadic, unpredictable, always on her terms. Allegra traveled the world for a time, never staying in one place long enough to leave roots. She sent me letters with no return address, words scrawled on paper like whispers carried by the wind. I never knew where she was, never knew if or when she would return home to Boston.

I wrote back anyway. I sent my letters to the only fixed point I knew—her childhood home—never certain if they would reach her, never expecting a reply. Then, out of nowhere, my phone rang. Her voice was on the other end, steady and familiar, as if no time had passed at all.

“I read your letters this afternoon,” she said. “I want to see you. As soon as possible.”

And just like that, we found ourselves in Buffalo, New York, in a small pocket of time that belonged to no one but us. I was on a break from my basic fire department training, caught between the grueling drills of becoming

someone people would call in their worst moments. She was just passing through—because that’s what she did. Allegra never stayed anywhere for too long.

We met. We talked. We existed in the same space for what felt like mere seconds. Then she was off again, heading to the airport, boarding a plane back to Boston.

Silence followed.

I didn’t hear from her again for decades—not until word got out that I was attending a camp reunion. And just like before, she reappeared like a specter from my past, stepping back into my life as effortlessly as she had left it.

We caught up. We filled in the gaps where we could. And then—just as quickly—she was gone again. A ghost in the wind. A crow taking flight.

I wasn’t looking for a new relationship when I met Amelia. In fact, I was trying to get out of the one I was already in—a relationship that had stretched on for nearly twenty years with a woman named Angie, long past the point where love had faded into routine, and routine had hardened into quiet resentment.



And yet, life has a way of upending itself when you least expect it.

Amelia and I met on Twitter, of all places. It started with casual interactions, nothing particularly significant, just the digital equivalent of passing glances in a crowded room. But then the messages became more frequent, moving from public replies to private conversations. We switched to Instagram video chat, and eventually, our voices replaced the typed words—long phone calls that stretched for hours, our conversations winding through the night like two people who had known each other in another life and were simply picking up where they left off.

At some point, we decided we needed to meet. That was when she told me—hesitant, unsure—I'm transgender.

I had been in lesbian relationships my entire life, but this was different. Or at least, I thought it would be. But the second she said it, I knew it didn't matter. Okay, I told her. That's fine. I'm fine with this. More than fine. Because love—real, soul-deep connection—has never been about gender for me. It's always been about the

person, the fire in their eyes, the way they fit into my life like they were always meant to be there. And the fact that Amelia identified as female, and was able to seamlessly live as such, I fully accepted her as such.

So, I got in my car and drove. Hours on the road, the hum of the highway beneath me, the sky stretched wide and endless as I made my way to meet her at her parents' house—ironically, just outside of Boston.

That afternoon in August of 2020, I met my second crow.

Some people come into your life like a slow, steady burn. Others arrive like a storm, changing everything in an instant. Amelia was neither. She was something different altogether—like a rare bird landing unexpectedly on your outstretched hand, looking at you with knowing eyes, as if to say, I was always meant to find you.

I told my ex-girlfriend that I was going to Boston to meet a woman named Amelia. That was the truth, or at least part of it. What I didn't tell her—what I couldn't tell her—was that this meeting was more than just a casual

introduction. It was the beginning of something neither of us could fully explain at the time, but both of us felt deep in our bones.

For Amelia's safety and mine, we left immediately. No lingering goodbyes, no drawn-out explanations—just a quiet, mutual understanding that staying put wasn't an option. Instead, we got in the car and drove north, crossing state lines like fugitives escaping a life that had never quite fit. Two weeks in Maine, just the two of us. No real plan, no fixed destination—just time and space to exist outside the weight of our pasts.

And then Vermont.

An hour after I signed the closing papers on my forever home—a retired Vermont dairy farm, tucked away in a place where the sky stretched wide and the air smelled of pine and damp earth—we moved in together. No hesitation, no second-guessing. It just was. The way certain things in life feel inevitable, like they were always meant to happen, whether you planned them or not.

We weren't lovers in the traditional sense, but we were something just as rare, just as

powerful. Best friends, bound together not by passion but by survival. Two lost souls who had been gutted by the world, by the rigid expectations of a society that never made space for people like us.

She had been rejected for being transgender. I had been rejected for being a lesbian. Different stories, same pain. We carried the scars of abandonment, the weight of knowing that family is supposed to be unconditional—but sometimes, it isn't.

But in each other, we found what we had lost.

Ours was a relationship of absolute friendship, the kind that doesn't need labels or explanations. We were inseparable, not because we had to be, but because we had finally found someone who understood—really understood—what it was like to be cast out and left to build a life from the wreckage.

And together, we did.

I helped Amelia transition—not just in the medical sense, but in every way a person can help another step fully into themselves. I stood beside her, unwavering, as she became the

woman she had always been. It wasn't just about hormones, or legal documents or the slow unraveling of the past—it was about claiming a life that had been denied to her for too long. And I was there, through every moment of it, because that's what you do for the people you love, and if you truly love someone, they deserve nothing less.

In 2021, we got married. Two best friends making a vow that went beyond romance, beyond convention, beyond anything the world might expect from a marriage. We swore that no matter what happened, we would always be together. That the farm, our farm, would be our forever home. That no matter where life took us, this land, this place, would remain the anchor that held us steady.

And for a while, it was bliss.

Not the fragile, fleeting kind, but the kind that settles into your bones—the kind that makes you believe, for once, that maybe you've outrun the ghosts of your past. We spent every moment together, not just surviving, but living. We built a life that was ours in every sense of the word.

We bought cars, put both of our names on the titles—shared everything, down to the last detail. I added her name to the deed to the farm, and I finally bought my dream tractor, a John Deere 3 Series—the kind of machine that isn’t just a tool, but a statement. A declaration of permanence.

For the first time in my life, I had everything I had ever wished for. A forever home. A dream car. A dream tractor. And, at long last, my beautiful crow. The one I thought would never leave.

In the spring of 2025, Amelia told me she was leaving.

There was no warning, no gentle build-up to soften the blow—just a statement, sharp and absolute. I’m moving to Erie, Pennsylvania. That’s my decision. I’m going, with or without you.

Just like that, the foundation of everything we had built together cracked beneath my feet.

It wasn’t a discussion. It wasn’t a question. It was a declaration. And for the first time since we had met, I realized that no matter how deep

our friendship ran, no matter how much we had promised each other, some decisions aren't made together. Some roads don't fork—they split.

The timing was impossible to ignore. Only weeks before, I had done something I never thought I'd do—I had finally sold my childhood home in New York City. The last tether to the place where my story began, the last piece of my past that I had held onto, as if keeping it would somehow keep me grounded. It was gone. And before I even had the chance to let that reality settle, another piece of my life was slipping away.

Amelia had made up her mind. And there was nothing I could say—nothing I could do—to change it. All I could do was watch as the crow I once called mine prepared to take flight.

St. Patrick's Day weekend came and went, leaving behind a blur of neon-lit streets, laughter spilling into the night air, and the kind of reckless, unfiltered energy that only comes from knowing everything is about to change.

It wasn't just another weekend—it was the beginning of something new, the next chapter turning before I had even finished the last.

Bar hopping with my niece, the two of us weaving through crowds, the scent of whiskey, and cheap beer lingering in the air. The kind of night where conversations flowed as easily as the drinks, and for a little while, nothing else existed beyond the hum of the city around us.

Then, the rush of street racing—adrenaline surging as engines roared, the pavement blurring beneath tires, that familiar thrill of pushing limits just to see where they might break.

A house party followed, the kind that felt like stepping into a different world, where music vibrated through the walls and time became irrelevant. A collision of strangers and fast friendships, the kind of night where you're never really alone, but somehow, always searching for something—or someone.

And then there was someone. A fleeting moment, an unexpected connection, a possibility hanging in the air like an unanswered question. Someone who, for the



first time in a long time, made me wonder if maybe—just maybe—I had found my next crowd.

We met at a bar—one of those dimly lit places where the music hums low, the drinks flow a little too freely, and strangers become something more before the night is over.

She noticed me first. I felt her eyes on me before she even spoke, drawn in as if some invisible force had pulled her in my direction. I played it cool at first, leaning into the role of the untouchable, the one who doesn't fall too easily. But she was persistent, her confidence unwavering, her energy impossible to ignore.

We talked—words turning over between us like cards in a slow game of chance. She edged closer with every sentence, the space between us shrinking, the air thick with the kind of tension you can't fake.

“I'm a lesbian,” I told her. “Always have been, always will be.”

She didn't flinch. She didn't hesitate. Instead, she leaned in, her lips curving into something between a smirk and an unspoken challenge.

“So am I,” she confessed.

And then there was the touch—so casual it could have been played off as an accident, the kind of thing most people wouldn’t even acknowledge. But I knew better. A brief, deliberate brush against my breast, her fingers lingering just long enough to make it clear that she was testing the waters. And to be honest? I liked it.

One thing led to another, and before I knew it, we had slipped behind the bar, tucked away from the crowd, hidden in plain sight. In the secrecy of that stolen moment, our shirts lifted, fabric forgotten as hands explored the kind of intimacy that only happens when curiosity and chemistry collide.

A reckless, fleeting indulgence.

A moment that neither of us would regret.

I handed her my business card, a small piece of paper that held more significance than it ever should have. She took it with a quiet smile, and after an exhaustive rummage through her purse, she returned the gesture with a card of

her own. The exchange felt almost ceremonial, as if we were acknowledging something we both knew, even if we couldn't yet put it into words.

She begged me to text her. Please—her voice, a mix of desperation and hope, clinging to the moment as if she feared it would slip away too soon. I agreed, of course. I always do. Texting was easy—an invitation, a promise that something might come of it.

At first, there was the response. A few brief words, nothing more than a spark of interest, but enough to let me believe that maybe, just maybe, this one would stick. But then, when I reached out again to confirm plans, to make sure that what we had wasn't just a fleeting encounter... nothing.

No response. Not a single word. Just silence. And just like that, she was gone.

Like Allegra. Like Amelia. She, too, was a crow. She came into my life, took what she wanted, and then disappeared into the dark, just like the others.

And as I stood there, watching the emptiness swallow the space where she had been, I felt it again—the ache of a promise broken. The way things always seem to end before they can truly begin. From the sky, it felt like black feathers falling from the stars, drifting down slowly, leaving nothing but the weight of their absence in their wake.

The pattern. I see it so clearly now, woven through the years like a thread I can never quite cut. These women—these crows—why do they keep finding me? Or is it me finding them? Do I chase the crows, or do they circle above, waiting for the right moment to land?

It's always the same. The gravity, the pull, the intoxicating dance of it all. They arrive like omens—beautiful, wild, untamed. They linger just long enough to make me believe the promises, and the possibility of something lasting, perhaps maybe something real. And then, without fail, they slip through my fingers. Off into the night, their wings catching the wind, leaving me with nothing but the tattoos of memories on my heart and the faint traces of their presence.

The weight of it is suffocating. The knowing. The inevitable. I never want just a fleeting moment—I never have. I want something deep, something unshakable. I want permanence in a world that only ever offers me glimpses, echoes, shadows of what could be, leaving me with echoes of what could have been. But crows aren't built for staying. They land when they choose, and when the moment is over, they go.

And yet, I keep hoping. I keep watching the sky, waiting, wondering if the next one might be different. But in the end, it's always the same. For me, at least, time is always finite. Love is always fleeting. And the crows? They always fly away.

Love is a strange thing. It arrives unannounced, perches close enough to touch, and for a brief, shining moment, you believe—maybe this time, it will stay. But love, at least for me, has never been something permanent. It's a crow landing nearby, tilting its head in quiet observation, watching, waiting. It lingers just long enough to make me feel its presence, to let me believe in its weight, its warmth. And then—without warning—it takes flight.

The initial excitement, the magnetic pull—the kind that keeps you awake at night, rerunning conversations, memorizing the smallest of details. The deep connection, so consuming it feels like time bends around it. And then, as if on cue, the inevitable departure. Always too soon. Always before I'm ready.

Love never truly disappears, though. It leaves behind black feathers—memories, remnants of what once was. Scattered fragments of laughter, of stolen moments, of whispered promises that were never meant to last.

I once wrote in my diary that it's always raining in my head.

That line plays on a loop in my mind—a quiet truth I've carried for as long as I can remember. The knowing that love, no matter how fleeting, never fully fades. It lingers like a storm on the horizon, always present, always threatening to break.

And still, despite it all, I keep reaching out my hand, hoping—just once—the crow will choose to stay.

## ***April 5, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)***

*“I do not end here. Today, I begin again,  
carrying forward the strength of every trial,  
the lessons of every failure, and the  
unshakable certainty that my story is still  
unfolding.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

There comes a moment in every life—every soul forged in fire, tested by wind, worn down by time and lifted by impossible grace—when you look at the sky and realize the storm isn’t passing over. It’s waiting. Waiting for you to stop standing there like a goddamn monument and move.

That’s where I am today. On the edge. Not the metaphorical way that poets write about, but the real one—the one where the banner’s been flying too long, soaked in the same salt-stung wind, tattered from battles no one will ever know I fought. This isn’t about surrender. It never was. It’s about release. Retiring the colors—not because I’ve given up, but because it’s time. Time to run the banner down. Time to stop saluting the life that once served me and let it rest.

It's not an act of mourning. It's an act of liberation.

The summer rain is coming early this year. The kind of rain that doesn't ask permission, doesn't care what plans you made, doesn't wait for your grief, or your pride. It just falls. Soft and constant. Cleansing everything it touches. I've spent so many years fighting to stay dry—to keep the uniform neat, the boots polished, and the traumatic stories buried. But I think maybe the time has come to let it soak me through. Let it reach the layers I've kept hidden under my coat, and the need to always be the one who holds the line.

This morning I walked barefoot through the yard. The pine trees held the sky, and the wind whispered that old song I used to hum on night shift—"Closer to Fine."

For me, it was always fine. Always enough. Always tolerable. But fine isn't living. Fine is surviving with grace, and I did that. And, I did it well. I stood like stone in a world that needed statues. But now? I want to run. Not necessarily away from anything, but instead, toward something.



I want to come up through the summer rain—hair matted to my face, mascara running like rivers, boots forgotten on the porch, and every ounce of me saying, “I’m still here. You didn’t break me. You never could.”

I’m done hanging my life on a banner nobody else can read. Done pretending my identity, my truth, my silence was some kind of shield. I’ve got scars that don’t need explaining and stories that don’t need permission to exist. I earned this peace, one broken call at a time.

So, here I go. I’m not raising the flag today. I’m not making my bed today. Instead, I’m stepping out into the rain—unburdened, unarmed, and utterly, unapologetically alive.

It almost feels like a homecoming. Not the flashy kind with banners and bleachers and some forced version of nostalgia-filled teenage shackles of youth, but the real kind—the slow, steady warmth that starts in your chest when your feet finally hit familiar soil and the ghosts that used to haunt the corners of your mind finally sit down and shut the fuck up.

This—all of this—feels like a rebirth. Not some airy, rose-petaled spiritual awakening, but the kind that comes with dirt under your nails, grit in your teeth, and a deep breath that doesn't feel like it's borrowed time anymore. It's the final resolution of a lifetime of service and unbridled adventure. The sirens, the screaming, the silence after. All of it. It's not gone, but it's settled. Like sediment in still water. It's finally not choking me anymore.

Coming home to the house that raised me—these walls, these floors, the stubborn old hardwood floors that still creak in the same damn places—it's like hearing your own heartbeat after years of static. This house has seen every version of me. The brave one. The broken one. The girl who once ran away to New York City, and the woman who stormed back in with ash on her boots and a thousand-yard stare that didn't scare the pine trees one bit.

I slept in my childhood bed last night. Not out of necessity, but because I wanted to. Because sometimes the most powerful thing in the world is choosing to return to the beginning—not because you failed, but because you lived. Fully. Without apology. Without regret. And that bed? It's smaller now, or maybe I've just

grown in ways that matter. But when I curled up in it, surrounded by the echoes of who I used to be, I felt something I haven't in decades.

Safe. Whole. Seen.

I surrounded myself with friends who have known me since the beginning. The ones who never flinched when I told them the truth about who I am. The same friends who didn't blink when the uniform came off, and the stories came out. The ones who remember my real laugh, not the performative one I wore like armor. They were here before the titles, before the badges, before the headlines, the hospital calls, and the late-night knock on the door saying another one didn't make it. They knew me when I was just Emily. Just the girl with the notebook and the camera and a wild streak a mile wide.

No emergency, no radio, no need to be the calm in someone else's storm. Just the sound of my own voice whispering, you made it home, rescue girl. You earned this. Not just the rest, but the right to live without bracing for the next tragedy.

Maybe this is what peace actually looks like. Not stillness, but presence. Not perfection, but permanence. And maybe, just maybe, I can finally stop searching for a place to belong—because I already do.

I don't need to explain myself here. And for once, I don't want to run, but I know in my heart that I can't stay at my mom's house forever.

In the end, I got exactly what I wanted—what I came for, what I sacrificed for, and what I deserved. And for once, I'm not going to apologize for saying that. I spent too many years handing out pieces of myself like party favors, doling out compassion, grit, and grace while expecting nothing but the satisfaction of a job done right. But now that the dust has settled and the air's cleared, I can say—without flinching—that I earned this ending. This beginning.

Amelia has returned to the farm.

There's something cosmic in that sentence. Some full-circle magic that words can't quite contain. No fanfare, no dramatics—just the quiet, steady return of someone who's always

been home, even when she wasn't physically here. There's a rhythm to our lives, hers and mine, that never stopped beating in time. We may not be the same as we once were, but maybe that's the point. We spent a month apart—her in Erie, Pennsylvania, and me still at the farm in Vermont. We've grown. We've learned that love isn't always romantic. The feelings of the heart are not affected by distance. Sometimes it's the soft hum of coexistence, the mutual understanding that no matter where the road leads, we'll always find our way back to each other when it counts.

Then there's my mom.

She's back in the house that raised me. The same home I fled, resented, returned to, and now visit from time to time. We're both older now. Softer in some ways. Sharper in others. But having her here, in the place where my stories were once written, feels like the final puzzle piece locking into place. Not because we've solved everything—but because we've survived everything.

So this is it. It's finally time to retire the uniform.

To hang it up—not with sadness, but with honor. To tuck it away like the pages of a chapter well-written, well-fought, and well-worth it. I showed up. Every single day. I carried the weight, held the line, walked through fire both literal and metaphorical, and never once asked to be spared. I gave my time, my energy, and the very fabric of my being—and now, I’m reaping my just reward.

Not in medals, or parades, or salutes out of gratitude and respect, but in peace.

This is not the end of the story.

This is the day I begin again. Perhaps no longer as Rescue Girl, the invincible heroine of a thousand unseen battles—but as Emily. The woman who came home, whole, just as she promised so many times before heading off to her shift.

And this time, I’m staying.

## ***April 6, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)***

*“I was given two soulmates in this life—one forged by time, the other born from fire. The universe didn’t send me a crow; it sent me a Phoenix, and I’ve been burning bright ever since.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

This past weekend, I drove back to the place where my story began. The road to my mother’s house is the same as it’s always been. That drive always stirs something in me. A reminder of who I was before the world turned hard and unforgiving. I didn’t just go to see my mom. I also carved out time—intentionally, like I always do—to see her. My best friend. My code friend. My forever friend.

We go way back. Back to the kind of days when your whole life fit inside a high school locker, and the biggest decision was what to wear to prom. She was just turning 18, I was turning 20, and when she asked me to take her to her senior prom, I of course said yes before she even finished the sentence. I remember the awkwardness at the tuxedo rental place—how the guy behind the counter gave me a once-

over, trying to reconcile my female body with his assumptions. I remember the way the fabric didn't sit quite right, the shoulders too wide for a frame that was never built for masculinity. But I didn't care. Because I wasn't doing it for appearances. I was doing it for her.

We were young, reckless, and filled with the kind of energy that only comes from not knowing how fragile everything really is. We did everything together. Worked side by side in Fire and EMS, went with friends to the movies together, laughed until we couldn't breathe, and, once, crossed that invisible line between friendship and something else entirely. I lost my virginity to her when she was turning 19, and I was turning twenty-one. It happened only once, but it meant everything to me. And yet, it was never about sex. It was about connection. It was about the safety of being seen. Fully. Without question or condition.

Then life happened. September 11th rewrote my trajectory. I took a job in New York City, and the distance grew slowly, like a crack in old plaster—small at first, then enough to let in cold air. We drifted. But we never disconnected entirely.



I remember the warnings and the whispered hesitations. People told me not to go to New York City. “It’ll break you,” they said. “It’ll chew you up, and you’ll lose yourself trying to survive it.” Maybe they were right. But I wasn’t asking for permission.

Because deep down, I knew.

This was my time. If there was ever going to be a defining moment in my career, a line drawn in permanent ink across the chapters of my life, this would be it. The city was calling—not with promises of glory, but with the undeniable pull of purpose. And when purpose calls, you don’t turn away. Not if you’re like me. Not if you’ve got rescue in your blood and steel laced into your spine.

So I went.

And life was hard. Harder than anyone ever warned me it would be. My body carried the weight of it first—exhaustion etched into muscle and bone, bruises that never quite healed, burns no one ever saw. My mind paid its own price—fractures that didn’t bleed but hurt just the same. There are wounds you can’t

point to on an X-ray, and I've got more than a few.

It felt like setting sail in a heavy gale while everyone else stayed behind on the dock—warm, dry, content, willingly tied to the anchor chain. Not me. I cut the rope. Gripped the wheel. Took the storm head-on. It damn near tore me apart. The wind howled, the sea roared, and the sky offered no mercy. But I held on. I held on.

There were nights I wasn't sure I'd make it. Days when the chaos swallowed every shred of clarity, when the weight of the job turned me to stone and expectation pressed into my chest like a cinder block. But I stayed steady. Not because I had to. Because I chose to.

And in the end, I made it out.

I walked through that fire—more than once. I stood where most wouldn't, did what others couldn't, and I kept showing up long after the cameras were gone. But in 2020, I quit the fire service.

Not in defeat. It was my decision.

I had given it everything. My strength. My time. My heart. My body. And when I walked away, I didn't do it with shame—I did it with the quiet dignity of someone who knows when the storm has passed and the ship deserves a new course.

I didn't quit because I was broken. I quit because I survived. And survival, sometimes, is the bravest act of all.

In 2020, at age forty, my best friend and I found our way back to each other. Just like that. No fireworks. No need for explanations. Just the kind of reunion that feels like picking up a conversation mid-sentence after a long pause. I'm forty-five now, and every time I go home, I make time for her. Because if I don't, it doesn't feel like I've really been home.

My friend and I have a relationship that doesn't fit into neat little boxes preferred in modern parlance. We're not lovers. We're more than friends. We're something elemental. Something solid, as if forged under pressure, tempered by fire. I look at her, and I see a whole lifetime; a lifetime shared from two intersecting points of view. I see the young girl who trusted me with her prom night. I see the woman who rode calls

with me through nights that damn near broke us. I see the person, the only person, I could ever cry with after witnessing a tragedy. I see the kind of person who knows exactly who I am, even when the rest of the world gets it wrong.

And I get it. I do. The stares, the confusion, the unspoken questions that hang in the air like static. I've lived my whole life at the intersection of what is expected and what is—and I no longer apologize for it.

I am intersex. A biological enigma to some, a footnote in a medical text to others. But to me, I am simply... me.

I identify as a hermaphrodite. Not because it's provocative, or political, or palatable—but because it is truth. It's the word written in the raw, unfiltered version of my birth records. Not the sanitized version the state allowed, but the quiet, clinical honesty scribbled in the margins by someone who saw me as I was: born in between. Not broken. Not confused. Whole.

Officially, I was assigned female at birth. XX chromosomes. Female on paper. Female in social security databases and school rosters.

Female when I sat cross-legged in kindergarten and when my pediatrician gently asked me, at eight years old, “Do you feel like a girl or a boy?”

I told him the truth. I have always felt like a girl. But not in the way the world defines it. Not in pink bows and soft edges. Not in dollhouses or fragile politeness. I’ve always been a girl built of fire and angles, of old soul quiet and fierce defiance. My womanhood was never a performance. It was instinct. It was breath. It was mine.

And if society demands that I translate myself into something it can digest—if it insists that I check a box, pick a lane, wear a label—then yes, I will say female. Female, as defined by biology and spirit, by blood and backbone, by the private orchestra of organs and anomalies that built this body I call home.

Female—based on fins and feathers, and every other strange taxonomy of nature. Female, like certain fish that shift their sex in coral solitude. Female, like birds who sing both parts of the mating call and confuse the scientists. Female, in the way god might have whispered a secret and then dared the world to understand it.

Our bond—this strange, beautiful, platonic-turned-something, turned-back-again relationship—has outlived years, cities, and chaos. And I can say this with absolute certainty: my younger years would not have been complete without her in them. She is, without a shred of doubt, the most enduring, significant relationship I have ever had.

When I came down with COVID-19, I was in New York City, staying in my birth home while overseeing renovations—dealing with cracked plaster, aging pipes, and the ghost of my childhood, all while something insidious was quietly taking hold inside my body. I didn't know I was sick at the time. Not really. I just felt... off. Like a radio signal that wasn't quite tuning in. I brushed it off as stress, fatigue, maybe a cold. After all, I was still standing. Still functional. Still me.

That Christmas in 2019, I flew to Texas to visit my aunt, with my then girlfriend Angie by my side. We weren't together anymore, but we still knew how to coexist in the same orbit—out of habit, history, or maybe just muscle memory. We landed in San Antonio, made our way to my

aunt's apartment, and that's when everything unraveled.

As soon as I stepped through her front door, I dropped. Not stumbled, not wobbled—collapsed. My body hit the floor like it had been waiting for permission to shut down. It wasn't fatigue. It wasn't dehydration. I passed out, cold. And for the first time in my entire life, I had no control over it. Just like that—lights out.

When I came to, I was dazed, disoriented, barely able to piece together what had happened. My aunt didn't hesitate. She bundled me into her car and took me straight to the local emergency room. No waiting. No triage delay. They saw me and brought me right back. I remember the sterile fluorescent lights, the beeping monitors, the way Angie hovered awkwardly in the doorway, her concern carefully hidden beneath that stone-faced calm she always wore when she didn't know what to say.

They ran tests—all the tests. Full blood panel. CT scan of my brain. IV fluids. The works.

When the results came back, the doctor didn't sugarcoat anything. My bloodwork showed that

I was fighting off a major infection—something aggressive, systemic. They didn't know exactly what it was, but it was serious enough that they didn't waste time pretending otherwise. This was early pandemic territory. COVID testing was unreliable. And they'd seen enough bodies come through already to know what they were dealing with, even without a positive result.

I myself have never claimed modern religion. If anything, I identify simply as Pagan. But being Texas, they prayed over me. Nurses, doctors, strangers passing in the hallway—people I'd never met whispering words meant for God. I didn't mind. It wasn't performative. It was real. Honest. Human.

They started me on a broad-spectrum IV antibiotic cocktail and told me—flatly—that there were no guarantees. They weren't sure if it would work. They weren't sure if I'd make it through the night. There it was. No drama. No crescendo. Just a statement of fact. I might die.

They asked me if I wanted anyone to be notified in the event that something goes wrong. I told them that I wanted two people notified; my mom, and my best friend. I instructed Angie to let my best friend know,



and I told my aunt who was present at the time to make sure Angie follows through with this request.

And I remember lying there, under the dim hum of hospital fluorescent lights, thinking, So this is it. And strangely, I wasn't afraid. I wasn't angry. I wasn't bargaining with the universe. I had lived a life of service, of action, of meaning, of working hard and playing hard. I had saved people. A lot of people. And I had done it without ever desiring any admiration, or reward, despite the toll it had taken on me physically, emotionally, and mentally. And while it's sad that if I were to go at age 39, I had to accept it. And yet, despite the now forgotten warnings from the doctors, the signed and witnessed and notarized disclaimers, and the mounting hospital bills, I survived. I'll never forget the way death circled the room that night.

Coming that close to death—closer than I ever had before—did something to me. It didn't just rattle the cage. It tore the damn door off. There's a difference between understanding, in theory, that life is fragile, and feeling that fragility settle into your bones. After that night

in the ER, I didn't just get better—I got changed.

When I realized I had survived—when the fever broke, and the world didn't fade to black—I made a decision, silent but absolute. If I was still here, I wasn't going to just exist anymore. I was going to live. Really live. No more sleepwalking through routines or carrying dead weight out of guilt or familiarity. I was done letting time slip through my fingers like water I pretended wasn't leaking. I spent the rest of my Christmas vacation in the guest bedroom of my aunt's apartment. I had no appetite, so I would simply snack as needed during the day, sleep, and go out for dinner.

Within the year, everything changed. I met Amelia on Twitter of all places—a spark flickering through fiber optics and late-night messages, unexpected and undeniable. I completely and permanently ended things with Angie not long after.

Then came Vermont, where I found a ten-acre piece of earth where I could put down roots that wouldn't be yanked up by sirens or deadlines. I bought my forever home—three bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a quiet kind of

freedom that doesn't ask for attention. Just space. Amelia moved in, and not even a year later, we were married.

She is a transgender woman. I helped her transition to female—not just in name or paperwork, but in all the deeply personal, quietly monumental ways that matter: language, presence, wardrobe, confidence, safety, and the quiet unspoken wisdom of girl code. I held space for her identity in the same way I always wished someone had held space for mine, even though technically I am a cisgender female.

When Amelia entered my life, it felt as though the universe had placed a black-winged bird gently into my hands—fragile, wild, and impossibly rare. I thought she was a crow, some beautiful omen, maybe even a warning. But I was wrong. She was a goddamn Phoenix. A fire-born miracle with ash on her lashes and heaven stitched quietly into her smile.

The universe didn't just send me someone to love. It sent me an angel—just in case I never make it to heaven myself.

Being with her feels like remembering how to breathe. Like sprinting barefoot through open fields laced with poppies and scattered with tiny pearls, catching the wind in your chest and letting it fill the hollow spaces you forgot were still aching. She reminds me of what it feels like to be young—not the kind of young that fades, but the kind that never really leaves you if you’ve lived hard enough to earn it.

It’s the same feeling I had that night with my best friend, when we and a couple of mutuals decided to test a theory: would driving a car through a cornfield really look the way it does in the movies?

We didn’t hesitate. We climbed into my beat-up 1991 Honda station wagon—a hand-me-down held together with rust and defiance—and plowed through a row of tall, golden stalks under a summer sky. The corn gave way like memory, bending and parting, and for a few precious minutes, we were the architects of chaos and beauty. We didn’t know where we were going, only that we were going together. Fast. Free. Unapologetically alive.

That’s what loving Amelia feels like. Like crashing through the rules just to see what

happens. Like laughter that doesn't ask for permission. Like surviving things that were meant to break you, only to rise again—scarred, but blazing.

She is my reminder that even after all the grief, the noise, and the nights I wasn't sure I'd see morning... something good still found me.

And it stayed. We weren't drawn together by romance or passion. We married as friends, and have stayed as such. I refer to my forever home simply as the farm; my friends and I know exactly what I'm referring to when I use these words. The farm is where Amelia and I live as chosen family. We cohabitate as kindred spirits bound by shared truths, hard-won self-understanding, and an unspoken agreement that the world is easier to carry when someone else is walking beside you. My mother's parents once owned a farm near Buffalo, New York, and as a girl I would visit. My grandparents farm was hundreds of acres in size. And although mine is tiny by comparison, and in a completely different state, there's a strange kind of comfort in that. A sense of renewed childhood freedom.

We didn't need each other to be anything other than what we already were. I never had to explain myself to her—not my female identity, not my past, not the way I move through the world in my own quiet defiance of its expectations. She got it. Not in theory. Not in sympathy. In lived experience. And I got her just the same.

Some people spend their lives looking for someone who sees them without squinting, without questioning, without trying to reframe or redefine. I didn't just find that in Amelia—I helped her become the version of herself she had always carried inside. And she did the same for me, in her own quiet way.

That kind of connection isn't common. It's not loud. It doesn't need to be. Yet, in my life, I have two—I have my best friend, and I have Amelia.

It's the kind you feel in the stillness of the morning, drinking coffee in silence beside someone who knows exactly who you are—and never once asked you to be anything else. When you've stood at the edge and watched the world flicker like a dying bulb, you stop waiting

for the "right time." You stop asking for permission. You go.

Some people say love is a spark, a moment, a singular flash in the dark. But what I found with Amelia wasn't sudden. It wasn't a firecracker. It was a slow burn—the kind that starts deep in the earth and works its way up through the soles of your feet, into your lungs, until you're breathing it in without even knowing.

We didn't fall for each other. We arrived in each other's lives like old souls reunited, like the story had already been written and we were just catching up to the page. I married her not out of tradition or fantasy, but out of reverence. I married her the way one might preserve a holy artifact—delicately, intentionally, knowing some things are too sacred to leave unspoken.

She never asked me to be anything other than who I already was—intersex, flawed, complicated, neurodivergent, profoundly high functioning, and stitched together by every choice I ever made. And I never asked her to be anyone but the woman she always had been, even before the mirror caught up with her

reflection. In that way, we didn't just love—we recognized each other.

There's this photo I carry in my mind, even if it doesn't exist on film: the two of us in the kitchen on a rainy Tuesday, soft music humming through the radio, me barefoot, hands dusted with flour, trying in a hurry to put together some pancake mix because we had run out and I neglected to make it the night before. We're not speaking, just moving around each other like we've always known the steps. Her helping me get ingredients, a spoon, and mixing bowl, while I'm spilling settling clouds of flour as it leaks through the bottom nooks and crannies of the paper it is packaged in. That's what peace looks like. It doesn't shout. It lingers.

And yet, beneath that peace is a gravity—an understanding that we've both survived things that should have shattered us. She has her ghosts. I have mine. Some nights we don't talk about them, and some nights we open the door and let them in. We sit in silence, side by side, while the ghosts drift through the room like smoke. We don't have to explain. We just... know.



People love to romanticize “soulmates,” but no one tells you how messy, how human that kind of connection really is. They don’t tell you that soulmates sometimes come wrapped in scar tissue and fire line tape. They don’t tell you that it is rare, though completely possible to have two soul mates like I do. And what is never acknowledged is the fact that they come after the storm, not before. That they aren’t always lovers in the traditional sense, but sometimes companions in the deepest, oldest meaning of the word—someone who shares your bread, your bed, your burdens, and your broken pieces.

I’ve had relationships that flared and burned out. I’ve had lovers who never learned my language. I’ve had one-time flings. But Amelia? She spoke it before we ever met. We were built from the same raw material—queer, neurodivergent, shaped by fire and left to find our own way home.

And we did.

Together, we found this little house in Vermont. Ten acres of sky and pine trees and the kind of quiet you can hear yourself thinking in. It’s not grand. It’s not flashy. But it’s ours.

It's where I cut the grass, and plow the driveway, and she reads on the porch, where I fix what breaks, and she takes photos of the wild things. We pass like moving shadows through morning routines, spend the entire day together as two female friends, and collapse into separate beds at night—content, understood, and never alone.

People ask me what kind of marriage it is, and I never quite know how to answer. It's not what most would expect. We don't fit into boxes. We never did. But I will say this:

I married someone who sees me. Fully. Unflinchingly. Without flinching at the parts of me the world has tried to erase. I married someone who chose me not in spite of my past, but because of it. Someone who brought her own suitcase of fire and ashes and said, Let's build a home anyway.

Even now, years later, when life has shifted and softened, and we've both changed in ways neither of us saw coming—we're still here. Still choosing each other. Still rising.

Not because it's easy. But because some things are worth the choosing.

And every now and then, when the stars align  
and the wind sounds just like it did that  
summer night with the cornfield and the  
station wagon, I remember: the universe didn't  
send me a soulmate wrapped in fantasy. It sent  
me a lifetime friend and a Phoenix.

And I've been burning bright ever since.

## ***April 10, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)***

*“We were young, broke, and wild enough to  
bleed just to prove we were alive.”—Emily  
Pratt Slatin*

I was nineteen years old, back in the Adirondacks, working as a counselor at Camp Chateaugay—the same damn place I was sent to as a kid. That summer felt like a loop closing in on itself. Same dirt roads, same lake, same kind of kids.

On our nights off, we all went to the Owlout. It wasn't a question. It was a rite of passage. That bar was a simple one-room bar with no pretense—walls soaked in spilled beer, floors that stuck to your shoes, jukebox in the corner full of songs that meant too much to everyone in the room. Every single window had a buzzing neon sign advertising a different beer, and if you stepped in on a rainy night, you could feel the heat coming off the low-hanging incandescent bulbs on the ceiling. That place had its own pulse, and if you didn't fall into rhythm, you got the hell out.

That night, it was me, a handful of other counselors, and a band that called themselves The Redneck Aliens. Yeah. That was their actual name. They were bad. Like not even bar-band-bad. Just plain offensive to sound. Out of tune, out of sync, and out of their league. They had this lead singer who looked like he borrowed his personality from a VHS tape he found in a pawn shop.

At some point—somewhere between song three and auditory hell—this middle-aged biker stands up from his corner stool. The guy had been quiet all night, just smoking and watching like he'd seen every version of this moment before. He stands up, walks forward like it's nothing, and says—clear as day, no yelling—“Shut the fuck up.”

He pulls the cigarette from his mouth with one hand, beer in the other, and points the bottle at the lead singer. Then he points the cigarette at the amp. It was like some backwoods exorcism.

The band freezes. The guy looks around, half-expecting someone to hold his beer, and when nobody moves fast enough, he just places it—dripping wet—right on top of the band's gear. Then he walks behind the amps and starts

unplugging everything one cord at a time. Calm. Systematic. Like he was defusing a bomb. No hurry. No wasted movement. Just yanking the life out of their setup, piece by piece.

The band tries to recover. They're scrambling, trying to save face. So what do they do? They go for a drum solo. A goddamn drum solo. As if snare rolls were gonna win the crowd back. As if rhythm was gonna erase the humiliation.

While they're flailing, the biker disappears. He comes back five minutes later—on his Harley. Not metaphorically. On his actual Harley Davidson motorcycle. He rides the thing through the bar doors like he owns the joint, parks it right in front of the band, and just revs the engine.

Not a little rev. Not a playful “vroom-vroom.” I'm talking full-throttle, chest-rattling, I will drown out your entire existence kind of revving. He lets that engine scream long enough for everyone to understand: You had your chance. You failed. Now the bike plays louder than you ever could.

Then—just like that—he rolls through the bar and out the other side. The band didn't play another note. Nobody clapped. Nobody cheered. Nobody needed to. It was over. Done. That man didn't just end the set—he erased it.

I look at the bartender. She looks at me. I raise my eyebrows and say, “Well, that's not something you see every day.”

That bar ended up mattering more than I realized at the time. It was the bar where I'd have my first real drink at age 20—cheap, flat, and perfect. It was also the place where I used to put Iris by the Goo Goo Dolls on the jukebox, every single time, and we'd all sing “you bleed just to know you're alive” like it was a goddamn sacred chant. It became a meme among us—half-sincere, half-joke, but all heart. That lyric outlived everything. I don't talk to any of those people anymore, but the joke's still alive in my head. Still funny. Still true.

I still laugh about it to this day. Not because it was shocking, but because it was so perfectly earned. I've seen bar fights. I've seen bad bands. I've even seen people thrown out of places for being loud. But I have never—before or since—seen someone walk behind a band,

unplug them wire by wire, and then ride a Harley through the building like it was his fucking living room.

That was the Owlout in Merrill, NY. That was the summer of 1999. And I'll never forget it. Not a single second of it. It wasn't just a funny night in a bar, it was what real life looked like, unfiltered, before phones, before feeds, before we all got afraid of looking like we gave a shit.



## ***April 15, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)***

*“The truest nicknames aren’t given — they’re  
earned in the fire and remembered in the  
quiet.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

Some names are given at birth—chosen in hospitals, whispered in delivery rooms, penned on certificates by people who may or may not have any real idea who we are yet. Others are earned through fire, dirt, resilience, and reputation. Still others are worn like armor, or masks, or sometimes both, depending on the day.

The word nickname comes to us from the Middle English eke-name—literally, an “also-name.” Over time, the indefinite article an eke-name softened into a nickname, and the evolution stuck. We’ve used the concept for centuries, likely since before language was formalized. An alternate name. An auxiliary identifier. A title you didn’t choose, but accepted. Or perhaps became.

People sometimes wonder where nicknames came from—whether the idea originated with

Native Americans or some specific culture. The truth is, the concept of secondary or symbolic names is as old as language itself. You'll find it in every corner of the globe, in nearly every human society.

Among Native American cultures, names were not mere labels—they were living expressions of a person's essence, often bestowed with great care and ceremony. A child might be named after a vision seen in a dream, a natural event surrounding their birth, or a characteristic that emerged early in life. But that name wasn't necessarily permanent. As a person matured, their name might change—sometimes more than once—reflecting major life events, personal growth, or acts of courage. In some nations, such as the Lakota or Navajo, names were considered powerful, even sacred; they could offer protection, carry ancestral significance, or invoke the spiritual guidance of animals, elements, or ancestors. Some names were spoken only within families or among elders. Others were earned in battle or ceremony. The idea of an “also-name” was interwoven into their spiritual and communal identity, not as a casual nickname, but as a sacred echo of who someone truly was—or who they were becoming.

There's a beautiful humanity in that. A recognition that identity isn't fixed, but fluid. That names carry the weight of evolution.

In my own life, I've lived through names like lifetimes. When I was a young girl, my friends called me Dark Horse. I was reckless, untamable—always the one who could be counted out until it mattered most. I didn't live with moderation. I burned hot, fast, and fully, even when the road ahead was uncertain. I wrote myself a beacon, so I would know the way, and despite the odds and challenges placed in my life path. When everything fell apart, I was the one people called upon to help. There was a kind of groundedness under the chaos, like a secret spine running through the madness. A queer, fun-loving, laid-back all-American girl who preferred to be alone, or simply in the company of a single trusted friend, who showed up without question whenever she was called upon.

At work, my nickname became Lieutenant—not because someone thought it sounded impressive, but because I'd fought, bled, and earned it through decades of relentless dedication, command presence, and hard-won

credibility. It wasn't handed to me with a promotion or stitched onto a uniform patch—it was spoken with a kind of unspoken reverence by those who knew what it meant to follow me into hell and back. Still, I never let it follow me off-scene. The moment the radios went quiet and the gear was stowed, I insisted people drop the formality. Not out of false humility, but because titles mean nothing in quiet rooms and empty hallways. Leadership isn't a name—it's how you show up when things go sideways, how you steady the chaos without making it about you. Lieutenant was never a performance. It was who I became when there was no room for error, and lives were quite literally on the line.

As an adult, my friends call me Rescue Girl. It began with the job, but it became a philosophy. I was a career Firefighter, a Paramedic, and a rescue specialist routinely placed in situations that would make most people freeze. It wasn't about heroism—it was about intention. Precision. Knowing exactly what needed to be done, and doing it, even when it felt impossible. I lived by certain rules: show up, keep your head, fix the unfixable. I didn't pick that name, but I carried it like a badge of

honor; I still do, even though I've long since retired.

And then there's *Emily*—the name I've been called my entire life, even when my legal documents stubbornly insisted otherwise. Or *Em*, for those who know me well. It was never about what the paperwork said. It was about truth. Identity, as far as I am concerned, is not a bureaucratic designation. It's not a driver's license, or a birth certificate. It's a bone-deep knowing. A voice in your own chest. I knew who I was before the world gave me permission. I still do.

We all have names we're given, and names we grow into. Some fall away with time. Some stick to the skin and become part of who we are. Some are whispered in love. Some are shouted across firegrounds, natural disasters, or trauma bays. But the real ones—the true nicknames—are earned. Not because someone decided them for us, but because we lived them into being.

So no, nicknames didn't originate with any one people. Not with the Native Americans, though their naming customs held profound spiritual meaning that deserves its own chapter in our

collective story. Not with the Greeks, or the Romans, or the early Anglo-Saxons. Nicknames are universal, human, and subtle reminder to those of us who have truly lived like to the definition of fullest, that we are never just one thing.

We are what we answer to. What we survive. What we become. Call me Emily, or Em. Or Rescue Girl, or Dark Horse, if you remember. But always remember—whatever name you use to refer to me—I've already lived it.

***April 16, 2025—Middletown  
Springs, Vermont (Home)***

*“I thank the reckless girl I was—storm-eyed,  
wild, and half-feral—for carrying me through  
the fire long enough to become the woman I  
am.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

Some nights I sit with the silence and feel like  
I’m eavesdropping on my own past.

The 1990s were the best decade of my life, and  
I don’t say that with any polished nostalgia or  
rose-tinted yearning for mixtapes, AOL  
Chatrooms, and pagers. I say it because I was  
still half-feral then—caught somewhere  
between a teen girl and a woman, trying to  
grow into skin that didn’t quite fit but  
somehow still looked like mine. I didn’t have  
the language back then, for my body, my truth,  
my queerness, my rage—but I had instincts  
sharper than broken glass, and I followed them  
with reckless precision.

I lived fast. The kind of fast that makes people  
think you’re running toward something, when  
really, you’re running away from everything. I  
bled slow, carrying every wound like a sacred

offering. I was the girl who always got up, brushed herself off, and stitched herself back together. And yet, somehow, I'm still here. Still strong as hell. Still breathing. Still me.

When I look at old pictures—those glossy, fading snapshots of a girl with storm clouds in her eyes and a daredevil's grin—I barely recognize myself. It's not the hair, or the clothes, or the blur of old film—it's the weightlessness. That reckless, wild, and untethered person I used to be. There's a part of me that wonders if she ever really existed. Maybe she was a fever dream stitched together by trauma and adrenaline. Maybe she was realer than anything I've ever been since.

I don't know how I made it this long. That's not false humility or poetic affectation—it's an honest, ragged truth. I've lived more lives than I had any right to survive. I've stood at the edge more times than I've counted. Sometimes I think the only reason I'm still standing is because something in the universe—some stubborn, cosmic glitch—refused to let me go.

People think survival is noble. That it earns you some kind of badge or grace. But surviving isn't noble. It's brutal. It's lonely. It's waking up in



the middle of the night and realizing you're still here, and you still don't know why.

But I do know this: I'm still that girl who lived through the '90s. I didn't die. I've just grown quieter, tougher, and maybe at times, a little sadder. I live with the memories of a hard life, full of grit, unwavering determination, and just the right amount of luck. I'm still the one who still grabs the wheel when everything's falling apart. I'm the one who realized, at a young age, that love doesn't have to look like a postcard, and family isn't always blood. Every day I remind myself that it's okay not to know who you are all the time, as long as you never pretend to be someone you're not.

So tonight, I will pour myself a Coke Classic over ice, light a candle in the kitchen, and say a silent thank-you to that reckless, beautiful girl I used to be—for surviving long enough to become the woman I am now.

Still wild. Still whole. Still here. Still Emily.

## ***April 18, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)***

*“The storm inside me was never meant to be  
quieted—it was meant to be everything I am.”*

*—Emily Pratt Slatin*

This morning, I keep thinking about the storm I carry inside me—how it’s always been there, humming just beneath the surface, daring the world to notice. It is not new. It didn’t just arrive one day. It was born with me, braided into my breath, threaded into every bone.

Some days, I wonder if people can see it—the way it presses against the edges of my skin, aching to break free. Most of them don’t. Most of them see only what they want to see—a woman who smiles, who carries the weight of the world so gracefully they assume it must not be heavy at all.

But I know better. I know all too well what it costs to be unstoppable.

Society taught me young to be small, to be quiet, to fold my fire neatly inside myself. It was called it polite. Society called it the mark of

good girl. But what they really wanted was for me to be less. Less difficult. Less brilliant. Less alive.

But the storm became a force I could not contain, and it would not be silenced. It cracked my rib cage open from the inside out. It roared in the spaces where silence was expected. It pulled me back to my feet every time the world knocked me down.

There is a force inside me that refuses to yield. It does not apologize. It does not ask permission. It knows, even when I forget, that I was never meant for smallness, never meant to be quiet, never meant to fit inside the lines someone else drew.

I carry a storm, and the storm carries me. Maybe that's the secret no one ever taught me—that I was never supposed to tame it. I was supposed to become it. And this morning, sitting here in the brilliant light of morning with the windows rattling, I understand something I have always known but never said out loud:

I am the storm. I am the force. I am the woman  
who cannot be contained. And I would not  
change a damn thing.

## ***April 20, 2025—Stamford, New York (Mom's House)***

*“To come home is not to return, but to reclaim the parts of yourself still waiting in the corners.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

There are places in this world that never quite let you go, no matter how many years pass, no matter how far your life carries you away. For me, that place has always been Stamford, New York—the small town where I grew up, where this chapter of my story began sometime in 1987, long before I had the words to tell it. This weekend, I found myself back there again, pulling into the familiar driveway of the old house that still wears the years like a favorite denim jacket—weathered, but still holding on.

Every time I return, it feels less like stepping into a memory and more like colliding with a part of myself that never really left. It's as if some essential fragment of who I was—who I still am—waited patiently inside those walls, tucked between the floorboards and the cracked paint, peeling in some spots, yet the memories themselves left untouched by time or distance. For the short time I'm here, that piece

of me breathes again. It's an unsettling comfort, a reminder that some places—and some versions of ourselves—are permanent fixtures, even when everything else shifts.

There's a gravity to it that I can't deny. A pull that tugs at the core of me in ways I don't even try to fight anymore. I used to think I had outgrown this town, this house, these ghost-like rough draft versions of myself—but the older I get, the more I understand that roots are not chains. They are lifelines. And sometimes, we need to come home, if only to remember who we were before the world demanded so much of us.

I left this home for the first time when I was sixteen—not by choice, but by force. My late father, realizing I was a lesbian, decided that loving differently made me unworthy of staying. He kicked me out without hesitation, leaving me to navigate the world with a hand-me-down 1991 Honda station wagon with bald tires, a duffel bag filled with my clothes, and six hundred dollars to my name. It wasn't enough, but it had to be. I had just started my first job then, fumbling my way into adulthood far sooner than I should have. Somewhere in the middle of that chaos—the long hours, the

sleepless nights, the desperate attempts to outrun the fear—I also fell in love for the very first time. Her name was Allegra, and for a little while, she made the world feel less brutal, less cold. Loving her was my first act of rebellion, my first taste of freedom, and my first understanding that even when you lose everything, sometimes you gain something even more sacred—the courage to build a life that is entirely your own.

For years and years after that first exile, I roamed—stumbling through life like a ghost trying to remember what it meant to be real. I was lost more often than I was found, chasing down dead ends and half-built dreams, unsure of where I was going or if I would ever really get anywhere at all. I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life, and most days, it felt like the world was perfectly content to watch me disappear.

I carved out a backup plan the only way I knew how: with ink, and with light. I wrote when the world tried to silence me. I photographed what I was too afraid to say out loud. I wrote myself into existence while everything around me—circumstances, expectations, even people—did their best to erase me. If I was going to survive,

it would be on my terms. Word by word, image by image, I built a life the world couldn't take from me. I survived by becoming the person I needed when I was young.

For all the ways life has stretched and reshaped me, there are certain people who have remained untouched by time—fixtures of my heart, as steady and certain as the stars, where being strong was never a choice—it was a sentence handed down without appeal. The universe gifted me one such person—the best friend I have ever had. She is the kind of friend who knew me before I built the walls, before the years taught me how heavy survival could become. In a world that demands masks and performances, she has always seen me without either, and loved me anyway.

Nearly thirty years ago, when we were young and untested, there were romantic feelings humming quietly between us—a soft, unspoken thing we never fully named. We were two girls standing at the threshold of adulthood, trying to make sense of ourselves in a world that had no intention of making it easy. We could have been something more back then, but the truth is, what we eventually became—soul-level friends—was something purer, something that



outlasted even the sharpest pangs of young love.

Even now, all these years later, I carve out time to visit her whenever I return. It is not an obligation or a courtesy—it is a necessity, like breathing. She is one of the few people who remembers the versions of me that I sometimes forget—the brave little girl, the reckless teenager, the young woman who thought she had to burn down every bridge just to find herself. And she loves all of those versions without question.

There is a sacred kind of loyalty that only grows in the soil of shared history. Ours is a friendship that doesn't require explanations, apologies, or constant tending. It simply exists—solid, irreplaceable, and stitched into the very fabric of my being. Every hug, every late-night conversation, every inside joke that still makes us laugh like teenagers—they are reminders that while much of the world moves on, some things—some people—are too important to be left behind.

This last trip, though steeped in familiar places and familiar faces, also cracked open something new. On April 20, a date that will

now mean more to me than a casual nod to cannabis culture, I found myself at a party hosted by one of my best friend's friends. A gathering of souls under the haze of smoke and laughter, tucked away in a house that felt instantly welcoming, like it had been waiting for me to walk through its door.

Walking into the party, I felt like I had been transported straight back to my freshman year of college in 1998—a time when house parties weren't about impressing anyone, but about belonging to each other in the most imperfect, beautiful ways. Cannabis was everywhere back then, woven right alongside flannel shirts, acid-washed jeans, the scratchy echo of grunge music, and the unshakable belief that while the world was changing faster than we could catch our breath, we still had each other. Back then, we hadn't yet been taught to judge people by their differences—we were far too busy being amused by them, celebrating the weirdness in each other like badges of honor.

The '90s were chaotic and brutal, filled with heartbreaks that left permanent scars and struggles that nearly broke me, but they were also, without question, the best years of my life. There was a rawness to it all, a freedom in not

needing to be anything other than exactly who we were. Stepping into that party was like stepping into a photograph from those years—a vivid reminder that somewhere beneath all the noise of adulthood, that girl still exists, laughing and unafraid.

It wasn't my usual scene. I'm not one for crowds or small talk—the kind of social theater that feels more exhausting than exhilarating—but there was something different about last night. Maybe it was the weightlessness that only comes from being among people who don't expect you to be anything but yourself. Maybe it was the way the stars looked impossibly close overhead. Or maybe—probably—it was her.

She was impossible to miss—not because she demanded attention, but because something about her energy made the room feel smaller, more intimate. She had been introduced to me by my best friend, earlier this month, and we connected instantly. It was the kind of effortless, electric connection that doesn't happen often, and doesn't need to be explained. Conversation flowed like we were picking up a dialogue we had started lifetimes ago. There was no awkwardness, no hesitation

—just a quiet understanding that whatever was happening between us was real.

I hadn't gone looking for anything. At this stage in my life, I'm not in the business of chasing ghosts, or trying to manufacture connections just to feel something. But sometimes life throws a match onto a pile of dry kindling you didn't even realize you had been carrying around, and suddenly, there's fire. Real, undeniable, impossible-to-ignore fire. We are taught to apologize for needing—so we learn to need in secret. I needed this experience.

Love, I have learned, has never cared much for the rules we try to impose on it. It arrives when it chooses, in the forms it chooses, and it rarely asks for permission. So it shouldn't have surprised me, but somehow, it still did—that what sparked at that party wasn't just fleeting chemistry or the soft glow of a passing connection. It was something deeper. Something that demanded to be acknowledged.

It's safe to say, without hesitation or fanfare, that I have a new girlfriend now. An arrangement that might look complicated on paper; she is married, after all, and she has a small child, but in reality, it feels beautifully

simple. Both of our spouses know, both are supportive, and both understand what it means to let the people you love find their own additional sources of happiness, even when those sources exist outside the boundaries of tradition.

There is no hiding, no shame, no betrayal. Only an honest, open-hearted acceptance of the messy, beautiful reality that sometimes, love doesn't fit neatly into the lines and boxes that society draws, and prescribes for us. I never thought I would find myself in something so nontraditional, and yet, standing inside it, it feels more natural, and more true than so many of the neat, sterile boxes I was expected to occupy over the years.

She makes me laugh in ways I had forgotten I could. She listens like the world isn't rushing by outside the door. She sees me and all the jagged, weather-beaten pieces of me, and she doesn't flinch. There is an easiness between us that feels rare, like stumbling upon a song you somehow already know the words to, even though you've never heard it before.

Some trips are about reunion. Some are about discovery. But this one reminded me of

something heavier, something I have spent years trying not to think about.

Someday, my mother will no longer be here. It's a truth I have carried like a stone in my pocket—always present, always heavy, but rarely brought out into the light, as I often try my best to deny this fact. Walking through the house this time, feeling the way it still holds the shape of my childhood, of my mother's life, of everything that built me. I carry the grief of who I might have been if I had been loved properly, and lately I haven't been sure if I'm healing, or just learning to hide the hurt better.

If something happens to my mom, I will need to throw the most epic house party this place has ever seen. Not out of disrespect, not out of avoidance—but out of sheer love. A celebration of everything this house has witnessed, everything it has held, everything it has meant. This house deserves that. She deserves that. I deserve that. I need to create memories here before I am ready to truly say goodbye to the place that raised me, as some memories are less about remembering, and more about refusing to forget. I know now that you can be both grateful and grieving at the same time.

And after the party fades and the last car pulls away, I will need to keep this house — at least for a few years. Hold onto it the way one holds onto the last embers of a fire on a cold night. Perhaps I need to be reminded of how I became my own sanctuary when the world offered no shelter. I need to remind myself that there are still people here who care enough to call me back when I drift too far. Friends who show up without being asked, who go out of their way to include me, who save me a seat at the table without blinking. These are the people who knew the rough drafts of who I was, and love the final version just as much.

Stamford may be a small dot on a map to most, but to me, it's one of the last places where I belong without needing to explain myself. Without needing to earn my space. In a world that often feels indifferent at best and hostile at worst, that is a rare, sacred thing. I owe it to myself to keep that tether intact—if only for a while longer. If only to honor the girl who still lives somewhere in those walls, waiting to be found every time I come home.

Coming back here always reminds me that home is not a place you can ever fully leave behind. You can pack your life into boxes,

change your zip code, rewrite your story a hundred times, but some pieces of you are stitched so deeply into the soil, the wood, the very air, that no distance can sever the connection.

This trip was supposed to be just another weekend—a quick visit, a few familiar faces, a few memories dusted off and quietly put back where they belonged. But it became something far more. It became a reminder that life—a real, messy, unapologetic life never stops offering second chances to find myself. Whether it's in the arms of an unexpected love, or in the crumbling corners of an old house that still knows your name, life keeps showing up, daring you to stay awake for it.

I needed this. I needed the late nights, the laughter-soaked conversations, the slow unraveling of old ghosts and new beginnings. I needed the sharp, sweet ache of remembering who I was, and the electric thrill of rediscovering who I somehow had the the courage, determination, and strength to become.

Most of all, I needed to be reminded that I still belong somewhere—that even after everything



the world has taken, there are still places and people who choose me without hesitation. And maybe that's the whole point. Maybe the pieces we leave behind aren't losses. Maybe they're sacred reminders that no matter how far we roam, we are never truly alone.

Sometimes, coming home isn't about retracing old steps or trying to slip back into who you once were. It's about finding the parts of yourself that you left behind—the ones still waiting quietly in the corners, still hoping to be seen, still aching to be loved. It's about recognizing that the real work of living isn't in surviving the world's expectations, but in salvaging what the world tried to take from you. This messy, unfinished, wide-open reclamation is what it means to truly be alive.

## ***April 21, 2025—Stamford, New York (Mom's House)***

*“Some loves arrive not with thunder, but like a key turning in a lock you’d long since forgotten was yours.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

Some of the most significant moments in life slip in quietly, like soft footsteps on a worn-out wooden floor—so subtle you hardly notice until they have already rewritten everything you thought you knew. Our story started, as most modern stories do, with a reply on Twitter.

Some of the most significant moments in life slip in quietly, like soft footsteps on a worn-out wooden floor—so subtle you hardly notice until they have already rewritten everything you thought you knew. Our story started, as most modern stories do, with a reply on Twitter.

Amelia had posted a #WritersLift—an open call for writers to share their work, to scatter their words into the chaotic void and hope that maybe, just maybe, someone would catch them. I had no expectations, no grand plan, only the quiet ache to be seen, even if only for a second. I shared a piece of mine titled A Little

Ghost For The Offering—a story stitched together from the parts of myself I usually kept hidden, written during one of those nights when the loneliness is too thick to name.

She was the one who reached out, and her words didn't feel obligatory or hollow. There was a kindness in the way she saw me—not as an account, or a username, or a fleeting moment in her day, but as a person. It was immediate, and it was terrifying in the way that only something deeply good can be. I had grown so used to being overlooked, or worse, misunderstood, that her recognition hit harder than I was willing to admit.

We messaged back and forth, cautiously at first—testing the waters, trading fragments of ourselves like the secret notes I passed to my friends under the desks of middle school. There was no rush, no pressure. Just the steady, undeniable pull of two people who, against every odd, had found each other in a world built on indifference.

When I think back on it now, I realize that moment—that tiny, almost inconsequential interaction—was the hinge on which my entire future swung.

When Amelia first appeared in my life, I was not looking for love. If anything, I was looking forward to a quiet retirement—a simple, predictable life far away from the chaos that had defined me for so long. I had spent two decades clawing my way through the fire service, carrying more than my fair share of broken bodies, shattered families, and the kind of memories that never fade, no matter how many nights I saw something truly horrible at work, and drank myself to sleep. I walked away holding the rank of Lieutenant Specialist—a title that sounded grander than it felt. To the world, it was an accomplishment. To me, it was a hard-won scar.

At the time, I was already settled into what most would have called a life. I was in a relationship with a woman named Angie—a relationship that had quietly stretched across nearly twenty years. There were no rings, no legal papers to prove our commitment, but we had built a life together just the same. Along the way, I had all but adopted her niece—a bright, complicated and misunderstood girl who, for all intents and purposes, became my daughter. I showed up to the after school sporting events, the heartbreaks, the times she

got in trouble, and the milestones. I was the one who packed lunches, gave lectures about the importance of seat belts, and waited in the parking lot after school events, and was both the mother and father figure in her life.

On the outside, my life looked steady enough, but the truth was far messier. My relationship with Angie had long since lost its tenderness—if it had ever truly been there to begin with. I spent years giving her everything I had to give, folding myself smaller and smaller to fit inside the life she said she wanted, only to be met with coldness and anger in return. It was a love that only ever flowed one way. And yet, I stayed, holding onto something already broken, too worn down to believe I deserved better. After walking away from a career that had defined me for more than twenty years—a career I wasn't ready to let go of—my sense of self had been shaken in ways I didn't know how to name. I wasn't ready to start over. I wasn't ready to lose one more thing, even if keeping it meant losing pieces of myself along the way.

My life was not the kind of life you see in movies. It was messy, and hard, and, for a long time, it was enough. I was not looking for anything else. Not adventure, not disruption,

certainly not a woman who would quietly take the pieces of myself I thought I had carefully hidden and lay them bare with nothing more than a few kind words sent across the static of the internet. But life, in its strange, cruel mercy, rarely consults your plans.

Somewhere in the middle of all that quiet hurt, Amelia found me. At first, it was easy to pretend that nothing was happening—that the messages, the conversations, the way she seemed to see through the cracks in my armor without ever asking for anything in return, were just a welcome distraction. We talked about everything and nothing, trading memories, half-formed dreams, the strange, unspoken loneliness that lived in the corners of our lives. She made me laugh in a way I hadn't in years—the kind of laugh that catches you off guard, too honest to be contained, combined with her staggeringly high intellect, was too real to be ignored. The connection between us didn't feel forced. It didn't feel like work. It felt like breathing after feeling like you're drowning for far too long.

We moved from Twitter messages to Instagram chats, each conversation stretching longer than the one before it, each exchange peeling back

another layer of who we really were when nobody else was watching. Somewhere along the way, video chats became a regular part of my life—her voice filling the rooms that had, until then, only echoed with silence. It was all so natural, so easy, that I almost didn't notice the shift happening under my own feet.

She wasn't asking me to change anything. She wasn't trying to save me, or fix me, or even lead me anywhere at all. She was just there—steady, real, brilliant in ways that made the world around her seem a little less heavy. Without meaning to, Amelia became a different kind of gravity in my life—a pull that felt nothing like obligation, nothing like fear.

There comes a point where you have to stop pretending you don't already know what your heart is trying to tell you. That moment, for me, was when my girlfriend's anger had become truly violent and too out of control for me to handle any longer. I told her I was done, packed all the things I would need, and drove away.

There was no grand goodbye, no dramatic showdown, no closure wrapped in a neat little bow. Just the sound of my tires cracking as

they slowly rolled towards the open road on the gravel driveway, the sharp sting of knowing that after nearly two decades of sacrifice, I was leaving behind a life that had never really loved me back. I did not look in the rear view mirror. Some things, once broken, do not deserve to be mourned a second longer than necessary.

I pointed my truck toward Brocton, Massachusetts, running on adrenaline, exhaustion, and the kind of desperate hope that feels almost too fragile to carry. Amelia's voice lived in the back of my mind the whole way there—soft, steady, and patient—the quiet reminder that maybe, just maybe, it wasn't too late to start again. I didn't know what was waiting for me at the end of that drive. I only knew that I couldn't stay where I had been.

Leaving wasn't brave. It wasn't romantic. It was survival. And somewhere deep down, I understood that survival, this time, had to mean more than just getting by. It had to mean reaching for something better — even if my hands were shaking when I did it.

I picked Amelia up, and together, we drove up the East Coast for a two-week vacation in Maine—a much-needed exile from everything



we were leaving behind. Before I left, I told my mother, in passing, that I was going to meet a girl named Amelia and would be spending a short time in Boston. I knew exactly what I was doing. I knew that if Angie got desperate enough to call my mother, my mother would relay whatever she knew—either because she believed she was helping, or because she wanted to hurt me, the latter of which had always been her preferred method of communication. It did not take long. Angie called my mother, frantic and grasping for control, and my mother, true to form, told her where I had said I would be. Just as I had predicted, Angie and her younger sister drove to Boston, hoping to find us—but by then, Amelia and I were already gone, two states away, building a new world where they could never follow.

Eventually, I had to return home—for the time being, that meant staying at my mother's house. While Amelia settled back into her parents' home, I found myself with too much quiet and too much time to think. I started looking at properties, almost on a whim, and stumbled across a dairy farm in Vermont that felt right in a way I couldn't explain. Without hesitation, I bought it, setting the wheels in

motion for a different kind of life—one built on my own terms, far from everything that had nearly broken me. While the endless paperwork and legal hurdles of buying real estate dragged on, Amelia and I stayed in constant contact, the bond between us only growing stronger with the miles. In the meantime, I returned to New York City to take care of the rental property my parents owned—a responsibility they had gradually, and somewhat begrudgingly, handed off to me, despite the fact that I only legally owned a small fraction of the building. It was one more obligation tethering me to a life I was already beginning to outgrow.

For weeks, maybe months—time got slippery back then. I tried to convince myself that Amelia was just a friend, just a kind voice on the other end of the line, just a lifeline thrown across the emptiness for a little while. It was easier that way. Easier to believe I wasn't standing on the edge of something too big to control.

But the truth kept rising up, uninvited and undeniable. I was in love with her. It wasn't the kind of love you see in movies—loud, messy, desperate for attention. It was quieter than

that, deeper, like a river carving its way through stone. It lived in the spaces between conversations, in the way her laughter stayed with me long after the call ended, in the way just thinking about her made the air feel a little easier to breathe. There was no single moment where it all fell into place—no sudden flash of clarity. Just a slow, steady knowing that grew heavier and more certain with every passing day.

I tried to fight it at first. She had told me that she was transgender, and that by being with her, I'd probably lose a lot of people. I told myself it was too soon, too complicated, too risky. I tried to convince myself that after everything I had just survived, the last thing I needed was another leap into the unknown. I tried to balance the feelings of the heart against the social fallout. But the heart does not negotiate. It does not wait for permission. It does not ask whether you're ready. It simply knows. And I knew with conviction with the kind of certainty that does not shake loose in the dark, that I loved her, and that nothing about my life would ever be the same again.

I remember the drive back to Brocton, Massachusetts, I remember the way my hands

shook on the steering wheel, the way my mind ran in frantic circles, trying to find a reason—any reason—to believe that this was reckless, foolish, or dangerous. But under all of that noise, there was something else too—something stubborn and sure and already decided.

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The idea of an open marriage unsettles people, too—as if the only proof of love is possession, as if loyalty can only be measured by the walls you build around each other. But Amelia and I never needed walls. We needed freedom. We needed the kind of love that doesn't shrink under the weight of fear or jealousy, the kind that understands that wanting someone to be happy—truly happy—sometimes means letting go of the idea that you have to be their everything.

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Mornings started with coffee made half-asleep, the kitchen filling with the soft clatter of cups and the quiet familiarity of her voice in the next room. Days were spent side by side—fixing what needed fixing, hauling what needed hauling—two women too proud to ever ask for help and too determined to leave the land better than we found it. Evenings were softer with two separate books, two separate blankets, the silence between us thick with comfort, instead of distance.

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the old slumber parties I had when I was a little girl. That same innocent, unspoken closeness—the comfort of knowing someone you trusted was just a few steps away in the quiet hours when the world outside fell away.

There was no need to perform, no need to fit ourselves into a story someone else had written about what marriage should look like. We weren't playing house. We weren't pretending. We were living—stubbornly, imperfectly, fully, in ways that only people who have lost everything, and still chose love can understand.

We didn't need matching rings, elaborate declarations, or a calendar full of anniversaries to prove anything. Our proof was in the way we kept choosing each other, every day, in a thousand small, invisible ways. In the way her laughter still felt like sunlight, even on the darkest days. In the way we both understood that love isn't about possession—it's about freedom, about trust, about choosing to stay when leaving would be easier.

There are so few places in this life where a person can be fully seen and still fully loved. Fewer still where you can lay down all the pieces of yourself—the broken ones, the

beautiful ones, the ones you were taught to hide—and have someone choose you anyway. Amelia was, and always will be, that place for me. Some loves are loud. Ours was simply true.

Amelia had posted a #WritersLift—an open call for writers to share their work, to scatter their words into the chaotic void and hope that maybe, just maybe, someone would catch them. I had no expectations, no grand plan, only the quiet ache to be seen, even if only for a second. I shared a piece of mine titled *A Little Ghost For The Offering*—a story stitched together from the parts of myself I usually kept hidden, written during one of those nights when the loneliness is too thick to name.

She was the one who reached out, and her words didn't feel obligatory or hollow. There was a kindness in the way she saw me—not as an account, or a username, or a fleeting moment in her day, but as a person. It was immediate, and it was terrifying in the way that only something deeply good can be. I had grown so used to being overlooked, or worse, misunderstood, that her recognition hit harder than I was willing to admit.

We messaged back and forth, cautiously at first—testing the waters, trading fragments of ourselves like the secret notes I passed to my friends under the desks of middle school. There was no rush, no pressure. Just the steady, undeniable pull of two people who, against every odd, had found each other in a world built on indifference.

When I think back on it now, I realize that moment—that tiny, almost inconsequential interaction—was the hinge on which my entire future swung.

When Amelia first appeared in my life, I was not looking for love. If anything, I was looking forward to a quiet retirement—a simple, predictable life far away from the chaos that had defined me for so long. I had spent two decades clawing my way through the fire service, carrying more than my fair share of broken bodies, shattered families, and the kind of memories that never fade, no matter how many nights I saw something truly horrible at work, and drank myself to sleep. I walked away holding the rank of Lieutenant Specialist—a title that sounded grander than it felt. To the world, it was an accomplishment. To me, it was a hard-won scar.

At the time, I was already settled into what most would have called a life. I was in a relationship with a woman named Angie—a relationship that had quietly stretched across nearly twenty years. There were no rings, no legal papers to prove our commitment, but we had built a life together just the same. Along the way, I had all but adopted her niece—a bright, complicated and misunderstood girl who, for all intents and purposes, became my daughter. I showed up to the after school sporting events, the heartbreaks, the times she got in trouble, and the milestones. I was the one who packed lunches, gave lectures about the importance of seat belts, and waited in the parking lot after school events, and was both the mother and father figure in her life.

On the outside, my life looked steady enough, but the truth was far messier. My relationship with Angie had long since lost its tenderness—if it had ever truly been there to begin with. I spent years giving her everything I had to give, folding myself smaller and smaller to fit inside the life she said she wanted, only to be met with coldness and anger in return. It was a love that only ever flowed one way. And yet, I stayed, holding onto something already broken,

too worn down to believe I deserved better. After walking away from a career that had defined me for more than twenty years—a career I wasn't ready to let go of—my sense of self had been shaken in ways I didn't know how to name. I wasn't ready to start over. I wasn't ready to lose one more thing, even if keeping it meant losing pieces of myself along the way.

My life was not the kind of life you see in movies. It was messy, and hard, and, for a long time, it was enough. I was not looking for anything else. Not adventure, not disruption, certainly not a woman who would quietly take the pieces of myself I thought I had carefully hidden and lay them bare with nothing more than a few kind words sent across the static of the internet. But life, in its strange, cruel mercy, rarely consults your plans.

Somewhere in the middle of all that quiet hurt, Amelia found me. At first, it was easy to pretend that nothing was happening—that the messages, the conversations, the way she seemed to see through the cracks in my armor without ever asking for anything in return, were just a welcome distraction. We talked about everything and nothing, trading memories, half-formed dreams, the strange,

unspoken loneliness that lived in the corners of our lives. She made me laugh in a way I hadn't in years—the kind of laugh that catches you off guard, too honest to be contained, combined with her staggeringly high intellect, was too real to be ignored. The connection between us didn't feel forced. It didn't feel like work. It felt like breathing after feeling like you're drowning for far too long.

We moved from Twitter messages to Instagram chats, each conversation stretching longer than the one before it, each exchange peeling back another layer of who we really were when nobody else was watching. Somewhere along the way, video chats became a regular part of my life—her voice filling the rooms that had, until then, only echoed with silence. It was all so natural, so easy, that I almost didn't notice the shift happening under my own feet.

She wasn't asking me to change anything. She wasn't trying to save me, or fix me, or even lead me anywhere at all. She was just there—steady, real, brilliant in ways that made the world around her seem a little less heavy. Without meaning to, Amelia became a different kind of gravity in my life—a pull that felt nothing like obligation, nothing like fear.



There comes a point where you have to stop pretending you don't already know what your heart is trying to tell you. That moment, for me, was when my girlfriend's anger had become truly violent and too out of control for me to handle any longer. I told her I was done, packed all the things I would need, and drove away.

There was no grand goodbye, no dramatic showdown, no closure wrapped in a neat little bow. Just the sound of my tires cracking as they slowly rolled towards the open road on the gravel driveway, the sharp sting of knowing that after nearly two decades of sacrifice, I was leaving behind a life that had never really loved me back. I did not look in the rear view mirror. Some things, once broken, do not deserve to be mourned a second longer than necessary.

I pointed my truck toward Brocton, Massachusetts, running on adrenaline, exhaustion, and the kind of desperate hope that feels almost too fragile to carry. Amelia's voice lived in the back of my mind the whole way there—soft, steady, and patient—the quiet reminder that maybe, just maybe, it wasn't too late to start again. I didn't know what was

waiting for me at the end of that drive. I only knew that I couldn't stay where I had been.

Leaving wasn't brave. It wasn't romantic. It was survival. And somewhere deep down, I understood that survival, this time, had to mean more than just getting by. It had to mean reaching for something better — even if my hands were shaking when I did it.

I picked Amelia up, and together, we drove up the East Coast for a two-week vacation in Maine—a much-needed exile from everything we were leaving behind. Before I left, I told my mother, in passing, that I was going to meet a girl named Amelia and would be spending a short time in Boston. I knew exactly what I was doing. I knew that if Angie got desperate enough to call my mother, my mother would relay whatever she knew—either because she believed she was helping, or because she wanted to hurt me, the latter of which had always been her preferred method of communication. It did not take long. Angie called my mother, frantic and grasping for control, and my mother, true to form, told her where I had said I would be. Just as I had predicted, Angie and her younger sister drove to Boston, hoping to find us—but by then,

Amelia and I were already gone, two states away, building a new world where they could never follow.

Eventually, I had to return home—for the time being, that meant staying at my mother's house. While Amelia settled back into her parents' home, I found myself with too much quiet and too much time to think. I started looking at properties, almost on a whim, and stumbled across a dairy farm in Vermont that felt right in a way I couldn't explain. Without hesitation, I bought it, setting the wheels in motion for a different kind of life—one built on my own terms, far from everything that had nearly broken me. While the endless paperwork and legal hurdles of buying real estate dragged on, Amelia and I stayed in constant contact, the bond between us only growing stronger with the miles. In the meantime, I returned to New York City to take care of the rental property my parents owned—a responsibility they had gradually, and somewhat begrudgingly, handed off to me, despite the fact that I only legally owned a small fraction of the building. It was one more obligation tethering me to a life I was already beginning to outgrow.

For weeks, maybe months—time got slippery back then. I tried to convince myself that Amelia was just a friend, just a kind voice on the other end of the line, just a lifeline thrown across the emptiness for a little while. It was easier that way. Easier to believe I wasn't standing on the edge of something too big to control.

But the truth kept rising up, uninvited and undeniable. I was in love with her. It wasn't the kind of love you see in movies—loud, messy, desperate for attention. It was quieter than that, deeper, like a river carving its way through stone. It lived in the spaces between conversations, in the way her laughter stayed with me long after the call ended, in the way just thinking about her made the air feel a little easier to breathe. There was no single moment where it all fell into place—no sudden flash of clarity. Just a slow, steady knowing that grew heavier and more certain with every passing day.

I tried to fight it at first. She had told me that she was transgender, and that by being with her, I'd probably lose a lot of people. I told myself it was too soon, too complicated, too risky. I tried to convince myself that after

everything I had just survived, the last thing I needed was another leap into the unknown. I tried to balance the feelings of the heart against the social fallout. But the heart does not negotiate. It does not wait for permission. It does not ask whether you're ready. It simply knows. And I knew with conviction with the kind of certainty that does not shake loose in the dark, that I loved her, and that nothing about my life would ever be the same again.

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People who hear about our marriage—the way we built it—often search for the flaw they are so certain must be there, as if love can only be measured by the weight of expectation, or of tradition. They listen with polite smiles, but behind their eyes, you can see the quiet disapproval, the disbelief that something so different could be whole. They cannot understand that love, real love, sometimes means giving each other enough room to stretch without fear, enough space to grow without apology. It means standing side by side, not tangled up in each other's shadows, but rooted in the certainty that neither of us needs to be diminished for the other to thrive.

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I lost what little connection I had left to my own family the day I married Amelia. To them, the fact that I had married another woman—that I had dared to live my life openly and without shame—was an unforgivable betrayal. They didn't see the courage it took. They didn't see the peace I had finally found. They only saw the ways I refused to fit into the narrow life they had tried to script for me long before I ever had the chance to choose for myself.

Amelia's family turned their backs just as easily, just as cruelly. Not because she had done anything wrong, but simply because she had the audacity to live as her true self—a transgender woman who asked for nothing

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Mornings started with coffee made half-asleep, the kitchen filling with the soft clatter of cups and the quiet familiarity of her voice in the next room. Days were spent side by side—fixing what needed fixing, hauling what needed hauling—two women too proud to ever ask for help and too determined to leave the land better than we found it. Evenings were softer with two separate books, two separate blankets, the silence between us thick with comfort, instead of distance.

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## ***April 24, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)***

*“The birch tree doesn’t ask who I was—it remembers me anyway.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

The stereo’s spinning again. Not a Bluetooth speaker, not some cold digital stream humming through soulless plastic—but an actual stereo. The kind with physical buttons you can punch down like you’re dialing into a memory. Indigo Girls – 1200 Curfews. Track 12. Closer to Fine. A CD I’ve owned since it came out, and one that never needed an upgrade, because truth doesn’t need remastering.

The house is quiet except for the hiss of the stereo. There’s a stillness here, but it’s not empty. It’s the kind of stillness that carries the ghosts of every version of me I’ve ever been, tucked into the corners like old photographs left out in the sun.

And when that track starts—when Amy and Emily start singing like they’ve known me longer than I’ve known myself—it’s like a switch flips in my chest. Suddenly, I’m sixteen again. It’s 1996. I’m standing on a porch I was

never allowed to call home, holding a leash in one hand and a duffel bag in the other. My whole life, reduced to what I could carry and what loved me back.

That's what this song does. That's what this moment is. It's not just nostalgia—it's resurrection. It's the unspoken truth that this music, this disc, this particular spin through Track 12, doesn't just remind me of who I was. It reminds me that I made it. That I fucking made it.

And somewhere outside, past the yard and the river and the edge of my ten-acre Vermont sanctuary, there's a birch tree. My favorite tree. Beneath it lies the only soul who stayed with me through it all—Penfold, my dog. The only living thing that never asked me to change, never looked at me like I was too much or not enough. The one who sat in the passenger seat of a beat-up '91 Honda station wagon as I drove away from everything I'd ever known, with nothing but \$600 and a spine full of grit.

So yeah, the stereo is spinning. And it's not just playing music. It's playing me.

It happened fast. That's the part people don't understand—how quickly everything can fall away. One minute you're standing in your childhood home, still technically a kid, and the next you're on the outside of a locked door, holding a leash, a duffel bag, and your breath. Sixteen years old. Just old enough to drive, not nearly old enough to deserve what came next.

No tearful goodbye. No sit-down discussion. Just a hard line drawn in the sand by people who never once asked who I really was. They didn't want answers. They wanted silence. Compliance. Something palatable. Something straight, quiet, grateful, and small. And I wasn't any of those things—not then, not now.

I stood on the porch long enough to feel the weight of it. The heaviness of understanding that I had been declared disposable. That everything I was—female, queer, stubborn as hell—had finally outweighed their tolerance by not being the son they wanted. I was no longer a daughter, or even their child for that matter. Just a disappointment with a dog.

Penfold looked up at me, his tail wagging like it was just another night, like we were headed somewhere exciting. He didn't know that the



house behind us was never going to open again. He didn't care about the yelling, or the tears I wouldn't let fall, or the birth certificate I kept hidden in my dresser drawer like a secret no one wanted to hear. He just wanted to go wherever I was going. And I needed that more than I've ever needed anything in my life.

The car was already packed. 1991 Honda Accord wagon, rust creeping like ivy around the wheel wells, the engine smelling faintly of burning oil, and begrudgingly answered prayers. I had \$600 in cash, a wallet full of expired library cards, and one duffel bag filled with clothing. Just one. It held clothes that didn't fit right, a notebook, a toothbrush, and a CD case with the Indigo Girls pressed flat in the front pocket.

The irony wasn't lost on me, even then. I had been kicked out for who I was—because of who I was—and yet, I was clinging to the music of women who looked and sounded like me. Women who wrote songs about not knowing all the answers. About searching. About surviving the crooked line. And somehow, it didn't feel like tragedy. Not completely. It felt like a beginning I didn't ask for, but maybe... just maybe... I needed.

I got in the car. Penfold jumped into the passenger seat like he belonged there. Like it was his job to ride shotgun through hell if that's where I was headed. And without a map, without a plan, without even knowing where I'd sleep that night, I turned the key. I told Penfold that this time he couldn't come with me. He looked at me with his big brown eyes, excited at first, then sad when the reality set in that his mother would have to be gone again for awhile.

The engine caught. The wheels moved. And just like that, I was gone.

The open road doesn't give a damn about your age, your gender, your bruises, or your broken heart. It doesn't ask where you're going—it just demands that you keep moving. For me, at sixteen, that was the only requirement I could meet. Movement. Forward. Anywhere but back.

I had nothing except what fit in one duffel bag and \$600 I kept hidden in my glove box, hidden and buried under random clutter like it was sacred. That car—a rust-bitten 1991 Honda station wagon—was my home, my shelter, my confessional booth. It smelled like oil, fast food wrappers, and fear, and the radio worked only

when it wanted to. The CD player was a lifeline, and 1200 Curfews stayed in rotation like it was stitched to the damn dashboard. Track 12—Closer to Fine—was the only thing in my life that didn't ask for explanation or apology.

Penfold didn't come with me this time. And that absence? It was deafening. I kept glancing at the passenger seat, half-expecting to see his eyes blinking up at me, ready for the next adventure. But it stayed empty. There was no wagging tail, no warm body curled at my feet, no breath beside mine when the silence got too loud. Just me and the road. Me and my thoughts. Me and the ache of knowing that even my dog, my dog, the one soul who ever looked at me like I mattered, wasn't with me anymore. It made the loneliness sharper. More surgical.

The next morning, I pulled into the gravel lot of my old summer camp with the kind of forced optimism that only a sixteen-year-old carrying the weight of the world can fake well. I was bright-eyed, grinning like I meant it, and ready to prove something—to the world, to my father, but mostly to myself. I didn't show up expecting kindness. I didn't even expect fairness. I showed up to work. To earn. To

stand on my own two feet and say, Look—I can survive without you. I signed on to scrub dishes until my knuckles ached, serve pancakes to kids who reminded me what safety looked like, and sleep in a tent with nothing but my duffel bag and a flashlight that worked when it wanted to.

But if I'm being honest—and I always am, even when it hurts—I also wanted something else that summer. Something soft. Something fun. I wanted to feel normal, even if just for a moment. I wanted to laugh without guilt. I wanted to steal a swim in the lake after dark, walk barefoot in the dewy grass before sunrise, and maybe even flirt with a girl who smiled back like she saw me for who I was. So yeah, I was there to work hard, earn every cent, and justify—at least to myself—any accidental moment of joy that might slip through the cracks.

Because when you've been told you don't belong, the hardest thing to accept isn't survival. It's happiness.

On my days off, I parked in grocery store lots, and quiet trailheads, in the forgotten corners of The Adirondacks where no one would notice

me. I curled up on the back seat like a ghost haunting her own life. Hunger came and went like an annoying cousin—too familiar to fear. I learned quickly that cold air bites differently when you don't have a house to warm up in afterward. But you adjust. You always adjust.

I wasn't scared, not in the way people think. I was raw. I was angry. I was running on fumes, blind hope, and fuel burning fast on an empty tank. And maybe that's what saved me. Not some deep inner strength, not some predetermined resilience—just the refusal to lay down and let the world win.

Some nights I'd lean the seat back and stare through the windshield like it was a movie screen showing someone else's life. The Indigo Girls would play, soft and low, Amy and Emily singing like they were sitting right there with me. Telling me that I wasn't alone. That there were others—queer girls, misunderstood girls, too-loud-too-soft-too-real girls—who had made it. Who had taken their crooked lines and drawn something beautiful.

I didn't feel beautiful. I felt invisible. But I was breathing. I was alive. I had the keys, I had a full tank, and I had a song that reminded me

that not knowing was its own kind of knowing. That surviving the confusion was closer to peace than pretending everything was okay.

The truth is, no one saved me. I did that myself. Not because I was ready. Not because I was brave. Because I fucking had to.

Penfold didn't make the journey with me that time, but I carried him anyway—everywhere I went, tucked into the quiet corners of my heart like a photograph folded in half and hidden in a wallet. I didn't need him sitting in the passenger seat to feel him there. I just had to glance at the spot beside me and I'd remember his eyes, the way they used to look at me like I was the whole damn world and not just a girl who'd been discarded.

He came into my life when I still believed there might be room in it for softness. Back before things got hard and stayed that way. He was never just a pet. He was home, wrapped in fur and warmth and wordless understanding. He knew when I was lying—especially to myself. He knew when I was breaking long before I let the cracks show. He'd nudge my hand or rest his head on my knee like he was trying to hold me together.

And he did. Over and over again. What I couldn't explain to the world, I never had to explain to him. I was intersex, queer, complicated as hell, and still figuring out where I began and where the damage ended—but to Penfold, I was just his. That was enough. That was always enough.

Penfold was with me through the thick of it—the latter part of my childhood, every brutal hallway of high school, the long nights and cheap coffee of college. He was there when I fell in love for the first time and when it all came apart. He rode shotgun when I moved across the state, sat on the porch of my first house like he owned it. Every chapter, he was there, tail thumping, eyes knowing, always just there. Until one day, he wasn't.

It happened fast, and it still burns.

There was an emergency—one of those chaotic, drop-everything-and-go kind of calls—and I didn't have time to figure out where he could stay. So I did what I thought was safe. I left him with my parents. Just for a night. Just until morning. I drove back the next day, tired and

filthy from the kind of shift that makes your bones ache—and he was gone.

My mother had taken him to the vet and had him put down. No call. No warning. No chance to say goodbye. She decided on her own that his time was up, that he was too old, too sick, too much trouble. She made that call without me. And then she told me like it was nothing.

To this day, I have never forgiven them for that. I doubt I ever will. Some things don't get stitched back together. Some fractures stay broken—and this one split something deep. Penfold wasn't just a pet. He was my companion, my constant, my tether to every version of myself that fought like hell to survive. And they took him from me like it was an errand.

That kind of betrayal doesn't fade. It settles in the bones and waits. When he died, it gutted me in a way nothing else ever has. Not the rejection, not the hunger, not the cold, not even the silence of sleeping alone in a car at sixteen. Nothing prepares you for losing the one soul who stayed. I buried him beneath the birch tree in my backyard—the one I've always called my favorite, the one that's seen the seasons pass



like chapters in a book I keep trying to write. I gave him the best I could. A place to rest. A place that felt like home. A place where I could still visit him when the world got too loud.

There's a birch tree in my backyard that I've always called my favorite. Not because it's the tallest or the most picturesque, but because it feels like it's been watching over me long before I ever arrived. The bark is thick and weathered, the limbs wide and open like an invitation. It doesn't flinch in storms. It doesn't sway easily. It just stands.

That's where I buried Penfold's ashes.

That tree holds more than roots, and springtime ribbons now. It holds memory. Loyalty. Love. It holds the echo of every footstep he ever took beside mine, every moment he stood between me and the dark. When I walk out there, I don't say much. I just stand still and remember the sound of his collar, the feel of his weight curled against my hip, the way he'd tilt his head like he understood the things I couldn't say out loud.

Some people measure their life by milestones—graduations, promotions, wedding photos. I

measure mine by the living things I've cherished, loved, and lost. Penfold was the first. The most honest. The one who set the standard. And even though he didn't make that first solo drive with me, he's been with me every mile since.

I didn't have to think twice about it. There was never going to be a shoebox in a corner of someone else's property or some cold plot at a sterile pet cemetery. He deserved more than that. He deserved roots. A resting place that mattered. A place that could hold him the way he held me all those years—steady, silent, and without conditions.

I dug the hole myself. No gloves, no fanfare, just me and the dirt. I wanted to feel every inch of the work, like maybe if I went deep enough, I could find a way to reverse it all. I laid him down in his handmade wooden box. I said nothing. There were no words good enough. Just the sound of shovelfuls of tear-filled earth, and the breath in my throat that refused to come out.

That spot beneath the pine isn't marked by anything fancy. A memory I will carry with me for the rest of my life. Sometimes a flower will

sprout when the season feels generous. But I visit often. I sit there when the world gets too loud, when people disappoint me, when I start feeling that old weight in my chest that reminds me what it felt like to be sixteen and on my own. And when I sit there, I don't cry—not anymore. I just remember. I let the wind move through the branches, and I let the silence between us say the things I never got the chance to.

That tree holds him now. And it holds part of me, too. Some people find god in churches. Some find it in music or books or the arms of someone they love. I find it under that tree, in the stillness, in the knowing. That's where I remember that I was loved once, purely, completely, and without conditions. That's where I go when I need to remember how to keep going.

Because the world may have tried to strip everything from me, but that tree, that dog, those memories—they're mine.

The stereo's spinning again. Same disc. Same track. Closer to Fine. It's not a coincidence—it never is. The CD is scratched to hell, worn down from years of heavy rotation and glove-

box exile, but it still plays like it knows I need it. And today, I do.

The first few notes hit, and suddenly time doesn't feel linear anymore. The air in the room changes—denser, quieter, like memory is crawling in through the vents. It's not about nostalgia. I don't sit around pining for my past. I survived it. What I feel when that song plays isn't longing—it's recognition. It's the sound of a girl who packed her life into a duffel bag and drove off into the dark because she had no other choice. It's the sound of a woman who's still here.

And not just still here—but thriving on land she owns, beneath a sky that doesn't belong to anyone else, with her name on the deed and her fingerprints on every inch of her goddamn life.

I let the song play loud, louder than necessary, because I don't have to ask permission anymore. I don't have to be quiet for anyone. I sit back with a fresh hit from the bong, smooth and warm, not to numb anything, but to honor the ritual. To slow it all down. To remember the girl I used to be and thank her for not giving up when it would've been much easier to

disappear. Because I almost did. More than once.

But instead of fading, I built something. Not perfect. Not polished. But mine. A life where I mow my own grass and fix my own pipes. A life where I can walk out to the birch tree and lay my hand on the earth and feel him there. A life where my survival isn't a secret—it's the basis of the entire story.

The stereo hums and skips like it's remembering too. Amy and Emily sing like they're still sitting in that passenger seat beside me, singing truths that never needed to rhyme to be right. There's more than one answer to these questions...

They were right. There always was.

The answer was never my parents, never the paycheck, never the rules handed down by people who didn't know what to do with a girl like me. The answer was in the crooked road, the rusted car, the camp kitchen, the birch tree, the grave, the grief, the goddamn grit of it all.

And the less I seek my source for some definitive? The closer I am to fine.

There's no big revelation at the end. No polished moral, no grand epiphany that wraps everything up with a bow. Life doesn't offer that. Not for girls like me. What I've got is realer than revelation—it's the quiet certainty that everything I've survived, every loss, every fracture, every moment I was told I wasn't enough, has shaped the woman I am now.

I was kicked out at sixteen. Not because I did something wrong, but because I existed too loudly. I loved too honestly. I refused to shrink. And in the years that followed, I stitched together a life from nothing but instinct and defiance. I didn't follow a map—I drew one in pencil, and smeared the lines as I went. Some paths led nowhere. Some led to pain. But some led home.

Now I wake up on land that's mine. I open a window and breathe in Vermont air that no one else claims ownership of. I walk barefoot across hardwood floors I installed myself, under a roof I paid for with my own goddamn grit. I keep the duffel bag. I visit the tree. I play the CD. And when Track 12 comes on, I don't flinch. I don't cry. I listen.

Because Closer to Fine was never a song about answers. It was a permission slip to be messy, to be searching, to be loud and soft and complicated and queer and still okay. And now, decades later, I know—I didn't have to be perfect. I just had to keep going.

So, no—I'm not all the way "fine." That's not the goal. I'm closer. Closer every day. Closer because I earned it. Because I built this life one decision, one heartbreak, one busted antenna and rusted car at a time. Because I never stopped moving forward, even when no one was clapping.

I'm closer because I stopped waiting for someone else to name me, save me, or fix me. Because I am not broken. I never was.

And that? That's fine by me.

## ***April 27, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)***

*“At some point, every woman must choose between the life she imagined as a girl and the life that pleases everyone but herself.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

Some mornings, you don't wake up so much as you surface—pulled out of a half-dream, half-memory place where the weight of the past is heavier than the day ahead. Today was one of those mornings. I woke up already sad, already somewhere else, and I let it happen. The playlist was Bear's Den and Bruce Hornsby, nothing else—the kind of songs you don't pick unless you're ready to hurt a little. Some days, you don't fight the current. You let it pull you where it wants, even if that place is somewhere you've spent years trying to outgrow.

Yesterday, I went back to the town where I first learned how small dreams could be, and how big a heart has to get just to survive there. I wasn't going for nostalgia. I wasn't looking for ghosts. I was going back to introduce Amelia to Darlene—my best friend, the one who knows the map of my heart better than anyone still



walking this Earth. Some bonds don't need constant maintenance; they just hum quietly in the background of your life, like a song you know by heart even if you haven't heard it in years. It took less than an afternoon for Amelia to understand what Darlene means to me, and maybe even what she has always meant. As I backed out the driveway of Darlene's house, without prompting, Amelia turned to me and said, "You should prioritize her, immediately."

What she didn't know—or maybe what she knew too well—was that I already had. A very long time ago. The real ones don't need a holiday card or a calendar reminder to know where they stand in your life—they just know.

When I was a little girl, eight or nine years old, I told my teacher that I was going to be a firefighter. She laughed. Not cruelly, but dismissively, the way adults laugh when they've forgotten the shape of their own childhood dreams. She told me to pick something more realistic—something better suited for a "girl like me." That was the first time I realized some people aren't teaching you—they're passing down their own regrets, hoping you'll wear them like hand-me-downs. There will always be people who confuse the size of their limited

imaginations for the size of the real world. Most of them stay exactly where they are, rooted by their own fear, while the rest of us build the lives they never believed were possible.

At eighteen, I stood at the crossroads that most people don't even recognize until it's too late. I could stay—fold myself into the same tidy life they all seemed so eager to live, marrying someone for stability, working a job that barely made a dent in my hunger to matter. Or I could leave. And so I left—and I ran headfirst into the fires that were supposed to scare girls like me into submission. At some point, every woman faces a choice: live the life she imagined as a girl, or live the life that keeps everyone else comfortable.

I didn't just choose the first—while others bought houses two blocks from the ones they grew up in, I was already a medic and firefighter, already knee-deep in a career that questioned every sterile piece of credentialism they clung to like a badge. They traded their dreams for mortgages and backyard BBQs. I became wilder, messier, freer. I became someone they don't even recognize.

Coming home now feels less like visiting and more like archeology. Every corner, every diner, every cracked sidewalk is a relic—a place where a version of me once stood, bright-eyed and bursting with too much hope for the size of the town that tried to contain her. Every visit strips away another illusion I didn't know I was still clinging to. It seems every time I return, I lose another friend. Some loss happens loud, some quietly, but it happens all the same. Outgrowing the place you came from is lonely—but staying would have been lonelier. Survival looks different than I thought it would when I was a child. Sometimes it looks like walking through streets that no longer feel like yours, knowing that the only thing more heartbreaking than leaving would have been staying.

I think about a day I had at work when I was twenty—a relatively new medic, determined to save everyone—when I was called to a scene that still haunts me even now. It was reported as a motor vehicle accident involving two vehicles. Multiple casualties, and no evidence of survivors. A kind of wreckage no words can soften.

It was not a routine call. It was a call that nobody wanted to answer, and because no survivors were reported, they sent me by myself with a driver, and an ambulance—the bare bones of a response crew. Before we even arrived, the driver handed me a box of triage tags. No words of encouragement. No speech about what I was about to see. Just a battered cardboard box handed to me along with a quiet look that said more than words could ever manage. It was my job to account for the victims—to move from body to body, tagging them like misplaced luggage, writing down their names, if I could find them, their approximate ages, their physical descriptions. I was supposed to leave only the black tag attached—the one that meant there was nothing left to save. And I was instructed to stay there until the coroner removed the last victim.

It sounded simple in the sterile language of protocol. It wasn't. When we pulled onto the scene, it was as if a bomb had gone off in the middle of the road. Bodies were everywhere—strewn across the pavement, twisted in ways that human bodies should not twist. Some missing limbs. Some so battered it was impossible to tell, at first glance, where one

person ended and another began. I started moving through them—doing the thing I had been trained to do, despite being told that this is the one module of training I'd likely never use. This experience was the thing that split my mind in two equal parts—the medic's way of processing something nobody should see, yet does so in the hopes that one could still function. Half of my mind was the medic part of me tagging and documenting, the other half was my deeply human part of me, screaming silently into the void.

I moved from casualty to casualty, trying to piece together the traumatic aftermath of what had happened. It took all my strength to try and not to think about the fact that just hours ago, these people had been alive—friends who were laughing, arguing, and making plans they would never be able to keep.

And then, a hand grabbed the back of my fire boot, a few inches up from the heel. I froze, the world tilting sideways.

There was one survivor.

He was mangled, barely recognizable as a person, yet somehow still holding on with

whatever scrap of life hadn't been stolen from him. Using what little breath he had left, like fuel burning quickly on an empty tank, he rasped out two words I will never forget: "Help me."

I broke protocol. I didn't hesitate. I tore off my gloves, dropped the box of tags right there on the pavement, and radioed for a helicopter immediately. I started working the code, stabilizing him enough to give him a fighting chance—hands moving on muscle memory, heart beating louder than the sirens.

He lived.

He spent months in the hospital, recovering in a body he barely recognized anymore. Eventually, he went home in a wheelchair, still carrying the broken pieces of the life he lost that day. About a year later, when the noise of survival finally grew too loud to bear, he took his own life.

I think about him more often than I admit. I think about the way his hand found my boot in all that wreckage, the way his voice reached out for mercy when the rest of the world had gone silent. I think about how survival isn't always a

blessing, and how saving someone doesn't always mean you get to keep them.

Some things don't heal. Some things become permanent residents in the places no one else can see. Some memories are stitched so deeply into your bones that no amount of time, distance, or success will ever pry them loose. You learn to carry them anyway, because that's what survivors do.

That morning, I learned a truth that would mark me forever: some things don't heal. They don't fade or soften; they calcify inside you, forming the quiet architecture of the woman you eventually become. Every strong woman has at least one story she never tells—because putting it into words would mean living it twice. Some battles aren't fought out loud. Some are fought quietly, stitched into the spaces between heartbeats, carried every single day without a sound.

Success is a strange, brittle thing. In the beginning, they cheered for me. They loved the idea of the scrappy girl making good. But when I made it further in my career than they could follow, when I started building a life too far away from their reach, the cheering stopped.

The hands that used to lift me up began tugging at me instead. We live in a world that pretends to celebrate success—until it threatens the excuses we’ve all been taught to protect. They will celebrate your ambition until it threatens their excuses, and when it does, you find out who was really rooting for you, and who was only rooting for themselves.

I’m in a good place now. A fragile place, but a good one. It’s the kind of happiness that doesn’t erase the loneliness—it sits next to it, holds its hand, and passes the time quietly. I built a life I’m proud of, even if most of the people who knew me when I was young pretend not to see it. Maybe they never understood because I never really lived in the same world they did.

I have always believed in, and in my own mind, lived among the stars and the moon.

Some of us were never meant for low ceilings and short distances. At this age, I stopped needing everyone to understand me. And when the music plays—when Bear’s Den and Bruce Hornsby drift through the kitchen late at night—I let myself cry for a minute, because it’s safer now. I wipe my face, pour another cup of



coffee, and I keep going. Because I always have,  
and because I always will.

## ***April 28, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)***

*“Most people fall in love like rain; I fall like  
wreckage.”—Emily Slatin*

Most people fall in love like rain—soft, steady, the kind that gently soaks in over time. They ease into it, step by step, trusting that each drop will collect into something nourishing. I never learned that kind of love. I don’t fall like a gentle rain; I crash headfirst. When I fall in love, I fall like wreckage.

There’s nothing gradual about the way my heart attaches itself to someone. For me, love has always arrived with the force of a building collapse. One moment I’m standing on solid ground, and the next I’m in free-fall, the world I knew reduced to splinters around my feet.

Maybe it’s the trauma talking—the part of me that learned early on that nothing safe stays. Or maybe it’s just how I’m wired, with an intensity that doesn’t know how to love in half measures. I only know that when my feelings ignite, it’s all at once. Immediate. Total. And it tends to leave a mark.

I was sixteen the first time I fell that hard. I brought a girl home to meet my parents, youthful and stupidly brave, thinking I could have honesty and safety at the same time. I was wrong. Loving her cost me the roof over my head. One afternoon I had a family; by nightfall I had a duffel bag, a broken heart, and nowhere to go.

My parents decided that their idea of me mattered more than my happiness, so I left home in a flurry of slammed doors and shattered trust. My whole life was suddenly reduced to what I could carry and what would carry me—clothes, a few keepsakes, and my dog curled up in the passenger seat of my beat-up Honda. I learned that day that love can bring the house down, literally and figuratively. And yet, if you asked me whether I regret it, I'd tell you no. That love was real, and even though it arrived like a lightning strike and ended in wreckage, I'd live it all over again. Because it was mine.

Trauma taught me young that every bright thing comes with a shadow. I've lived through things that other people only see on the news—pulled bodies out of mangled cars, walked

through the ashes of someone's burned-down life, pressed my hands against hemorrhaging wounds praying the bleeding would stop. I spent years as a rescue worker, surrounded by sirens and chaos, so I know what it means to hold onto hope in the middle of devastation.

Maybe that's why I never learned to fear the crash that comes with love. I've seen buildings fall, and people break beyond repair. I've learned that safety is a luxury, a temporary lull that can disappear in an instant. So when my heart finds something worth holding, I hold on tight, and damn the consequences. I don't know how to tiptoe into love any more than I know how to tiptoe into a collapsing building. I was built for fire and free-fall, not for hesitation.

Being intersex and queer in a world that likes its categories neat and tidy only added fuel to the fire. My very existence started as a battle—I was born with a body that didn't fit the mold, and I grew up knowing that being myself could cost me everything. When you're told again and again that you're too different to be loved, you either break, or you rebel. I rebelled the only way I knew how: by loving exactly who I wasn't supposed to, with every piece of me.

And yet, I still lived the all-American girl life since day one.

As a teenager I fell for girls with the kind of intensity that would scare most people. I had to fight just to claim my own name and identity; falling in love was another fight, another free-fall off the edge of what everyone told me was acceptable. I never did anything by halves, and love was no exception. If I was going to be damned for who I cared about, I figured I might as well care with my whole heart.

That kind of all-or-nothing intensity carries its own scars. I've been told more times than I can count that I'm too much—too intense, too honest, just too everything. Maybe they're right. I know my brand of love isn't easy. I know it can be overwhelming to be on the other side of someone like me, someone who runs hot and never really cools down.

I've tried to tone it down before, to do the slow-and-steady routine that seems to come so naturally to others. Once, I even stayed in a relationship for nearly twenty years, thinking if I just held on and behaved myself, I could make it work like "normal" people do. It didn't. Quiet resentment can wreck a home just as

surely as a five-alarm fire. In the end, I left that relationship with the same sudden urgency as I do everything else—because I couldn't stand living in something that was already burned-out inside.

When I met Amelia Phoenix Desertsong, the woman who would become my wife, I felt that old familiar plunge. We met in the unlikeliest of ways (online, of all things), and it didn't take long for late-night conversations to turn into an unshakable bond. We were two people who had seen our share of broken things, two independent souls who weren't looking for rescue—and we collided like two stars caught in each other's gravity.

I fell fast, probably faster than I should have. She moved to Vermont to be with me before either of us could overthink it. We got married on our own terms, with no elaborate fanfare, just a quiet vow between us on a spring day. Our love is real, even if it doesn't follow anybody's blueprint. Loving her is the closest I've come to feeling safe, but even then, it's a safety we carve out one day at a time, fully aware of how fragile life can be.

Here's the truth: no matter who you are, safety is never guaranteed. Not in life, not in love. I've held people in my arms as the light left their eyes. I've said goodbye to friends who promised forever and meant it, but forever still wasn't long enough. I know every time I say "I love you," it might be the last time. Perhaps the greatest lesson I've learned in life is to never delay letting people know exactly what they mean to you, because you will regret not telling them once it's too late.

Maybe that knowledge is why I refuse to hold back. I live with my heart on my sleeve and an emergency bag packed, hoping for the best while planning for the worst. Most people can afford to fall in love like a gentle rain, believing in tomorrow without a second thought. I envy them, in a way. But I don't know that life. I only know that I will love with the same intensity that's gotten me through every fire and every storm—completely and without apology.

Most people fall in love like rain; I fall like wreckage. It's not pretty or gentle, and it sure as hell isn't graceful. Loving the way I do means bracing for impact. It means understanding that something in me will break every single time I give myself away. But it also

means I get to feel it all—the rush, the heat, the undeniable truth that I am still alive enough to crash and burn, and heal, and crash again. I’ve come to realize that I’m okay with breaking, as long as it’s for something real. I’ve been through worse and survived. A broken heart won’t kill me; playing it safe just might.

So yes, I fall hard, I fall fast, I fall like a collapsing roof with the sky on fire. I know no other way. I carry my trauma, my identity, my history like a toolbox, and when love calls, I pry open the wreckage with my bare hands looking for the little glimmer of life underneath. I’ve never been one to wait out the storm—I am the storm. And if that means I come crashing down, then so be it. At least I know every piece of me that falls will tell a story. At least I know I didn’t hold back.

I wasn’t meant for soft rain and safe landings. I was built for the wreckage, and I’ve learned to love within it. In a world that offers no guarantees, I will love the only way I know how—without restraint, without fear of the fall. It’s messy and it’s painful and it’s mine. And if I’m being honest, I wouldn’t trade my wreckage for all the gentle rain in the world.



***April 29, 2025—Middletown  
Springs, Vermont (Home)***

*“Certain memories return like ghosts, not to break you, but to prove you once touched something real.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

There are nights when my mind doesn't so much think as it wanders—quietly, like a stray animal, unsure of whether it's welcome. Thoughts drift like smoke in an abandoned room—aimless, fragrant, impossible to catch. They curl into the corners of my brain, wafting through the wreckage of old memories, clinging to the peeling wallpaper of things I no longer speak aloud. The kind of memories that don't knock before entering.

There's a stillness to that kind of mental drift—a weightless ache. Like being in a house that no longer has electricity, but still holds onto the heat from a fire long since burned out. The walls remember voices. The floorboards creak not from footsteps, but from loneliness. That's what my head feels like most nights—inhabited, but not lived in.

Some memories hit like sirens. Others, like the low hum of a radio station just out of range. That's what it's like when you've seen too much, and spoken too little. The mind doesn't store trauma in neat folders—it leaves it strewn across the floor, like paperwork in an office that someone left in a hurry. You don't clean it up, you simply learn to carefully step over it.

I used to think healing was some sort of linear process—a checklist I could easily get through through like a structure fire. Step one, get in. Step two, find the source. Step three, extinguish. But trauma doesn't burn out. It simmers. It finds oxygen in quiet moments, and reignites when the world goes still.

There are places I can't return to—not physically, not emotionally, but at least ten minutes out of every single day, my thoughts go there anyway. They revisit the rooms I've boarded up, looking for something I forgot to carry out. Sometimes it's a face, sometimes a name, sometimes just a feeling. A feeling of being stared at by the past through a keyhole in the door you thought you had shut.

I have learned to let the smoke drift. To let the memories rise and vanish, instead of choking

on them. I no longer try to catch each thought, catalog it, or make it make sense. Some things aren't meant to be understood. Some things are meant to haunt you a little, just to remind you that you felt something real once.

There's a freedom in not needing answers. There's a truth in just standing still, breathing in the smoke, and letting it sting your eyes for a moment before you move on.

That's the kind of woman I am now. The kind who doesn't need to light fires just to feel warm. The kind who walks through abandoned places—inside and out—and still sees beauty in what's left behind. Not because it's pretty. But because it's real.

And I'll always choose real, even if it smells like smoke, and hurts like hell.

## **May 1, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)**

*“The moon shifts without apology, circles alone, and glows with a borrowed brilliance—how could I not see myself in her?”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

There are nights when I step outside into the silvered darkness of my Vermont farm, and the only thing I feel truly seen by is the moon. The world is quiet here—just the chorus of crickets and the distant hoot of an owl—but above me the moon hangs like an old friend. Its pale light touches my face gently, as if to say I know you. In those moments, I allow myself to wonder: What if the moon is the only one who ever really understood me?

I’ve lived a life under many spotlights—harsh fluorescent lights in hospital corridors, the red glow of flashing emergency beacons, the flicker of firelight on my soot-streaked bunker gear—but none ever felt as honest as the moon’s glow. From the very start, I was a riddle to people around me. I was born different, with a body that wrote its own medical rule book. The doctors weren’t sure what to call me; my

parents weren't sure how to raise me. Intersex, hermaphrodite, anomaly—those are their words, not mine. I simply came into this world a girl who didn't fit neatly on the forms, a truth that unsettled everyone but me.

As a child I looked up at the night sky and felt a strange kinship with that solitary moon. It didn't fit in either—it glows only through borrowed light from the sun, it changes shape unapologetically, and it circles the world alone. I too was accustomed to being the lone oddity orbiting others' expectations. Even as my birth certificate declared me a female at birth, there were whispers and stares that tried to convince me I wasn't real. But in the moon's silent acceptance, I never felt the need to justify myself. Under that soft light, I was real—whole and understood without a single word.

Misunderstandings have followed me all my life like a shadow I can't shake. Institutions especially have a way of misreading anyone who colors outside their lines. My family, for one, tried to rewrite my story before I could even hold a pen. There was a legal battle over my name, and identity when I was too young to comprehend it—my own relatives insisting I be someone I'm not. By sixteen I was cast out of

the very house I grew up in, all because I dared to love another girl and tell the truth about it. They saw my honesty as rebellion, my identity as threat.

When I drove away into that cold night, duffel bag in hand and tears stinging my eyes, the only witness to my heartbreak was the full moon watching over me over the Adirondacks. I remember looking up through a blur of tears, thinking that at least one thing in the universe wasn't judging me. The moon just shone, indifferent but present, and somehow that steadied me. I spent that night on a camp bunk with moonlight slanting through the window, promising myself I would never again let anyone tell me who I was. That promise became my armor.

In the years that followed, whenever human beings failed to understand me, I'd find the moon and remind myself that I carry my understanding within, like a secret solace that no one can take.

Autonomy became my north star. At eighteen I left behind the ruins of a family that wouldn't accept me and leapt straight into the flames—literally. I ran away from boarding school in my

senior year, found a job at the local fire department, earned my EMT certification, then my Firefighter certification, and hurled myself into a career on the front lines of chaos. It was an extreme choice by most people's standards, but for me it felt inevitable. While my high school peers traded college plans and easy comforts, I was pulling on bunker gear and running into burning buildings.

Maybe I had something to prove—to myself, to a world that doubted me from birth—or maybe the fire just called to the fire inside me. I've always been drawn to extremes, and absolutes. In rescue, and emergency work, I found a place where my intensity wasn't just accepted, it was required. Courage over conformity—that was my daily oath. I forged my own path and damn if I didn't walk it with head held high.

And yet, even amid sirens and adrenaline, there were quiet moments of solitude where I felt profoundly alone. After grueling 24-hour shifts saving lives or, worse, witnessing lives I couldn't save, I'd often find myself alone behind the station, staring up at the night sky. No matter how turbulent the day had been, the moon would be there, steady and patient. I could be covered in soot and grief, or numb

with exhaustion, but the moon never looked away.

I think the hardest part of being misunderstood is that people don't even realize they're doing it. The institutions I served—fire departments, EMS, even society at large—saw the decorated Lieutenant-Specialist, the Rescue Girl who never flinched, and assumed I was unbreakable. They praised my strength, but failed to notice the person behind the uniform. Few asked why I was so driven, what pain perhaps fueled my relentless courage. Fewer still understood that strength isn't a boulder, unmoving and solid; it's a dam holding back a flood. And my flood was mighty.

I carried the psychological residue of countless traumas, layered one on top of another. Decades of seeing humanity at its worst left cracks in me that I carefully patched over with unprecedented determination, and dark humor. I can still remember the worst night of my career—a double fatality car accident on a lonely road in Upstate New York, bodies and twisted metal illuminated by nothing but spinning lights, and the flood lights of the rescue truck.



I was twenty years old and tasked with tagging the lifeless bodies, under a sky so brutally clear that the moon itself saw everything. In the moment I didn't falter; I did my job with a steady hand, and a silent prayer for each victim. But afterward, when the wreckage was cleared and I was finally alone... I broke. I stepped away from the others, found a stretch of field bathed in lunar light, took off my helmet, and I screamed at the sky. Not out of anger, but anguish—soundless, hitching sobs that I refused to let anyone else witness.

The moon witnessed it though. It saw the tears mixing with blood on my uniform, and it saw me gather myself again when I was done. I wiped my face, stood up, and went back to being the unflinching rescuer everyone needed me to be. In that moment the moon felt less like a distant rock and more like the only friend who truly saw the depth of what I was carrying.

There have been lovers, too—women who, in their own ways, tried to understand me. But only one ever truly did. I am married to Amelia Phoenix Desertsong, a woman of impossible brilliance, and quiet depth, who never once asked me to explain myself. From the beginning, she saw me—all of me—not as a

contradiction to be solved, but as a woman to be honored, and trusted. She is the first transgender person I've ever loved, and the only soul who ever made me feel like my body, my mind, and my truth were not just accepted, but sacred.

Ours is a friendship-based marriage—queer in form, in function, and in the way it defies every expectation handed down by straight society. We sleep separately, we live intertwined but untethered, and we love each other in a way that is fierce, complicated, and profoundly gentle. Though we've walked through storms and emotional distance and come to the quiet, unflinching understanding that our paths may not always run side by side, we remain committed.

The emotional closeness we share does not require traditional romantic expressions; instead, it's built on truth, code, and the kind of mutual care that neither time nor separation can diminish. Even when our hearts feel miles apart, even when we go quiet for days or disappear into our own internal worlds, there is a string that connects us—something unspoken, unbreakable. She is my anchor when the world tilts, my sounding board when my

mind spins too fast, and the only person I have ever known who can look me in the eye and match my intelligence without blinking.

When I say I have been understood by someone, I mean her. But even then, there are moments—usually late at night, when the farmhouse is still and the air hangs thick with everything we haven't said—when I find myself looking up at the moon again. Not because she isn't enough, but because some things in me are older, quieter, and lonelier than words can reach. Amelia knows that. She doesn't try to fix it. She lets me have my silence, and she never questions my communion with the night sky. That, in itself, is a form of love that requires no explanation.

Now, in this chapter of my life, solitude has become both a close friend and a formidable teacher. I live on my own terms, on this little farm that only grows scenery, with dirt under my nails and autonomy in every breath I take. I spend my days with Amelia, fixing my tractor, laying in the green grass if only to gaze at the night sky, writing when the words come, and photographing the wild beauty around me. My life is modest, and honest. The happiness I've cultivated is a fragile kind—it doesn't erase the

loneliness, but rather sits beside it, holding its hand. I've learned that you can be both content, and lonely at the same time, and that's not a tragedy—it's just part of being human.

I no longer need the whole world to understand me. The young woman who once desperately craved validation has grown into a woman who validates herself. I know who I am: a proud intersex woman, a retired firefighter who has seen the worst and still refused to lose her best, a fiery and passionate storyteller, a lover of women, a fierce friend, and a soul forever reaching toward that moon. I don't shrink myself anymore—not for family, not for institutions, not for doctors, not for anyone. Truth doesn't care if it makes people uncomfortable, and neither do I.

So what if, in the end, the moon truly is the only one who ever understood me completely? It's a sobering thought, but not a devastating one. I've come to realize that being understood is not the end-all be-all of existence. Being true to myself matters more. The moon taught me that in its own mute way. Night after night, it showed up for me when others didn't. It listened when I hurled my pain into the stars. It watched me evolve—from a misunderstood kid

curled up on a windowsill, to a determined first responder covered in ash, to a woman standing alone in a pasture with head raised high, unbroken and unapologetic.

The moon has been the backdrop to every version of me. And maybe it's the only one who witnessed all of those versions and loved them all the same—without question, without demand.

I take one last look at the glowing orb above. A thin veil of clouds crosses its face, but its light only softens; it does not disappear. I smile to myself, feeling that familiar tightness in my chest loosen. I know I could cry right now and no one would see, but I don't need to. Instead I close my eyes and let the night breeze and moonlight wash over me, cleansing the day's doubts.

Understanding can be a lonely road, but I am never truly alone on it. I have my resilience, I have my truth, and I have the moon's silent companionship. Perhaps the moon is the only one who ever really understood me—and perhaps that is enough. In the gentle night, in this life I built with scarred hands and an open heart, I find peace in my solitude. I open my

eyes, wipe the stray tear I hadn't realized fell,  
and turn back toward the warm glow of my  
home.

The moon shines on behind me, unwavering, as  
it always has. And I carry on, unafraid.

**May 6, 2025—Stamford, New  
York (Mom's House)**

*“Going home doesn’t fix you—it just reminds  
you of the pieces worth carrying forward.”—*

*Emily Pratt Slatin*

I found myself back in my hometown again this week, back in the house where it all started, spending time with Darlene—my childhood best friend, my code friend, the only person left on this planet who knows the whole damn story and stayed anyway.

Darlene and I were thick as thieves back then, always up to something—exploring creeks, daring each other to climb where we shouldn’t, figuring out who we were going to become long before we had any idea what that actually meant. It’s wild to think we’re grown now, technically speaking. We both have houses, responsibilities, stories layered on top of other stories. Yet when we’re together, it’s like some part of the universe presses pause on time. The rest of the world can shift and crumble, people can vanish and storefronts can be replaced with things we don’t recognize—but Darlene and I?

We're still us. Still laughing like we're young and didn't have all the answers.

We took a drive to Oneonta, then Cobleskill, just like we used to. Not because there was anything particularly pressing to do there, but because the road itself held the memories. Every twist and turn had its own inside joke, every diner and gas station held the ghosts of conversations past. It was one of those days where the sunlight hit just right, where my iPhone playlist shuffled songs that hadn't graced our ears in years, and we didn't feel old—we just felt alive. We didn't talk about bills, or jobs, or the pain of time passing.

And as the day folded into night, I found myself slipping between timelines. The past and present bleeding together like watercolors—messy, imperfect, beautiful in their own stubborn way. I climbed back into my old bed, where the walls still had faint outlines of posters long since removed, and I stared at the ceiling. For a moment, I could almost hear the soundtrack of my youth—songs that knew me better than I knew myself.

When I was still visiting New York City, I would often default to my 80s playlists. Echoes of the



Cure, Depeche Mode, Blondie, and Pet Shop Boys. It's moody, restless, dripping in neon. But when I find myself back in Stamford, NY, it's always the 90s that take the wheel. Alanis. Pearl Jam. The Cranberries. Nirvana. It's not just music. A secret language that leads me back to a version of myself I thought I'd lost.

And maybe that's the thing about returning home—not just to the town, but to the people who knew you before the world tried to tell us who we are. It reminds you of who you were before you had to start pretending. Before life demanded masks and scripts and backup plans. Before trauma carved new lines into your skin, and psyche.

Everything changes. People come and go, stores close, roads get repaved, the high school replaces their moveable type sign with a new digital screen out front, and you realize the local deli you used to swear by is now an AirBnB with a name that doesn't make sense. But some things stay—if you're lucky. For me, it's Darlene. And maybe, just maybe, it's also that part of me that still believes in wonder, still blasts 90s music with the windows down, still remembers the smell of autumn leaves and

the sound of sneakers on wet pavement after a rainstorm.

Going home doesn't fix everything. But it helps you remember what's worth holding onto. And for me, that's everything.

**May 8, 2025—Stamford, New  
York (Mom's House)**

*“For years I searched for silence in secret places, until I realized the only quiet worth keeping was the kind I carried within.”*

When I was a teenager, I discovered the roof of my parents' house wasn't just made of shingles and nails—it was made of silence. It was made of peace. It was the only place I could go where the rest of the world couldn't follow, and more importantly, wouldn't try.

It started the way most secrets do—quietly. One day, I realized that if I opened my bedroom window, and stepped out just right, I could sit on the edge of the world. I didn't tell anyone. I never brought a book, never took my diary. I didn't go up there to do anything—I went up there to not do. To not listen, not answer, not perform. To just be still in a way that made sense only when surrounded by sky.

The roof wasn't safe in any traditional sense. The slope was just steep enough to command respect, the edge always a dare. But it was mine. I'd step out when the house felt too crowded or when my thoughts grew so loud

they couldn't be contained between four walls. I didn't need a reason—being born different to parents thirty years apart, who never got along, was reason enough. At that age, everything feels like it's pressing in too close, and nothing feels like it's really yours. The roof changed that. It didn't belong to them. It belonged to me.

I would sit there for hours, watching the sky change color in slow motion—blue to gold, gold to bruised purple, until stars began to appear like pinholes punched through a paper sky. Sometimes I counted them. Sometimes I didn't even look up. Sometimes I cried, not because anything had happened, but because I could finally do so without anyone asking what was wrong. And sometimes I just breathed. Long, deep, unscripted breaths—something I didn't even realize I'd forgotten how to do until I was up there.

There was no noise from the house that could reach me. Not the muffled arguments. Not the phone ringing off the hook. Not the fake laughs that echoed off the walls, and never quite made it to the eyes. It all stayed below. The roof was above it—not just in height, but in spirit. It had a way of reminding me that I was temporary,

and so were my problems. That the world was so much bigger than a bad day, or a test I didn't ace, or a friend who stopped calling without warning.

I didn't go up there to rebel, though I'm sure that's how it would've looked if anyone had found out. I went up there because I needed to be unreachable, unfixable, uninterpreted. There's something oddly powerful about creating a space that no one knows exists. It's like carving out a corner of the universe and stamping your name on it in invisible ink. No one can take it from you, because they don't even know it's there.

I recently went back to visit my mom and my best friend—two people who exist at opposite ends of the emotional spectrum, yet somehow keep drawing me back to the same place. It was the town I once called home, though calling it that now feels a bit dishonest. What I return to is a collection of rooms filled with old memories and furniture that hasn't moved since I was in braces and combat boots. It smells like dust and denial. I stay in my childhood bedroom because part of me still needs to—like I'm performing some emotional archaeology, trying to excavate what's left of

the girl who used to sit up late listening to the Indigo Girls, reading Sylvia Plath, and hoping no one would knock on the door.

I stay, mostly, for the sake of nostalgia—and maybe, if I’m being brutally honest, to brace myself for the grief I know is coming. My mother’s health is declining. Her memory is becoming more distant. She’s sharp some days, then vacant the next, like someone keeps flicking the lights on and off inside her head and she’s just too proud to admit she can’t find the switch.

But it’s my best friend who keeps me tethered. She’s been there since before the world turned complicated. Seeing her is like flipping through a photo album where the pages come alive, except the people in the pictures are still right there, sharing your fries, and finishing your sentences. She gets me in that deep-code way—the kind of friend who doesn't need subtitles.

The visit was mostly uneventful, until it wasn’t. There was a moment—a conversation I wasn’t supposed to hear. One of those careless, half-laughed disclosures tossed out like an empty can. My mother was speaking to someone—god only knows who—and I caught her say, “You

know my daughter Emily was born genetically female despite having a penis. And she thinks this is cool. Would you think that being born like that would be cool? Apparently she thinks it is.”

I do think it's cool. In fact, I think it's very cool. And yet, feeling those words being spoken over the phone hurt. It always hurts. No matter how strong you are, no matter how solid your foundation, there's something uniquely cutting about being reduced to a punchline by someone who was supposed to protect you, but never did. My parents were never there for me. My mom even sat quietly in the living room when my father kicked my door down, and then beat me for bringing another girl home to meet them. This time, he did it in clear view of the girl, leaving us both traumatized.

That's the curious thing about returning home. You go back hoping maybe—maybe—the air will smell sweeter, the memories less sharp, the voices kinder. But often, what you find is that the furniture stayed the same because the part of yourself you left behind did, too. And maybe that's the real heartbreak. You grow. You fight. You change. And then you go back and realize

that while everything in life has changed drastically, some things haven't moved an inch.

If I could go back and talk to the girl I was, sitting cross-legged up there with the wind pulling her hair every which way, I wouldn't offer advice. I wouldn't tell her it gets better. I'd just sit beside her. Quietly. Respecting the silence. Knowing some things in life, the things that matter, don't need to be said to be understood.

These days, when the world begins to press in, I slowly drive my truck down the familiar gravel drive that snakes around the garage toward the ranch-style farmhouse. The sky opens wide over our ten acres, the pines lining the property, and the air greets me with a stillness that reminds me everything can wait. And it does. Out here, everything waits. Time doesn't rush. The fields don't shout. Nothing demands. Nothing interrupts. It's a place that's always been paused, quietly holding its breath, patiently expecting my return.

When I was a teenager, I thought peace had to be stolen in moments—clawed out of chaos, and claimed in secret places like the roof of my parents' house. Now, peace meets me at the



front gate. It lingers in the rusted metal of the porch rail I will eventually end up fixing myself, in the scent of the earth after a hard rain, in the sound of Amelia thinking out loud softly in the kitchen as she pours a glass of iced tea she probably will forget about, and won't finish. The kind of comfort I used to chase upward is now something I live inside of.

There's no need to climb for solitude. It's stitched into the land out here. In the low thrum of frogs in the evening, in the way the mist rises off the fields at sunrise, in the early morning silence when there's sunlight on my bed. I don't have to escape to find stillness—I just have to come home. The quiet is built into the foundation now.

Amelia understands this without words. Besides my best friend Darlene, she's the only other person I've ever known who doesn't ask me to explain my silences. Amelia and I share them like blankets—folded between us, comforting but unspoken. Sometimes we don't talk for hours, and still I've never felt more heard. We've built something together, not just a home, but a refuge. A place where neither of us has to vanish to be ourselves. We're simply allowed to be.

There's a rhythm to this life that suits me—the steady cadence of chores, the soft punctuation of birdsong, and windchimes, the occasional reminder that the world may be a mess but this little patch of it is mine. I mow my own lawn. I fix what breaks. I paint my nails blue because I like the way it looks when my hands are covered in grease, or dirt.

Sometimes I think about that roof and the girl I used to be—legs dangling over the edge, heart full of questions no one dared to answer. I used to think she was lonely. But now I understand she was just waiting. Waiting for a life she didn't know she was slowly building every time she refused to give up.

She couldn't see this place back then—couldn't imagine a home that felt like an exhale, or a partner who would love her without caveat. She couldn't picture a life where comfort wasn't a secret to be stolen in high places, but a daily ritual that began with black coffee and the morning sun filtering through farmhouse windows. But she climbed anyway. She kept going. And now I get to live the reward she never stopped hoping for.

Coming home doesn't feel like returning to a place. It feels like returning to myself. The porch light's always on. The house smells like cedar and coffee and quiet forgiveness. Nothing needs fixing. Nothing needs fleeing. I am no longer a girl on a roof, hiding from the world. I am a woman on the ground, rooted, steady, seen.

And here's the truth I carry now—peace isn't found in the escape. It's found in the place you no longer need to run from.

(Welcome home, rescue girl. You made it home safely.)

*This was written at a time when I still believed in her. I no longer do. Some friendships end not with silence, but with betrayal. She tried to break something sacred. She failed. I survived. And so this post stands, not for her—but for the part of me that loved without regret.—Emily, May 14, 2025*

**May 13, 2025—Middletown  
Springs, Vermont (Home)**

*"I changed the ending of the story I was handed. And I didn't do it loudly, or for attention—I did it quietly, like planting a tree I may never sit under, trusting that its shade will still offer shelter to someone, someday."—Emily Pratt  
Slatin*

It was late, I pulled my skirt off, tossed it in a lazy heap on the far corner of my bed, and stood there for a second in just my bra, my panties, and an old shirt with a frayed collar.

For once, I didn't feel the need to perform for anyone, not even for myself. And then out of nowhere, it hit me like a punch to the chest. I love the ever living fuck out of Amelia.

There are so many people who think love is supposed to be neat, manageable, polite—something you can fold and tuck away when it becomes inconvenient. When I'm in love, truly in love, I don't know how to love halfway.

I stood there, half-dressed, and half-broken, and I realized that even if Amelia never sleeps beside me again, even if our relationship is that of two best friends who are married but live only as roommates, I will still love her with everything I have, because loving her changed the shape of me in ways I never want to undo.

This isn't the kind of love that needs permission. This isn't the kind of love that begs to be understood. It just is.

And standing there half-naked in the soft, forgiving dark, I realized something else—

Loving the ever living fuck out of Amelia is one of the most honest, most beautiful things I will ever do. And if that makes me a fool in the eyes of the world, then so be it.

**May 16, 2025—Middletown  
Springs, Vermont (Home)**

*“Some people only loved the version of  
me that kept quiet, but never the  
woman who found her voice.”—Emily  
Pratt Slatin*

I spent a year in the mouth of a whale. Not literally, of course, but in a place just as dark and confining. Inside, the outside world became a muffled hum, and time lost its meaning. It was a space of suspended existence—quiet, briny, and claustrophobic—where I felt both strangely protected, and painfully trapped.

In that cavernous darkness, I was living in a state of emotional and existential suspension. The whale had swallowed me whole on the day I realized that those I loved most had betrayed me. Perhaps it wasn't the belly of the beast—maybe I wasn't fully lost—but it was the mouth: a limbo where I was neither free nor consumed. Grief and shock held me in their jaws, and I floated there for

what felt like an eternity, afraid to move in any direction.

The grief that swallowed me was born of an unexpected betrayal. One wound in particular cut me deeper than all the others: the sudden and unexpected loss of a childhood friend, my best friend of nearly thirty years. She was, in many ways, a sister to me—we grew up side by side, whispering secrets under starry summer skies, trading dreams about who we'd become. If anyone in the world truly knew me, it was her. Or so I believed.

That illusion shattered the day I introduced her to Amelia. Amelia is my partner, my wife, the woman not only who holds my heart, but is the center of my universe. I had imagined my best friend would embrace Amelia just as I did—warmly, without question—because that's what you do when someone you love finds happiness.

Instead, I watched an icy distance cloud my friend's face the moment she realized that Amelia is transgender. Her

polite smile tightened at the edges; her eyes darted away. Later, in a hushed and stilted voice, she confessed that this—my life, my marriage—was something she couldn't accept. In that moment, I felt a cold weight of understanding: the person I had trusted with every chapter of my life was not the person I thought she was.

I left that conversation as if in a daze, my stomach hollowed out. This was someone who had seen me through every awkward year, every heartbreak and triumph since we were girls. She had cried with me when we were working on an ambulance together, cheered for me when I returned with my certifications from the fire academy, and shared countless ordinary afternoons that became cherished memories. Yet when it truly mattered, when I needed her to see me, and the woman I love, she refused. It was as if decades of friendship evaporated in an instant, erased by a truth I had thought she could handle. I realized, standing there with my hands shaking and my eyes burning with tears I refused to shed in



front of her, that perhaps she had never really known me at all.

Hers was not the only betrayal. Other childhood friends began to drift away in the wake of my coming out into the fullness of my life. Some stopped calling, their silence heavy with unspoken judgment. Others stayed in my orbit but at a careful distance, offering polite small talk that never touched the changes in my life—never asking about Amelia, or acknowledging the woman I had become.

Each quiet dismissal, each awkward omission, was another stone in my pocket pulling me deeper into sorrow. The people I once called my chosen family had become strangers, revealing prejudices I never imagined they harbored. It was a slow exodus of trust: one friend moving out of reach, then another, until I found myself virtually alone with my truth.

I didn't fight these losses—at least not outwardly. Instead, I went silent. I retreated into myself, carrying on with

the motions of everyday life while a storm raged quietly inside. By all appearances I was surviving: I kept writing, kept taking pictures, kept up with chores here at my Vermont farm. But inside the whale's mouth, I was drowning in unshed tears.

Night after night, I'd lie in bed, listening to the sound of my own heartbeat echoing in that darkness, wondering how it was possible to feel so lonely with so much love in my own house. I couldn't bear to burden Amelia with the depth of my hurt—after all, she was the one directly snubbed by people I had sworn were good. So I carried it in silence. Each day I swallowed a little more of my pain, until carrying that weight became as routine as breathing.

Surviving betrayal takes a silent toll. There were no dramatic confrontations after that, no screaming matches or public reckonings. Only the slow, steady drip of heartbreak, hollowing me out from the inside.

I found myself avoiding the topics that mattered most. When old acquaintances from back home would ask how things were, I'd force a smile and say fine. I did not mention Amelia's name, fearing the cold pause or forced nicety that might follow. I learned which parts of myself to keep hidden in conversations, like tucking away a precious photograph whenever certain company came by. In trying not to make others uncomfortable, I contorted myself into a smaller shape. And with every compromise, every quiet omission, I felt another piece of me sealing off, growing numb in the dark.

It's a terrible thing to live unseen, especially by those who once claimed to love you. In that whale's mouth, in that self-imposed darkness, I felt invisible even to myself at times. I spent long hours with my own thoughts as my only company. I replayed old memories, searching for clues—were the signs there all along? Did I miss some hint of who my friends really were, or did they change when I wasn't looking? I sifted through years of laughter, tears, and

late-night talks, now all tainted by doubt. In the endless night of that metaphorical belly, I questioned my own judgment, my own worth. What was so wrong with me or my life that it made lifelong friends turn away? The question echoed in the darkness, unanswered.

At some point—after months that bled into years—I grew tired of the question. Tired of making myself small. Tired of the taste of saltwater sorrow in my throat every time I stayed silent to keep the peace.

Maybe it was the strength I saw in Amelia's eyes each time she assured me we would be okay. Maybe it was simply exhaustion from carrying the weight of others' prejudice. But I began to stir inside that whale. I began to push back.

Naming a truth, I found, has power. The first time I finally said it aloud, it was late on a winter night. The woodstove was crackling, the world outside as still as a held breath, and Amelia sat across from me at our kitchen table, worry in her gaze.

My voice shook with anger and relief as I whispered the words: "I am hurt. I am furious at them. They betrayed me." Saying it felt like striking flint in a dark cave—sparks flew, illuminating jagged walls I had refused to see. I let the words hang in the air, and in that moment I swear I felt the great jaws of the whale begin to loosen their grip.

Awakening to betrayal is a painful rebirth. I wish I could say that as soon as I acknowledged the hurt, I was instantly free of it. Life isn't so tidy.

The truth didn't set me free in a burst of light or spit me onto a sunny shore fully healed. What it did was give me clarity. It allowed me to see the situation for what it was: I had been living in a purgatory of unspoken pain, trying to spare the feelings of people who had not spared mine. Recognizing that was like finally breaching the surface after holding my breath too long—my lungs burned, my eyes stung with tears, but I could see the sky again. I could see the truth.

And the truth was this: my womanhood, my queerness, my very self—these are not tragedies. The real tragedy was that I ever thought I owed anyone an explanation, or an apology for them. I am a woman who fought to be herself in a world that tried to tell me who to be. I am a queer woman who found a love that feels like sunlight, a love that didn't ask for permission, nor forgiveness.

There is nothing shameful in that. If my old friends could not embrace the full, authentic me, then their love was always conditional. That realization hurt, but it also set something inside me straight.

From that hard truth, I began to salvage hard-won wisdom. I learned that being a woman, in all my strength and vulnerability, means I get to define myself—I won't let anyone, not even lifelong friends, define me by their fear or ignorance. I learned that being queer is a gift of seeing the world with more compassion, not a flaw to hide. And I learned that real friends, real family, do not require you to cut out pieces of

yourself to make them comfortable. Love doesn't demand that kind of sacrifice; fear does.

The most difficult lesson was one of self-acceptance. In the absence of those once-beloved voices, I had to become my own friend. I sat with my pain and did not look away. I let myself feel the betrayal in its entirety—the anger, the sadness, the disappointment—like letting a storm rage through. And when the storm finally passed, I found, amid the debris, a quiet resolve.

I realized I was still here. Still me. Bruised, yes, but intact. In the whale's mouth I had felt hollow, but once I allowed the echoing pain to crescendo and fade, I discovered an echo of something else: my own resilience.

There is no tidy closure to this story of lost friendships. I have not been granted any neat happy endings or apologies that magically stitch up the wounds. The friends I lost may never understand the hurt they caused, and I have made an uneasy peace with that.

Instead, I am learning to live with the duality of ache and clarity. The ache is the part of me that still mourns what I thought I had—the sisterhood, the unconditional camaraderie of youth—now forever changed. The clarity is the light that finally shines on all those shadows, revealing things as they truly are.

Standing here now, I feel both of those things at once. The sadness of betrayal sits heavy in my chest, but beside it, a glowing truth burns steady: I know who I am, and I know what I've survived. I stepped out of that whale's mouth not into blissful closure, but into a world made honest by my own acknowledgment.

I carry the knowledge that I was betrayed and that I lived through it. I carry the knowledge that my love is real and my identity is valid, even if people I cherished refused to see it. These truths are my compass as I move forward.



In the end, perhaps survival itself is a kind of grace. I was swallowed by despair, but I was not consumed by it. I emerged with scars and a clearer vision of the world, of who my true friends are, and of who I am without the lies I told myself. There's no neat ending waiting for me—just the ongoing journey of a woman claiming her own life, day by day.

The mouth of the whale is now just a metaphor, a place I dwelled in for a time. It taught me what I needed to know, but I don't live there anymore.

## ***May 18, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)***

*“I was never meant to live by anyone  
else’s script—so I burned it and rewrote  
myself in mud, in grease, and in the soft  
witness of moonlight.”—Emily Pratt  
Slatin*

As far back as I can remember, my childhood was haunted by a profound sense of fragility. While other kids were preoccupied with cartoons and playground games, I was grappling with questions of life, and death. I carried a storm inside me even as a little girl—a churning cloud of existential dread that lived under my bed, and whispered in my ear at night. I’d lie awake staring at the ceiling, wondering what the point of it all was, and when it would all collapse. Mortality wasn’t an abstract concept to me; it was a shadow that stretched across every birthday candle I ever blew out.

That constant awareness of life’s brittleness set me apart early on. I was

born different in ways I didn't yet have words for, and maybe that was part of it. Being a profoundly gifted child—with a mind that raced years ahead by default, meant I sensed truths too heavy for a young heart. I understood that people died, that love wasn't guaranteed, that forever itself might be a lie.

I didn't have the luxury of childhood oblivion. Instead, I had insomnia and philosophical questions I dared not voice. The weight of being different—in body, mind, and soul—pressed on my small shoulders long before I learned how to stand up straight under it.

If my inner life was turbulent, the world of my mother's family was solid ground. They lived in a rural stretch not far from Buffalo, New York—a clan of proudly working-class Americans chasing their slice of the all-American dream. Summers meant piling into the car for the drive to my grandparents' farm, where family reunions unfolded around campfires, under big open skies.

My uncles and cousins all seemed to drive sturdy GM and Ford trucks, vehicles built with honest American steel that gleamed under the sun. Parked in the tall grass by the old house, those trucks were a evidence to support everything my mother's claims that they held dear: hard work, durability, and loyalty. These were people who clocked in at factories, and construction sites, who fixed their own cars on the weekends, and who barbecued under a Buffalo Bills flag that waved proudly from the porch.

The old family farm was a paradise of hands-on living. In a back corner of the yard, an antique tractor rested beneath the sagging tin roof shed, rust gathering on its iron bones, and wildflowers curling around its tires. I remember watching one of my uncles crouched in the dirt with a wrench, coaxing that stubborn machine back to life with grease-stained hands and gruff patience. There was nothing and no one in that household that couldn't be fixed with a little elbow grease or a bit of clever tinkering. In that environment, I learned

early how to coil an extension cord, drive a nail straight, and trust the calluses on my hands.

They worked hard, and they played with equal intensity. For every dawn that saw them up going to work or fixing something on the weekend, there was always a dusk that saw them cracking open beers around a bonfire or playing horseshoes until the stars came out. My mother's family approached joy the same way they approached labor—with their whole hearts open, and no reservations. Laughter came as loud and easily as the rev of a well-tuned engine. As a child, I'd fall asleep on a pile of cousins' jackets to the comforting sound of my relatives telling old stories and belting out off-key country songs. Under those Buffalo skies, I felt safe and, dare I say, almost free from the darkness that often gripped me when I was alone.

These were the same family members who took me to my first county fair, an event so vividly etched into my childhood memories that even now, decades later, I can still recall the

electric buzz of excitement mingling with the scent of deep-fried everything. I remember standing on the bleachers, wide-eyed, as cars slammed recklessly into each other during the demolition derby, metal crunching against metal—a spectacle so gloriously chaotic, absurdly violent, and undeniably American that I couldn't tear my eyes away. I laughed until my sides hurt, fully immersed in that wonderfully reckless moment. Yet when my father learned I'd attended something so uncouth, so profoundly blue-collar, he was utterly horrified—as if I'd somehow betrayed his carefully cultivated image simply by daring to revel in the unfiltered joy of dirt, noise, and unapologetic authenticity.

It was in that atmosphere of rough-hewn love that I found the courage to come out. At 16 years old, with shaky hands and a heart hammering like a jackrabbit, I told my aunt on my mother's side that I was a lesbian. It wasn't a surprise. Eventually I told my mom, and she told her entire family. I remember visiting the farm, and the moment of silence I walked into that day. My uncle paused

mid-bite into his burger, gave a little shrug, and sarcastically offered, “Who here could have NOT seen that one coming.”

And everyone got a good chuckle, and that was that. They didn’t understand me fully, and they didn’t pretend to; but not a single one of them turned their back on me. In their own understated way, they let me know I was still one of them. I was still family.

My father’s side of the family was a different world entirely. They had traded the bustle of New York City for the sun-soaked suburbs of Los Angeles, but they carried the big-city mindset with them wherever they went. To them, image was everything. They were the kind of family that prized pedigree, education, and keeping up appearances, and they never let me forget it. Where my mom’s relatives saw a life to build with sweat and laughter, my dad’s relatives saw a ladder to climb—and they expected me to climb it two rungs at a time.

Manual labor was something they avoided entirely, almost as a point of pride. My paternal aunt and uncle, and all my cousins outsourced anything that involved getting their hands dirty. If a pipe leaked or a car needed an oil change, they'd rather pay a stranger to handle it. And they would watch the labor with arms crossed across polo shirts, and overpriced cardigan sweaters. I once casually mentioned helping repair a telephone jack at my mom's family farm, and watched their faces twist in distaste—why would anyone do such grunt work when you could just call and hire someone? In their manicured, air-conditioned world, a hammer was something you handed to the help, not something you ever touched yourself. They micromanaged businesses, and balanced ledgers, but never so much as mowed their own lawns.

They also held me to standards I never managed to meet. I was profoundly gifted, yet I struggled in the strict private schools they enrolled me in. To them, my poor academic performance wasn't a



sign that I was bored or mismatched with the curriculum; it was a personal failing, an intentional rebellion that tarnished their perfect image. I was a perplexing puzzle they couldn't control: a child who was both too smart and, in their eyes, not successful enough. My very existence challenged their tidy worldview. Instead of trying to understand me, they chose to be ashamed of me.

The breaking point came shortly after my sixteenth birthday, not long after I had come out to my mom's side. My father's family summoned me to what can only be described as a full-scale intervention. I remember sitting stiff-backed in my aunt's living room in California, the air stifling and still, as a circle of well-dressed relatives fixed me with hard stares as I sat, dressed in some frayed green cargo shorts, my favorite t-shirt that had been worn out at least a year ago, and some Teva sandals. They spoke in careful, lowered tones, as if discussing a business deal or a dearly departed – but it was my life they were dissecting.

They informed me that my lifestyle choices, and so-called identity were unacceptable. I was to keep my situation a secret at all costs, they said. If I insisted on being that way, I must never speak of it outside those walls, and never find a partner, or speak openly about this as it will bring shame to the family.

Their words grew sharper as the hours wore on. One by one, my relatives—the people who were supposed to love me—stood up and pronounced judgment. I was selfish. I was an embarrassment. I was even, in the venomous hiss of my aunt's voice, disgusting. My father nodded each and every time someone stated something they hated about me. I sat there, hands clenched into fists on my knees, feeling heat rise in my cheeks. But I would not cry for them. I would not bend.

When they finally paused, expecting to see me broken and obedient, I quietly rose to my feet. My chair scraped gently against the carpeted floor in the silence. I looked around at each of those faces—

people who shared my blood but had never truly seen me—and I said, as evenly as I could, “I have better things to do with my life than live it for you.” Then I walked out the front door, letting it shut firmly behind me.

In that moment, I chose love and authenticity over fear and appeasement. I walked away from their money, their expectations, their conditional affection—and I walked straight into freedom (and a Hardee's restaurant, where I ordered a double cheeseburger). It was the day I had lost half of my biological family, and found myself at a Hardee's in Claremont, California, trying my best to figure things out. They had never really been my family in any way that mattered. Their absence in my life hurt far less than the expectations I would have had to aspire to, if I sought their approval. I realized as I left that I had always known where I belonged. I wasn't the heir to their hollow legacy; I was my mother's daughter, forged in Buffalo steel and honest mud.

As I grew into adulthood, my mother's side of the family, which had once stood as an unshakable foundation in my life, gradually unraveled beneath the quiet devastation of alcoholism; first my uncle, and then one of my beloved aunts, succumbed far too early to their addictions. Their deaths fractured something intangible yet profoundly real—the warmth and closeness I'd always counted on—and as if in mournful response, the farm itself slipped through my fingers.

Despite my earnest offer to purchase it in cash, above asking price, my cousin made it painfully clear that the family farm could no longer belong to any of us, as though our shared memories had become an unbearable burden rather than a treasured heritage. He allowed me to visit one last time, then as the day was nearing the afternoon, he told me to move my car outside the gate. He locked the gate behind all of us, sold the farm, and I haven't been back since. Since that day, my connection to them has dissolved into silence; the ties that once bound us frayed beyond repair. It was as

if time froze in the very instant of loss, leaving a much younger version of me forever standing in a quiet field of ghosts, still waiting—perhaps futilely—for a reunion that will never come.

These days, I wake up each morning on a patch of land nestled in Vermont's Green Mountains, breathing air that smells of hay and wildflowers. This is my own farm—a life I built from the ground up, far from any suburban expectation. On these ten acres of rolling pasture and forest, I've found the kind of peace that once felt more myth than reality. Here, I rise with the sunlight on my bed, and I watch the mist lift off the fields as I sip coffee that tastes like hard-earned freedom. Every task on this homestead is mine to tackle, and every square inch of it carries my fingerprints, my footprints, and my memories. It's a place I can comfortably live without curtains or blinds on my windows. I want to look out, all the time, to stay connected to the outside world, but at a distance, at my pace, and only on my terms. No exceptions.

My John Deere tractor sits in the barn, its green-and-yellow paint catching the morning light as faithfully. Its massive rear tires and undercarriage are caked with mud and gravel from to the long days of plowing snow, hauling trees to plant, and stray grass clippings from towing the mower deck through the fields. My blue Ford F-150 pickup truck waits in the barn along side it, with the back seat full of changes of clothes and camping gear, waiting patiently for the next last-minute adventure where I drop everything and just go.

These machines aren't just vehicles to me; they are trusted companions in my everyday work. I maintain my own equipment, just as I watched my uncles do, only this time as the adult, I'm the one getting dirt and grease under my fingernails.

When the work is done, I've learned to let myself play and rest without guilt. As dusk falls on the farm, I trade my work gloves for a CD player, my laptop, or a good book, oftentimes a combination of these. There are evenings when I dance

barefoot in the grass, music from the radio mingling with the chorus of crickets. Other nights, I will be inspired to cook something really incredible, and Amelia and I will have it for dinner. In those moments, my muscles ache in the best way, and my heart feels full. I have built a home where my authentic self is not just accepted but celebrated, where love is open and easy, and where the boundary between working hard, and savoring life is as natural as the shift from day into night.

Sometimes, in the quiet of a starry night, I let myself remember the girl I could have been if I'd played by everyone else's rules. I picture a version of me still stuck in that gilded cage of expectations—lonely, false, a ghost wearing someone else's smile. I ask myself if appeasing them, if trying to live up to their idea of who I should be, would have been worth it. Was any of that sacrifice ever worth the cost?

In the end, the mountains finally won. The open sky, the honest earth, the life built on my own terms—these things

claimed me, and I let them. I stopped running from who I am meant to be. I stopped trying to perform a role that was never mine. Here in the shadow of these mountains, I've found something better than what I lost. I found peace. I found myself.

When I finally crawl beneath the covers—bones aching in that quiet, familiar way, heart a little too full for words. The house is still, save for the hum of the refrigerator, I fold into myself like muscle memory. No fanfare, no audience, just me in an old shirt and panties—tired, unguarded, soft in all the places the world tries to harden.

I curl up on my side the same way I always do, pulling my knees toward my chest, arms wrapping instinctively around my own body. One hand rests gently across my breast, the other tucked underneath, cradling me with the tenderness I used to think had to come from someone else. But tonight, like so many nights before, I'm my own comfort. My own shelter. My own bra. And I lie there breathing—slow, steady,



and wholly mine—knowing that this,  
this quiet moment of holding myself  
together, is a kind of womanhood no one  
ever taught, yet every one of us  
somehow knows.

## ***May 19, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)***

*“The man who tried to cage me became the one who set me free—because when he left the gate unlatched, I found the courage to run through, and I never looked back.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

I was raised by a father who tried to script every facet of my life. Each day was dictated by rules that my mother and I never agreed to. Having given up on trying to control my mother, he focused on me. He decided what I wore, what I could say, even what dreams I was supposed to have. In that confined space, the air felt thin and my own voice barely echoed back to me. Childhood shouldn't feel like a cage, but there I was, imagining a life I wasn't sure even existed.

Those early years were steeped in quiet fear. My father's love came with conditions and consequences. A gentle laugh at the wrong moment could earn a scowl; a small act of defiance could

summon his rage. He was emotionally and physically abusive, though I only learned to call it that later. Back then, it just felt like normal—a normal I survived by making myself small and compliant. I remember the hush at our dinner table, the way I'd lower my gaze as he spoke, like doing so would make me invisible. And in some ways, it did.

Under his roof I became a secret, a self in hiding, because it was safer to fold my truth into my pocket than let him see it. Every day was an exercise in walking on tiptoes to avoid triggering an outburst. Every night I'd retreat into my mind, building imaginary worlds with open skies and open doors, places he could never reach. I clung to those daydreams the way some kids cling to stuffed animals—they were my comfort, my promise that somewhere beyond those walls, a different life could be waiting.

Growing up under my father's roof often felt like living under lock and key. He had a rule and a plan for everything—who I was supposed to be, how I should behave, even what feelings were

acceptable to feel. I wasn't a daughter to him so much as an extension of his will, expected to mirror every belief he hammered into me. He tried to rewrite my story before I could even hold the pen, telling me what my name meant, what my future should look like, and who I must never become. In his eyes, obedience was love, and any assertion of my own will was a betrayal.

I learned to read his moods the way others read weather reports. If the front door slammed a little too hard or his voice sharpened at the end of a sentence, I knew to brace myself. He could be calm one moment and thunderous the next. A minor misstep—spilling a glass of milk, speaking out of turn—might earn me an hours-long lecture or worse, the kind of punishment that leaves bruises blooming beneath sleeves. My world was measured in decibels and footfalls: the creak of floorboards signaling his approach, the volume of the TV indicating what kind of evening it would be. Every sound was a warning or a cue to make myself smaller.

When my father moved us into our second home in Stamford, New York, my mom told me I could choose any bedroom I wanted—a gesture that might’ve felt like freedom to another child. But I wasn’t just any child, and I’d already learned that freedom came with caveats. I chose the room at the very top of the stairs—not because it had the best light or the biggest closet, but because I knew I’d hear my father coming. At eight years old, I was already thinking in terms of exits and warning signs, already calculating how long it would take to twist the lock before my father reached the door. While other kids were picking bedrooms based on color or view, I picked mine for survival. I didn’t have the language for it then, but I understood tactics—I understood threat assessment. That bedroom wasn’t just a space to sleep in. It was a buffer zone, a line of defense.

In that kind of life, hope was a contraband feeling. Yet I kept a tiny ember of it glowing. I tended it in secret, feeding it on late nights when I’d sneak out to the backyard. I’d lay beneath the

branches of my favorite tree, just for open air, and whisper promises to myself under the moon that one day I'd know what freedom felt like. But every time I tested the boundaries, I found the gates to opportunity firmly shut. I started to believe that if I was ever going to taste liberty, it would come by sheer accident or miracle. I didn't have the keys, and my father wasn't about to hand them over.

Still, a part of me refused to accept that my life would be confined forever. In whispers and diary entries, I nurtured the idea that the world was bigger than the yard I knew. I took risks in the smallest ways: hiding my favorite queer book he'd forbidden, writing about the handful of girls I was friends with that I actually had crushes on. I remember occasionally sneaking out the kitchen door to go next door to borrow a dress from my childhood best friend who lived there. These were tiny rebellions, flickers of selfhood that persisted despite him. They were proof that I was real, that outside his control there lived a girl with her own heartbeat, her own

mind. I promised myself that if an opportunity to escape ever came—no matter how slim or terrifying—I would take it. I would run and never look back.

Freedom, I quickly learned, came with its own challenges. I slept in my car and tent for a while, curled up with a duffel bag as my pillow, waking with the dawn because the sunlight made it impossible to rest long. I scrounged together meals from gas station snacks, and the kindness of a few friends who secretly slipped me sandwiches, or a couple of dollars when they could. Every hour of freedom demanded a level of courage I didn't know I had.

Because I was pretty much living out of my car, the glove box became a chaotic archive of my life, jammed into a space meant for owner's manuals and insurance cards. It became a rogue museum of notes, receipts, napkin sketches, cassette tapes, lighters, rogue hair ties, a Swiss Army knife. There were several blue Bic pens—some with the ends chewed, some long dead, others half-alive, and covered in scrawl from

when I used my thigh as a writing surface. All of it dumped unceremoniously at the feet of whatever poor soul had the audacity to open the glove box, as there was no catch, and would fall out of the dashboard.

There were moments I questioned if I had made a terrible mistake—like when I ended up spending an entire summer living in an army tent while working at a summer camp washing dishes.

Yet even in those hardest moments, I never truly regretted running. The memory of my parents' house—of that stifling prison of a life—kept me from turning back. I would replay his angry outbursts in my head whenever I wavered, reminding myself what going back would mean. That was usually enough to straighten my spine. And in the cracks of hardship, goodness started to slip through.

In quiet moments, I'd reflect on how miraculous it was that I had this chance at all. Had my father not effectively forced me out, I might have endured



years more of that suffocating life—too frightened to open the gate myself. It's a strange thing when your worst tormentor unwittingly becomes your savior in a sense. He would never see it that way, of course. To him, my leaving was meant to be a lesson in failure and submission. But to me, it was as if he lit a match in a dark room and showed me the door. I often think about that irony. The person who tried so hard to confine me ended up delivering me to liberation through his one moment of forcing me out with an index finger full of hate. It's a reminder that sometimes freedom comes from unexpected places. Sometimes the hero and the villain of your story can be the very same person seen from different ends of time. And sometimes the only thing we need to save ourselves is a single chance—a door cracked open, a gate left unlatched, just long enough to slip through.

Years have passed since the night I found the gate open, and I ran through it into a new life. In those years, I built something beautiful for myself—

something I hardly knew how to imagine back when I was caged.

These days, I live on a quiet piece of land a few hours away from the house where I grew up. The mornings here are gentle: I wake to the golden light of dawn spilling through my window, and the sound of birds unafraid to sing. I step outside with a cup of coffee and feel the dewy grass between my toes—no fences hemming me in, just open field stretching as far as my eyes can see. The silence that greets me is kind, not tense like the silence of my childhood home. It's in this stillness that I often pause and remember the girl I used to be, the girl who stared at the gate and wondered if the world beyond was as terrifying as she'd been told. I wish she could stand here with me now, breathing in freedom with every slow inhale. I think she'd smile, finally understanding that peace isn't something stolen in secret—it's something you grow, once you have the space to plant it.

My life today is far from perfect, but it is undeniably my own. Every square inch

of it is claimed by the person I have fought to become. I fixed up a house with my own two hands, painting the walls bright white, like the walls of my rooms were all the years I had to rent. Being on my own makes me happy, and repairing what needs fixing so it truly feels like mine.

There's a sign on the back door of my house that leads into the unspoiled beautiful fields often found in Vermont. The sign reads, "NEVER STOP EXPLORING". This is my creative space, and when my mother was recovering from surgery, I returned to the house, and took my childhood book shelf. I often run my hand along its top and think about how different my life could have been if I hadn't dared to challenge my father and run. The thought is sobering. It makes me hold my freedom dear, never taking a single day of this self-made life for granted.

I have friends who know me—the real me, unfiltered, unafraid to speak. I even found a partner who loves every scar in my soul, someone who understands

silence and laughter and all the language I carry in between. The companionship taught me that family can indeed be chosen, and that trust doesn't have to be earned through fear.

In this life, I've learned what gentle love looks like: it's patient and without conditions, the very opposite of what I knew growing up. Sometimes, when the evening light slants just so across our kitchen, catching the dust motes in a lazy dance, I'm struck by how ordinary and precious a safe life can be. There are fresh picked flowers from our farm on the table, muddy boots by the door, laughter echoing in the living room while Amelia plays a video game—and no one frowns at these simple signs of happiness. Nothing is perfect, but everything is free in the ways that matter.

Looking back, I understand something with crystal clarity: it took extraordinary courage to do what I did. At sixteen, I wouldn't have described myself as brave—more like desperate. But bravery and desperation often tango together. I was

desperate enough to leap, and brave enough not to turn back mid-air. In that reckless courage, a new self was born. I think of that teenage girl as a separate person sometimes, a younger sister who handed me the gift of a future unchained. She suffered so that I could stand here now, whole and healed. I owe it to her, to that version of me who selflessly stayed behind, to make this life as wonderful as she dreamed it could be when she sat under those stars praying for a way out.

If there's one truth I carry in my heart now, it's this: freedom was well worth the risk. The world outside that house I fled turned out to be hard, yes, but also breathtaking. It was bigger and more surprising than the grim fairy tales my father used to scare me into staying. I've seen things and met people that expand my heart in ways I couldn't have imagined back in that little yard. Each experience—good or bad—taught me that I am stronger and more capable than the scared girl my father tried to keep. Every challenge I overcame out here became a brick in the foundation of

me. With each one, I built walls of my own, not to trap myself in, but to shelter the freedom I fought for.

I made it out. I made it home. All because one day, the gate was left open—and I had the courage to run through.

## ***May 23, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)***

*“Life isn’t a clean story—it’s a leather diary passed down in fragments, with lipstick prints that swore we loved, and tear stains that proved we survived.”—*

*Emily Pratt Slatin*

Life isn't just lived, it is passed down like a well-loved leather diary—full of scribbled notes, tear stains, and lipstick prints in the margins.

We inherit it in pieces—half-truths, coded glances, fragments of letters never sent. The lipstick print on the margin says, “I loved once—recklessly, fully, with a laugh that echoed through motel hallways and empty parking lots.” The tear stain beside it whispers, “And it broke me, but I’d do it again.”

Because life—real life—isn’t a clean narrative. It’s a scrapbook of contradictions. A woman can be a war zone and a sanctuary. She can leave claw marks on the past and still be gentle

when she holds a child. She can carry her mother's grief and still write her own chapter—even if the ink smudges.

Some pages in that diary get written in pen because we were so damn sure at the time—sure about love, sure about friends, sure that they would never leave. And some are written in pencil because somehow we just knew it wouldn't last, or hoped it wouldn't, or weren't brave enough yet to say it out loud.

And then there are the pages that got torn out entirely. You know the ones. The years we don't talk about unless it's three drinks in, and the lights are low. The mistakes we made because no one ever taught us how to be loved without conditions, or how to walk away without thinking it meant failure. The secrets we buried so deep we sometimes forget they were once ours. Pages that smell like spiced rum.

But even those—especially those—are part of the book. You don't get to leave out the ugly just because it doesn't



photograph well. Scars make a better story than perfection ever will.

Because real women—real goddamn women—don't live life with clean margins and polite epilogues. We write sideways. We doodle when we're bored, bleed when we're broken, and underline the hell out of the moments that changed us.

Sometimes we annotate what our mothers never said—scribbling in the margins like: “She was in pain here but wouldn't admit it.”

This is the part where I finally stopped apologizing.”

“I didn't deserve what happened next, but I survived anyway.”

That diary—passed from hand to hand, heart to heart—it isn't just a record. It's a fucking survival manual. A map of the bruises that became blueprints. A litany of every time we stayed when we should have left, and every time we left and saved ourselves.

It holds the scent of cigarettes on a back porch at midnight, and lavender sachets tucked into old drawers. It echoes with footsteps down hospital corridors, with laughter in thrift store dressing rooms, with the silence of a woman realizing—finally, irrevocably—that she is enough.

It's got lipstick kisses from first dates and last nights. Coffee rings from mornings we weren't sure we could face. And tucked in between all that, sometimes—just sometimes—a pressed flower from the day we knew we were truly alive.

This isn't the kind of legacy that gets framed or praised. It won't make the history books. But it is history. It's the kind that keeps the world spinning because some stubborn, brilliant, battle-worn woman woke up one more morning and decided to keep going. To keep writing.

And when it's finally passed down, years from now, to a girl with eyes like wildfire and questions burning in her chest, she'll flip through the pages, see the

mess and the magic, and she'll  
understand without needing to ask:

“This was her.”

“And now—this is mine.”

**May 28, 2025—Middletown  
Springs, Vermont (Home)**

*“As a child I belonged to two worlds:  
butterflies in open fields that spoke of  
freedom, and a house thick with silence  
and lies. I mistook them both for home,  
until I learned what home truly meant.”*

*—Emily Pratt Slatin*

When I was little, I used to imagine myself barefoot and wild, running through fields that never ended—thick with tall grass and wildflowers, the air alive with monarch butterflies swarming around me like they knew I belonged there. In those dreams the sky was a fearless blue, the sun gentle on my skin, and I could almost touch freedom with my fingertips. I was five or six when this daydream first came to me—a vivid escape I returned to whenever the real world felt cold and confining. The butterflies were as beautiful as I could imagine, fluttering just out of reach, in patterns of black, orange, and white, and I chased them with my big eyes, and pure laughter. In that imagined meadow

I was innocence, and hope incarnate, a little girl unburdened by secrets, running and running and never wanting to stop.

But inevitably I would wake up—or simply open my eyes—and find myself back in my bedroom, back in the house of lies I called home. The giggles in my throat would fade to silence as I remembered to be small, and quiet again. Reality always crept in at the edges of my butterfly field: the distant sound of my parents arguing downstairs, the heavy stillness that followed like a held breath, the knowledge that in our house, truth was something dangerous. I learned early on that the smiles my family wore in public were masks—thin, blatantly obvious, and easy to crack. We pretended to be fine, and I pretended along with them, even as my heart ached for the simple honesty of my dreams. As a child I didn't know why the butterflies meant so much to me; I only knew that in those daydreams I felt free, and in my waking life I felt anything but.

In our home, silence was the rule. I was forbidden to talk about things that truly mattered to me, especially not the truths lurking beneath our perfectly staged family photos or the tension that lived in the walls. My childhood home was a typical rural house, all white wooden siding with green shutters, and drawn curtains—outwardly ordinary, but inside it was cluttered with unspoken things. I sensed the lies long before I had words for them. There were the little lies, like everything's fine when everything was falling apart, and there were big lies, like the one that formed around who I really was. I grew up breathing in those falsehoods, tiptoeing through them as if they were shards of glass. If I listened hard at night, I could hear the truth in the floorboards creaking or the muffled sobs my mother hid behind the bathroom door. By day, though, we all acted our parts: a family undamaged, a family that didn't talk about feelings, or identities, or anything real.

I was a problem child in that house—problem was the word my father used, often with a scowl. The truth is I was

neurodivergent, though I didn't learn that term until much later. All I knew then was that my mind was full of voices and ideas that wouldn't sit still. I lived my young life with an internal chorus of thoughts, questions, and imaginings that flooded my young brain at all hours. I would lie awake in bed under my flower-printed quilt, telling myself stories in the dark, because the only place I could speak was inside my own mind. In the silence of our household, my own thoughts became my comfort and my company. I was lonely, yes, but my imagination filled the void—sometimes with fantastical adventures, and sometimes with the honest conversations I longed to have with my parents but never could. In my head I could scream, cry, laugh, confess—all the things I muted during the day.

The secrecy in our family was suffocating. There were subjects I learned never to mention. We did not ask why my dad drank so much in the afternoon when his friends were around, or why my mom slept in her chair most of the time. We certainly did not

mention the confusion from doctors from when I was born—though I only learned the details years later, I always sensed a peculiar tension around the topic of my birth, and early months. It was as if my very existence carried a secret I wasn't privy to. Whenever I overheard murmurs of doctors, and my name in the same sentence, my mother would notice me and abruptly change the subject. I grew up in the shadow of a truth I could not see, a puzzle with missing pieces. That uncertainty became another thread in the web of lies and silence.

So I adapted. I became hyper-alert to the moods that filled each room. If the air in the living room felt thick after a phone call, I'd retreat to my bedroom and close the door without a word. If my father was walking around the house with heavy footsteps, I knew to make myself invisible—a ghost in my own house. I learned that silence was safety; speaking up was an invitation for pain. In a home where honesty was unwelcome, I became fluent in quiet, mastering the art of keeping everything inside, and if it



had to be said, then the pages of my diary is where it would stay.

*“I used to write like someone pressing her hand against the glass, hoping that someone, someday, might see the girl on the other side.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

Even without words, my difference announced itself. I was different by nature, a fact that both fascinated and troubled the adults around me. In kindergarten I could already read far beyond my grade level, losing myself in books about galaxies and ancient myths while my classmates sounded out basic sentences. At seven I dared question my teacher’s mistake in front of the whole class, and while the other kids stared at me, the teacher sent me to the principals office. The principal decided to label me as a gifted child, pointing directly at me in front of my father with an index fingertip full of hate. That word—gifted—followed me through childhood, whispered by teachers, printed on evaluation reports, rarely spoken with admiration, and often times with a hint of concern. By the time I was ten, one

evaluator outright called me a polymath, amazed at how I excelled in every subject she put in front of me. I remember sitting in the principal's office as they discussed me in third person, as if I wasn't right there. I swung my feet above the floor, more interested in the pattern of butterflies and sunflowers on her office curtains than in their discord. Yes, I was smart—frighteningly so, according to some—but that didn't solve the real problem. In fact, being brilliant only made me more different, and different was dangerous in my world.

My father, a fiercely traditional man, didn't celebrate my talents. To him, my advanced vocabulary combined with less-than-perfect test scores were often cherry-picked facts that were amusing when he wanted to brag to a friend, and annoying when they drew attention to how odd I was.

My father liked to say, "No point being a genius if you have no common sense," usually after I did something that vexed him, like forget to do a chore because I was buried in my writing, or question

one of his rules. My inquisitive nature—the same curiosity that annoyed my teachers—often provoked his temper. I learned to hide my light around him, dumbing myself down just to avoid his sneer and the word smartass thrown like an insult. In a thousand little ways, I was instructed to be normal: Dress like a proper child. Sit up straight. Don't talk back. Don't question authority. Why can't you be like other kids? The irony was, I couldn't be like other kids. It wasn't rebellion for rebellion's sake; it was simply who I was. I climbed trees instead of playing with dolls, I daydreamed about galaxies and butterflies instead of princes and weddings, and my heart... my heart loved differently, even before I had a name for it.

By the time I reached middle school, I knew that I was queer—queer and hiding, like a butterfly still in its cocoon, praying not to be noticed until it was safe. Puberty only intensified the knowledge. While other girls giggled about which boy in class they had a crush on, I felt my cheeks flush for her—

the girl with the auburn braids who sat two rows ahead, the one who gave me a dimpled smile every time I lent her a pencil. I didn't fully understand what I felt, but I knew it was real and unshakable. And I knew, most of all, that it was forbidden. In our household, being gay was not just unacceptable; being queer was nothing short of betrayal of my father's world. I had heard his contemptuous comments often enough when someone came on TV who didn't fit his narrow view of normal.

My father would grunt at the sight of two men holding hands in a movie, and then I'd be reminded (again) how being gay was acceptable, but only if they weren't members of my father's family. Or, "No child of mine would ever do that crap." Once, as a naive twelve-year-old, I asked quietly, "What if you had a daughter who was... like that?" The look he gave me stopped me mid-sentence. His voice was low and certain: "No child of mine will ever be queer. You understand? You and your mother will

be out on the street with only the clothes on your back.”

I understood. After that, I never asked again. I became an expert at not letting him see me. I trained myself to keep my eyes from lingering too long on a pretty girl at the grocery store if my parents were around. I kept my expressions neutral when my classmates talked about crushes, feigning indifference or even inventing a fake crush on a boy just to throw them off the scent. Conformity was survival; I wore it like an ill-fitting uniform, praying it would be enough to get me through each day without confrontation. But in my mind, I nurtured my true self in secret. I scribbled confessions in my diary late at night by flashlight, pages and pages of truth that I could never, ever speak aloud. That diary became my dearest confidant. In those lined pages I wrote about the butterflies—how I longed to be as free as them—and about the girls I secretly loved, and the anger I felt at having to hide every facet of my existence that made me who I was. I hid the notebook in the one place I was sure

my parents would never look: under my mattress, centered in the middle. It was a fitting hiding spot—hidden in such a way that making the bed wouldn't reveal it. The futon itself provided protection from prying eyes.

Living under my father's roof meant living under constant threat of discovery. He ruled our home with a volatile mix of strict discipline and unpredictable rage. On good days, he would ignore me or grunt in my direction; on bad days, he'd find something about me that offended him and unleash a tirade of insults that left me shaking.

I remember once getting into the car after school, proudly clutching a ribbon I'd won in the science fair, and without warning he ripped it out of my hand and threw it out the window as we were driving home. "Wipe that smug smile off your face," he growled. "Nobody likes a show-off." I stared at the ribbon on the pavement, watching the growing distance between me and the ribbon, and the fleeting feeling of triumph I felt,

now fading quickly into shame. To him, even my achievements were an affront if they dared make me happy. Joy was dangerous; it was often taken as rebellion.

And nothing sparked his anger like any hint of what he called deviance. As I got older, hiding my queerness became both more difficult and more critical. In high school I found a small circle of friends who were as different as I was—the artsy weird girl who quoted Sylvia Plath, the punk girl with a shaved undercut and gentle eyes, and the cute popular girl who wore pride pins on her denim jacket as a straight ally. With them I could drop the act for a few precious moments at lunch or after school. We whispered our secrets under bleachers, and behind lockers, swapping handwritten notes, and quietly validating each other's existence. Those friendships were a lifeline, but also a liability. More than once I caught my father eavesdropping when I was on the phone, and I'd force myself to talk about homework or some innocuous topic until he lost interest. I knew if he ever heard something

suspect, the consequences would be dire.

By some miracle—and careful vigilance—I managed to keep my father in the dark until I was sixteen. Sixteen, the age when many teenagers taste a first sip of independence, when they learn to drive or go to prom. For me, sixteen was the year everything came crashing down. Her name was Allegra. She had long dark hair and a laugh that made my heart do somersaults.

One rainy afternoon when my parents were supposed to be out, I started going through my shoebox of letters that Allegra had sent me while she was in South Africa as an exchange student. I curled up on the couch in the living room, watching the rain streak the windows and daring to read the letters I kept hidden in my closet. I can still recall how the her handwritten words made the house feel bright for once. In that moment, I let myself imagine that maybe someday it could always be like this—that maybe someday I could live openly in my home. But that fantasy



shattered in an instant. My parents came home early that afternoon, and found me relaxing on the couch with open letters scattered on the couch, some gliding gracefully towards the floor. My father's voice thundered from the doorway, "What the hell is going on here?"

To this day I don't know what twist of fate brought them back hours ahead of schedule, but there he stood, red-faced and disbelieving, staring at Allegra's letters, as I furiously tried to collect them. My mother hovered behind him, standing there in her typical apathetic existence. I froze, every muscle in my body locking up with terror. I started to stammer an apology or an explanation—I'm not sure which, because my father's roar drowned out all other sound. "No. No. Not in my house!" he bellowed, after realizing that these were love letters from another girl my age. In two strides he crossed the room. I shrank back, and I moved to shield the box of letters without even thinking. His open hand struck me hard across the face, the force so strong I tasted blood where my teeth

cut the inside of my cheek. “You little bastard,” he snarled, and with that the dam broke. Years of his suppressed suspicion and contempt came pouring out in a torrent of hateful words. Ungrateful. No child of mine. Idiot. Failure. He spat each one like venom. Homophobic slurs filled the air—words I had only heard on TV or muttered by bullies at school now hurled at me by my own father.

I wish I could say I stood strong, but I was sixteen and heartbroken and terrified. I cried out, begging him to stop, trying to reach my mother’s eyes for help. She looked away, expressionless, and monotone, throwing her hands in the air with a casual shrug, but her feet nailed to the floor. She did nothing—said nothing. My father was beyond hearing anyway. He grabbed me by the arm and flung me aside like I was nothing. I hit the corner of the coffee table and collapsed onto the rug. In the blur of the next moments, I remember him grabbing the letters, throwing them into the cardboard shoe box, then tearing them up before throwing them into the

fire place as I sobbed, begged, and pleaded. “Get out!” he shouted at me, shoving me out into the hallway stairs. “And you—” he turned to me, voice low with a terrifying calm, “I have no child anymore. Pack your things and get out of my house.”

There was no arguing with that voice. In a single afternoon, I ceased to be his child—I became nothing to him. Numb and shaking, I stumbled to my room, my face throbbing where he’d struck me and my vision blurred with tears. I could barely think, but I knew I had minutes at best before he might return to throw me out physically. I fumbled for a duffel bag and threw in whatever clothes and personal items my trembling hands could grab. My diary—I snatched it from its hiding spot without a second thought. Those pages were my soul and I wasn’t about to leave them for him to find and destroy. As I fled my childhood home, a strange calm overtook me. I looked back just once from the doorway: my mother stood at the base of the stairs, her face a mask of sorrow and fear, and my father... he had turned his back, already

walking away as if I no longer existed. The lies and secrets had finally exploded into the open, and there was nothing left to say. No child of his would be queer, and so he had no child at all.

Outside, the rain had stopped. The air was cool and smelled of wet pavement and cut grass. I stood there alone in the driveway, the house looming behind me, and I felt a curious mixture of devastation and relief. The worst had happened; the truth was out, and I had survived it, bloodied but unbroken. A part of me even felt a glimmer of the freedom I'd always longed for. I was cast out, yes, but I was free to be myself. At that thought, I almost laughed through my tears. It wasn't the way I wanted freedom to arrive, but it had arrived nonetheless, harsh and abrupt – like a door kicked off its hinges, I thought wryly, touching the bruise already forming on my cheek.

I didn't know it then, but I was embarking on a journey of survival that would shape me into the woman I am today. That rain-soaked afternoon

marked the end of my childhood and the beginning of something else—a metamorphosis. In nature, a caterpillar’s world has to end for a butterfly to be born; my world ended in chaos and pain, but what emerged was me, fully and truly me, at last. In the weeks and years that followed, I often reflected on how I made it through such a traumatic upbringing. There were nights I spent curled up on a friend’s couch or in the spare bed at a summer camp cabin (the first refuge I found after I was kicked out), replaying memories in my head and wondering how I hadn’t been crushed by it all. By any statistic or sad story, I should have been broken—another queer kid destroyed by an intolerant home. But I wasn’t. I was bruised and scared, yes, carrying mental scars that still throb on cold lonely nights, but I was also alive and moving forward.

The voices in my mind that once kept me company in the silence of my childhood became the voices of encouragement, reason, and sometimes humor that spurred me on when I was

alone. My intellect, that brilliant flame others wanted to dim, guided me to opportunities and mentors who valued me for all that I was. After surviving a house built on lies, I made a vow that I would never again live a lie, not for anyone. I embraced the very parts of me my father wanted to erase. Each time I chose to live openly and honestly, it felt like a small defiance and a huge victory all at once.

There were times I stumbled. Trauma has a way of echoing through the years, and I'd be lying if I said I never hear my father's voice in my head, or feel a pang of that old fear when I open up to someone. I couldn't change the past, but I could change how I carried it.

Now, so many years later, I stand on my own land under a wide Vermont sky, and I often think of that little girl I used to be. In the spring, my favorite monarch butterflies migrate through these parts, and sometimes I'll see some passing through the fields. I watch as their orange wings flutter gently, and I remember the dreams that sustained me

through so many dark times—those childhood visions of running through sunlit fields, free, happy, and unafraid.

In a way, I am living that dream now. I have my freedom; I have truth in my life. The innocence of childhood is long gone, but in its place I've cultivated something more enduring: self-acceptance, hard-won and profound. My home is no longer a house of lies, but a home of honesty, and peace. There are no more diaries to hide—I leave my diary out on the kitchen table, pages open to whatever I'm writing, because I fear no judgment here. The voices in my mind now are ones of purpose and creativity, not panic. And if silence comes, it's a gentle silence, one I can fill with music, laughter or simply the contentment of knowing I am safe.

Sometimes I catch myself twirling in the meadow at dusk, when the air is thick with fireflies (our summer stand-ins for butterflies), and I realize I am happy. I've built a life on my own terms, living in a small town where everyone knows me only as Emily, the openly queer,

proudly neurodivergent, endlessly curious and brilliant woman—all the things I was told I shouldn't be, I will always be. The society that once demanded my conformity has long since lost its hold on me. I walk through this world to the beat of my own heart, not anyone else's drum. Being different, which once felt like a curse, is now my greatest treasure. It meant I had to fight harder to survive, yes, but it also means I live more authentically, love more fiercely, and see the world in colors and patterns that others can't even imagine.

How did I survive? I ask myself that often, not in despair but in awe. I survived by clinging to that vision of freedom, by listening to the truth inside me when the external world tried to drown it out, and by never, ever giving up on myself. I survived by growing wings of resilience. Like those butterflies I dreamed about, I emerged from my chrysalis—the painful shell of my past—and when nobody was looking, I took flight. Every so often, I think back to the nightmarish day my father cast me out. It felt like an ending, and it was. But it



was also the beginning of me. I want to tell that sixteen-year-old girl, shivering in the driveway, that she will go on to do things she can't even imagine yet. She will find love that embraces her wholly. She will find home in places and people who actually care. She will turn her story of pain into a testament of survival that might even help others like her feel less alone.

I can't go back in time to hold her hand, but I carry her in my heart always. She is the child who ran through fields of butterflies in her mind to escape a cruel reality. She is the teenager who refused to become someone she wasn't, even when it cost her everything. And she is me – the core of me, the part that remains forever hopeful, curious, and brave. I survived for her and because of her.

Tonight, as the day's last light fades, I step outside and breathe in the cool evening air. The grass is tall and damp under my feet. A lone butterfly, unexpected this late in the afternoon, flits past my shoulder—a small

silhouette against the pinkish twilight sky. I smile up at it, a silent salute. Go on, I think, you're free. And so am I. I walk back toward my house—my own honest home that took me a lifetime to afford outright—and leave the ghosts of the past to linger elsewhere. My story is not a sad story, not anymore. It's a story of resilience, of a girl who was different and oppressed and afraid, but who grew up to claim the wings that were always meant for her. And with these wings, I continue to rise, continue to run through my own fields of butterflies, forever unashamed and forever free.

**May 29, 2025—Middletown  
Springs, Vermont (Home)**

*“Every porch I sit on is also a memory,  
every field a mirror—reminding me  
that the girl with the duffel bag still  
walks beside me. She is in the sway of  
the grass, in the hush of the wind, in the  
weight of silence I still carry. I’ve built a  
life far from where she once stood, but  
she never really left. She is the proof  
that survival has a face, and that  
freedom, however fragile, can be  
claimed.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

I’m out on the porch when the call comes through. The local tractor dealership is on the line, letting me know that my new mower deck—a long-awaited upgrade—is being assembled and will be delivered in the next couple of days. I thank them by name, because by now they answer with Hey Emily, as if I’m an old friend. As I hang up, I picture the tall grass in my lower field that will soon feel the blade. That grass has grown so high it nearly reaches my knees; once it was an inconvenience,

then it became a refuge for pollinators, and this evening, strangely, it's all I can think about.

The back porch is where I do most of my writing, and dreaming. In the morning when I wake, I see the sunrises. In the evening, after a long day of work, creating, or dreaming, I am rewarded with a sunset as the sun sets between the mountains at the far end of the property. The late spring wind moves visibly through the tall grass, making the field ripple in little swirls like a green ocean under the afternoon sun. Each gust sends a wave rolling across the land; even the old farmhouse seems to lean a little into it, timbers gently creaking as if the house itself can feel the breeze. I close my eyes and let the breath of the wind pass over me too. In that shushing hush of grass and breeze, there's a familiar whisper of freedom—something I used to chase in my daydreams as a child.

It's been an expensive month, a season of investment in the things that Amelia and I need. I'm typing these words on a

brand new MacBook Pro, bought to replace my trusty laptop that finally gave up the ghost. At my desk sits a custom-built gaming desktop tower, quietly humming—a powerful machine I ordered custom for the Windows-based multi-tasks, and occasional moments of recreation.

I also had to purchase a new mower to pull behind the tractor—an inevitability I saw coming. The last one, a finish mower that never truly measured up to the work I asked of it, had developed a nasty habit of throwing belts off the pulleys no matter how carefully I tried to finesse it. I gave it one last round of repairs, but the truth was, it had already given me everything it had. Letting it go came easier than expected. I listed it for free on Front Porch Forum, and the local fire warden showed up the very next day. We chatted for a bit, then I helped him load it onto his trailer.

Tomorrow I'll drive into town to hand over a personal check for the mower deck I needed to replace on the tractor. The folks at the dealership won't blink at

that; they know my name, know my story, and trust that my word is good. In the same little Vermont town, the vehicle dealership across the street doesn't hesitate to accept my check either—I've bought two trucks there, and Amelia's Bronco Sport, and they've long since stopped asking for ID. There's a warmth in this kind of recognition. After so many years of feeling like a stranger in my own life, I've become someone the local community knows by name.

Still, the turning of the calendar brings an old ache. It's the time of year that once meant packing up for a journey away from home. The humid air and the scent of cut grass remind me of duffel bags and nervous excitement. I catch myself remembering the night before those summers of my youth, when I'd double-check a packing list and hug my pillow a little tighter, bracing for weeks in a world that I hoped might understand me, though never did. In my bedroom closet, on a shelf in the back, lives that same battered duffel bag I took with me the very first year I headed to those summer cabins. It's the one I still

had clutched in my hands the day I was kicked out at 16—the summer sky falling around me as I left that place for the last time. That bag hasn't left this farm since the day I bought the property. It holds stories it will never tell, souvenirs of a self I had to outgrow to survive.

My back porch now is not so different from one of those old cabins where I spent my teenage summers. On warm days I fling the windows wide open and let music pour out, the same songs that once got me through long nights in my younger days. I sit here with my notebook, and listen to the wind, the birds, and the rain, against the sound of the rushing river behind me. The wooden planks under my feet, the screens rattling softly in the breeze, even the scent of the air after a rainstorm—it all brings back echoes of distant afternoons, of sunlit dust motes dancing in cabin light. Sometimes I close my eyes and I can almost imagine myself back there, a lanky, hopeful kid scribbling poems in a spiral notebook, believing for a moment that the summer could last forever.

But pieces of me are forever trapped in that earlier time, in that sunlit cabin of memory that I can visit only in dreams. I know I can't truly return to the person I was or the place where it all stopped. That world is inaccessible now—closed off by ignorance and difference, by the people who couldn't accept what they knew all along, though in the end, didn't understand. The door to that past life is locked tight, and even if I could turn the knob, I'm not sure I'd recognize the girl who remains on the other side. She is frozen there at twenty, sitting on the edge of a bunk with her arms around her knees, eyes closed against the hurt. I feel her sometimes, a ghost in the rooms of my memory.

When I was young, I spent more time with a notebook and a camera than with any living soul. I see her now in my mind's eye: that younger me, forever the observer, wandering the edges of the soccer field or the lakefront with a camera slung around her neck, jotting down secrets, and sorrows in a dog-eared journal. Those were the truest



companions of my youth, and were there for me when I struggled to speak. I think that's how I learned to feel visible: by writing myself onto pages, and collecting moments in photographs, I claimed a corner of the world that felt real, and mine.

I open my eyes now to the golden light stretching over the farm. The tall grass is glowing, swaying in slow waves as the sun sinks lower. By next weekend, that grass will finally be back to normal; the new mower deck will see to that. I'll cut paths through the green expanse, and the field will transform back into something familiar and tame. And yet, I know that underneath the fresh-cut order, the wildness will still be there—the wildflowers will root deeper, the monarchs and bees will return when it's time. Just like me, this land has its cultivated surfaces and its untamed depths. Just like me, it remembers what it's been through.

I linger on the porch steps as evening comes on. The air is cool and carries the scent of damp earth and the last of the

apple blossoms. My worries fall at my feet, and a gentle hush falls across the fields. I realize I am content here in a way that the young girl I was could barely imagine – content, safe, and free. The past hasn't vanished; it lives in me, in the soil under my nails and the scars on my heart, in old duffel bags and weathered notebooks. But every day I get to choose what to carry forward and what to lay to rest. Tonight, as the wind moves through the tall grass like a lullaby, I carry the lessons and let go of the pain. I watch the phantom waves roll across the fields in the twilight, and I whisper a thank you—to the land, to the wind, to the girl I used to be.

***May 31, 2025—Middletown  
Springs, Vermont (Home)***

They came barefoot through the  
ash and glass,  
dragging the hem of history  
behind them like it owed them  
something.

Daughters of memory—etched in  
the brittle pages of notebooks  
that never made it out of the fire.

They did not arrive with lullabies  
or lanterns,  
no soft hands,  
no rosaries tucked into coat  
pockets.

They didn't knock.  
They didn't ask.

I never expected mercy.  
I stopped waiting for it the day I  
learned  
that silence has a mother  
and her name is shame.

These women—

they are not sisters.  
Not to each other,  
not to anyone.

There are no secret meetings in  
the chapel,  
no shared needles threaded with  
redemption.  
Just the echo of heels in an  
abandoned hallway,  
and the way one girl once pressed  
a Polaroid into my palm  
and whispered,  
“Don’t forget what they did to  
us.”

No one writes ballads for girls  
like us.

We are the footnotes of tragedy,  
the slashed-out verses of psalms  
too raw for Sunday morning.

We don’t wear white.  
We wear blood under our  
fingernails  
and laughter like a knife in the  
ribs.

Not the laughter of joy—God, no.  
The laughter of survival.  
That cruel, cracked sound that  
says,  
you didn't get me this time.

We are the bruises no one can  
photograph.  
The bite marks we learned to hide  
with lipstick.  
The backseat confessions that  
tasted like rust and cigarette ash.

They call us troubled.  
They call us broken.  
They call us every fucking thing  
except truth.

And maybe we are.

Maybe we are just ghosts with  
bones,  
daughters born from memory  
alone.  
No sisters of mercy.

Only women who carry their own  
names like gravestones,  
their own hearts like contraband.

We write in the margins  
because the center is a lie.  
We remember what they want us  
to forget—  
that pain doesn't sanctify,  
that faith doesn't feed,  
that sometimes the most merciful  
thing you can do for yourself  
is burn the whole fucking thing  
down.

I never asked for salvation.  
I only wanted the kind of peace  
t h a t   d o e s n ' t   c o m e   w i t h  
conditions.

So here we are—  
Rising like smoke.  
Bleeding like saints.  
And screaming  
like the last goddamn hymn  
in a church set ablaze.

Not to be saved—  
but to be seen.

## ***June 5, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)***

*“Saturn’s rings remind me that sometimes beauty is born from breakage—what survives is elegant not because it was untouched, but because it endured the pull and shattered into light.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

I’m tucked indoors at midday, listening to the clock tick and the walls creak in the heat. The sun outside is merciless UV Index 9, which my weather app labels “very high” in that polite, understated way. In truth it’s dangerously high, the kind of sun that turns my front yard into an ultraviolet hazard zone. What the app should say is, “Emily, stay the fuck inside.”

So today I decided to simply stay in, watching a rectangle of white-hot light crawl across the floor of my creative studio. There’s a paradoxical quiet to this bright hour: the world out there is humming (I can hear a distant lawnmower), yet I feel like I’m in a pocket of stillness, a sort of personal eclipse. It’s just me, a cup of rapidly cooling coffee, and dust motes swirling lazily where the sunlight sneaks in. Stuck in this artificial dusk, I find my mind

wandering to places it finds refuge—and today, that place is Saturn.

I'll admit, being forced to avoid the sun at noon feels almost ironic. Usually I'm the girl who worships every ray of Vermont sunshine, working outside until my nails are black with tractor grease and garden soil. When I'm denied the open air, I start craving the night sky instead. I catch myself fantasizing about the moment dusk arrives, when I can step outside without fear of frying, tilt my head up, and see the first stars emerge.

Saturn has always been my favorite planet. Earth is cool—I mean, that's where Vermont is located, but Saturn has a personality and style that captivate me. There's just something about the way Saturn wears its rings: effortlessly, with a kind of regal flamboyance. It's the grand old eccentric of our solar system, enormous yet somehow elegant. I often imagine Saturn as a genteel host at a cosmic gala, draped in shimmering rings like jewelry and surrounded by a crowd of moons. Its very look sets it apart. While other planets have rings too, Saturn's are the wide, unmistakable show-stoppers. Those broad bands of ice and dust catch the sunlight and declare "I'm special" in a way that makes



my heart swell. Maybe I identify with Saturn's flair for standing out. Or maybe I just love the poetry of it—a massive gas giant, lighter than water, encircled by billions of glinting shards. Saturn is a planet that celebrates being a planet. And in the quiet of my living room, bathed in stray sunbeams, I find myself celebrating Saturn in return.

This afternoon, I keep circling back to Saturn's rings in my mind's eye. I've known since I was a kid that those rings didn't magically appear as decoration; they're there because of physics—and a little bit of drama. Ages ago, my asshole father took me to visit Cornell University where he attended college. He was flat-out determined to get me enrolled there, and brought me to his college reunions, many decades after he graduated. I was taken by the stars as a child, and asked my dad to find out if I could visit the observatory. To my surprise, he granted this wish, which was one of the most amazing things he had ever done for me. I found the observatory utterly fascinating. Because my father had pulled strings, he was able to have the staff aim the telescope at the night sky and allowed me to observe Saturn. I was six years old at the time. Come to think of

it, that was probably the only amazing thing he had ever done for me.

There's a concept I learned about (likely while devouring some astronomy book one rainy evening) called the Roche limit. It's essentially the invisible line around a planet that marks the point of no return for any moon that strays too near. Inside that limit, the planet's tidal pull becomes destructive—it will literally tear a satellite apart, shredding it into rubble that can end up as rings. Outside that limit, a moon can orbit safely, maybe even coalesce from smaller bits; but inside, all bets are off. Saturn's rings today sit snugly within that boundary, a sparkling graveyard of what might have been a moon. I've always found that fact equal parts haunting and beautiful: haunting, because it means something broke apart to give Saturn its beauty, and beautiful, because in rare cases, beauty can come from destruction.

I sat on my couch this afternoon thinking about how the Roche limit isn't one single fixed distance. It shifts, depending on the nature of the moon in question. Gravity is a bit of a tailor: it treats a rigid, rocky moon differently from a squishy or icy one. The exact break-up distance depends on Saturn's mass and the

moon's own density and cohesion. A dense, sturdy moon such as one made mostly of rock and metal can venture closer to Saturn before feeling the fatal tug. A light, icy moon or a loosely bound rubble-pile will get torn apart from much farther away.

A small solid moon might survive skimming along just outside Saturn's cloud tops, whereas a fluffy iceball would disintegrate long before it got that near. And something barely held together—say a comet that's more dust than stone—might be doomed at an even greater distance. These thresholds aren't neatly separated, either; they blur into each other. I thought about it in terms of zones of vulnerability, each one a halo around Saturn where a particular kind of moon would meet its demise. One zone for rigid moons, another for fragile ones, another for icy vs. rocky compositions—all intermingling in a concentric collage. In my mind I see them as gentle, translucent rings of different colors, layered on top of one another.

It's almost like a Venn diagram drawn in space, centered on Saturn. The overlaps are the places where, say, a weaker moon would break up but a stronger one might hold on a little longer.

The whole idea arrived in my head unbidden, and it absolutely delights me. Leave it to Saturn to make even orbital mechanics feel like an art project.

I'll confess, the moment this mental image hit me—Saturn surrounded by a Venn diagram of Roche limits—I laughed out loud. Here I am, hiding from the midday sun, daydreaming about tidal forces and broken moons. It's such a wonderfully nerdy thing to amuse oneself with.

## ***June 8, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)***

*“The pines have been the one constant thread  
—watching me grow, fracture, and begin  
again—and even now, I know I will remember  
the woods all my life.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

The air is cool and heavy with the scent of pine. Through my open window I hear the wind whispering in the branches—a gentle hush that carries me back to the first woods I ever loved. I remember being a little girl at summer camp, sitting cross-legged by the fading campfire on the final night. We sang softly into the darkness, voices trembling with the end of summer, “I will remember the woods all my life,” we promised. At the time I didn’t fully grasp what those words meant, but I felt them settle deep in my chest like an oath. Somehow I knew even then that the woods were in me, and I in them.

When I was an adolescent girl, my grandparents’ farm in upstate New York near Buffalo. They owned hundreds of acres of dense pine woods. My parents would drive me to, “the farm”, as they called it, and drop me off

to stay with my mom's side of the family, sometimes for weeks at a time. Whenever I visited, my cousins and I would disappear into that green world for hours. I remember those quiet groves where I was just a girl moving through dappled light and shadow, utterly free.

I think that's when I fell hopelessly in love with pine trees in particular. The maples and oaks on the farm would flame out and drop their leaves come autumn, but the pines stayed vibrantly green against the hazy gray of winter, defying the cold with their steady presence. There was something inspiring in that resilience. I'd run my hand over the rough, plated bark of an old white pine and feel connected to its strength—as if a little of that ancient endurance could flow into me. To this day, pine is my favorite tree. It's a living reminder of everything that stands through the storms of life. The pine is hardy and humble, and alive when all else goes barren. In those woods I learned what resilience looks like, and why it matters.

Over the years, the relationship my parents had with my mom's side of the family soured. We lost touch, I stopped being able to return to the farm, and my parents made the ultimate

decision to enroll me in summer camp in the Adirondacks. Those childhood summers in the forest were the first time I felt truly at home in the world. Even now I can close my eyes and conjure the smell of woodsmoke, and crushed pine needles from that time, the perfume of innocence and freedom that I have carried with me ever since.

Life was good then—or at least tolerable, which is sometimes the best you can hope for when you're a kid straddling the strange divide between being known and being understood. I had one best friend back home, the kind of quiet alliance that made the days bearable, even if the undercurrent of being different never quite let up. At summer camp, I was accepted—welcomed, even—but I still never fully fit in. I wasn't the loudest or the prettiest or the most popular. I was the girl off to the side, scribbling in her notebook, listening more than speaking, always half-ghost and half-feral.

Every couple of years I'd try to go back—to see if maybe they remembered me for something more than my name written in Sharpie on the wall where my bed used to be. They did

remember me, at least by name, but it was hollow recognition—a nod, not a homecoming.

Then came boarding school at fourteen, and that was another exercise in endurance. I made it through by holding onto to the promise of summer. I had a calendar on my dorm room wall like that of a prisoner with an intellect like Galileo. Each day would show the number of days until my next school vacation. I kept track of the number of days until school — down the days in detail until I could once again disappear into the woods I didn't have to explain myself to anyone.

When I was sixteen, my world turned upside down. I lost the family I'd always known in one cruel sweep of judgment and misunderstanding, and suddenly I had nowhere to go. Instinctively, I drove toward the only refuge I could think of—the woods. I ended up back at that summer camp, not as a camper but as a scrappy teenage staffer determined to survive on my own terms. I scrubbed dishes in the camp kitchen by day and slept alone in a canvas tent at night, listening to the wind in the pines above me.



On evenings when I felt utterly abandoned, I'd step out under the blue-black sky, breathe in the sharp pine air, and remind myself that I was still here. The trees didn't care that I was queer, or a runaway; they accepted me without question.

Life carried me far from those woods for a long time after that. I spent my twenties and thirties in the thick of city life, chasing sirens and tending to emergencies in concrete jungles. I was proud of that work—it gave me purpose—but in the quiet moments between chaos, I would find myself longing for the solace of trees and the crunch of real earth under my feet instead of pavement.

I remember sometimes driving hours out of the city on rare days off, just to find a hiking trail or a patch of forest where I could breathe again. I'd sit with my back against a large tree, feeling the pulse of the living wood, and pretend for a little while that I was back in my grandparents' pines, or back at camp. The truth is, the woods had imprinted themselves on my soul. Even in those years I couldn't be among them, I carried the memory of pine shadows, and bird-songs inside me.

So when the time finally came to lay down my helmet and turn in my uniform, I knew exactly where I needed to go. I didn't want a cushy retirement or a sun-soaked condo by the beach. I wanted my woods back. I wanted real seasons, real silence, real life. That's how I found myself in Vermont, driving along a rutted dirt road to a modest ranch house encircled by pines. I'll never forget stepping out of the truck that first morning and feeling the quiet press in around me. It was the kind of quiet you can hear yourself thinking in. Ten acres of sky and pine trees in every direction, wrapping around me. I knew in that moment I was home.

Of course, Vermont is not an easy place to live. The winters here are long and cruel, the soil is rocky, and each day this land tests me in new ways, and I love it. It's not easy, and that's the point. This life makes me feel alive in a way comfort and ease never could.

In the end, everything in my life seems to circle back to the woods. The trees I've loved—those same pines that watched over my childhood, my youth, and now my middle age have been the one constant thread stitching all my disparate pieces together. There's a gentle,

wordless wisdom in their presence that has guided me, grounded me, healed me, time and again. Here among them, I have room to remember, to forgive, and to continue becoming who I'm meant to be. I am not lonely out here; I'm rooted. The land, the trees, the sky—they're all part of me, and I of them.

This place is more than just my home—it's what I know to be true: I will remember the woods all my life.

## **June 11, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)**

*“This porch, with the storm pressing close and the fields humming their rough hymn, is the first place I’ve belonged without apology—where the land itself seems to say, stay as you are.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

This afternoon, the breeze rolled in like it had somewhere to be. I sat on the porch and let it comb through my hair like the fingers of someone who knows better than to ask questions. It’s sticky out—just enough to remind me it’s June—but I’d still take this over air conditioning. I want to feel the weather. I want the warmth to cling, the breeze to break, the clouds to gather up their guts and finally let go.

A typical Vermont storm was rolling in—slow at first, like a secret it didn’t want to tell just yet—and I sat there staring at the uneven circles in the grass, left behind by the half-mowed stretch before the pull-behind mower on the tractor gave out. It looked like a memory that had been interrupted mid-thought, frozen in a loop. As the wind picked up and the sky dropped a few

warning notes, I noticed the bees—their frantic little bodies pushing against the coming tide of weather, fighting to get the last flecks of pollen from clover before being forced back to whatever hollow or hive they called home. It struck me all at once, watching them: even the smallest things know when it's time to retreat, to gather what you can before the sky breaks wide open.

I've always said I'd rather be slightly uncomfortable in real life than perfectly numb in an artificial one. AC makes everything quiet in the wrong way—like a hotel room or a hospital hallway. The porch? That's where the truth is. Wood grain flexing gently under bare feet. Flies buzzing in and out like they're casing the place. Distant hum of someone mowing a field down the road. Honest noise. Familiar chaos.

I had music playing, and it was the usual stuff—acoustic recordings from dive bars where the singer barely had a mic. Tracks where you can hear the chairs squeak, the buzz of the amp, someone coughing in the back. I kept listening to the CD on repeat because the rawness felt right. Acoustic always hits different. Not just because it's stripped down, but because it

doesn't lie. It's just voice and strings, and a room that's holding space for someone to finally say what needed saying.

I want everything in my life to sound like that. A little breathless. A little imperfect. All heart soul.

Home isn't just where you live—it's where your soul belongs. It's the place where you're understood without having to explain yourself, where you don't have to soften your edges to be accepted, and where you finally fit without folding yourself into something smaller. It's not measured in square footage—it's measured in truth.

I've finally found that place—the one everyone daydreams about when the office lights are too bright and the world feels too loud. That little house by the lake in the middle of nowhere. Only, mine isn't by a lake—it's better. I sit on the porch with dirt under my nails knowing I'll never have to explain myself again. No more keeping quiet to make others comfortable. No more trimming off the parts of me that don't fit in. Out here, I can live loud—welding torch in hand, boots in the mud, music playing across the fields—and no one gets to tell me I can't.

This place isn't just where I live. It's where I finally am.

## ***June 15, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)***

*“Some nights around a fire feel like forever, but the truth is they burn quick—what glowed as belonging can fade to silence, and yet I still count the warmth as real.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

I sent a simple email to my neighbors. Just a courteous heads-up that I’d have a few friends visiting the farm overnight. In a rural stretch of Vermont, where each house is a good tractor’s ride away, it felt right to let them know about the extra car in my drive and the voices that might carry over the fields after dark. I expected maybe a polite “thanks for letting us know.” Instead, I got something I never saw coming: an appearance from my neighbor who brought over their lawnmower to mow a spot for me and my guests to gather.

I immediately went outside to thank them for their help, especially considering that I never asked them for this favor. Instead of simply thanking them, I invited them to join us. My neighbors wrote back almost immediately, delighted that I had company and said that yes,



that they would be delighted to come over and gather with me and my friends.

In 2020, I moved out here to escape noise and neighbors, craving solitude. My career in public safety taught me to keep the world at arm's length, and to chose my friends carefully. As I read their warm reply, I felt something soften in me. I realized that while I had briefly spoken with them, and we had helped each other from time to time, now, I wanted to actually know them.

Night fell gently, bringing a clear sky pricked with stars. We gathered in my backyard around a crackling campfire—me, my three close friends (Maddie, Luke, and Lucas), and the neighbors who had once been just distant porch lights at night. Flames danced in our eyes as we settled into easy conversation. It started with the usual introductions and small talk, but before long we were trading stories like old pals. Laughter came in waves, unexpected and freeing. Someone made a corny joke about people judging you by the stickers you have on your Subaru in Vermont, and we all just lost it. In that flickering amber glow, it didn't matter that some of us had decades between our ages or entirely different

life stories – we were simply humans together, faces warm and open, sharing the same moment.

There was an intimacy in that circle that I can't quite put into words. Maybe it was the way the darkness beyond the fire made our little gathering feel like the only world that mattered. Or the way we passed around a bag of marshmallows and used graham crackers as makeshift plates for our sticky s'mores, not caring that crumbs were everywhere. At one point I leaned back, listening to the murmur of voices and the crackle of wood, and felt a quiet peace wash over me.

This was the kind of night I used to dream about when I was younger – the kind where you look around at the glow on everyone's faces and realize you're home. Not just at a place, but with people. With family and friends you chose. My wife Amelia often jokes that I collect people like stray cats—taking in those who need a warm place. Watching my neighbors and friends telling jokes as if they'd always known each other, I understood exactly what she meant. My little farm, usually so silent, was alive with camaraderie. And I was completely at ease, content to just soak it in.

That night we stayed up far too late, nursing the last embers of the fire and our own reluctance to let the night end. Eventually, we drifted off to bed—my three friends making themselves at home across the living room bean bags and guest room, the neighbors wandering back to their house with promises to do this again soon. I crawled into bed smelling like smoke and smiling into the darkness. Outside, the Vermont night held its breath, as if savoring our laughter that still hung in the cooling air.

Dawn came softly, as I woke up to sunlight on my bed. I slipped out of bed quietly, leaving my friends still tangled in their dreams. Morning rituals have a special kind of holiness for me—the simple act of getting ready to go take photographs of a town event while the world is dewy and hushed. I sipped my morning tea on the porch, converse sneakers damp with dew, and watched mist off the field like a curtain on a new day. My mind replayed snatches of last night's warmth, and I felt an immense swell of gratitude. These everyday moments—waking up under my own roof with friends snoring softly down the hall are the ones that anchor me.

But I had a commitment to keep. By 8 AM I was in my truck heading toward town, camera gear rattling on the passenger seat. The 4th Annual Strawberry Jam Fun Run was kicking off in Middletown Springs at the elementary school that morning, and I had volunteered to photograph it. When I arrived, the little schoolyard was already buzzing with the kind of cheerful chaos only a small-town event can have: kids with shoelaces untied chasing each other through the grass, parents pinning race numbers onto wiggling toddlers for the “fun run,” and the local fire department setting up orange cones along the 5K route. I felt that familiar comfort of community wrap around me as I raised my camera.

Through the lens of my Leica, I caught moments big and small. As the “GO!” sounded and the runners took off, I snapped away, preserving slices of joy and determination. The morning light was gentle on everyone’s faces, and I realized I was smiling behind my camera.

Photographing these events always reminds me that happiness isn’t a thunderous, grand thing; more often it’s a mosaic of small, sweet moments—like a young boy proudly showing

off his new t-shirt, or a volunteer handing out cups of water with a “you got this” smile to every runner. By 11 AM, prizes had been handed out and folks were beginning to disperse, some drifting toward the Strawberry Festival that would follow. I packed up my gear, feeling refreshed.

I headed back home with dust on my converse sneakers and the scent of cut grass in the air. My friends were awake by then, lounging on the porch, ready for the days adventures in Rutland. They looked comfortable, as if my home was theirs too, and the sight filled me with a quiet pride. I’ve always wanted my home to be a gathering place not just for me, but for the people I care about.

We decided, on a whim, to make a day of it. The sun climbed higher and with it our adventurous spirits. Piling into my truck, the four of us set off for a little afternoon road trip. First stop was Five Guys in Rutland—nothing fancy, just burgers and fries, but it hit the spot. We crowded around a small table, still flushed from the previous evenings excitement, sharing ketchup and fries and laughing. There’s something about sharing greasy, delicious food with friends that makes you feel like kids again.

I watched Maddie lick a stray smear of ketchup off her thumb and had to chuckle; it's in those tiny, unguarded moments that you see someone's pure joy.

After lunch I drove everyone I drove everyone over to Proctor, where Wilson Castle rises out of the green Vermont hills like something plucked from a fairy tale. It's a real 19th-century estate with turrets, stained-glass windows and all, famously known as Vermont's only real castle. I'd visited once about a year ago, but seeing my friends' faces light up as we pulled in was like experiencing it anew. We wandered through grand rooms decked in old European antiques and dusty portraits, our footsteps echoing on hardwood floors that have seen over a century of life. Sunlight filtered through the colored glass, painting the walls in soft reds and blues. In one room, a guide was explaining the history—something about a radio pioneer and five generations of the family—but I'll admit I barely listened. I was too busy watching Luke and Lucas pretending to be royalty in the dining room, and Maddie roaming the hallways as if she were the castle's long-lost princess.

I felt a tug in my chest, a gentle ache of happiness tinged with nostalgia. I pulled out my camera and started capturing my friends in these playful moments.

As I clicked the shutter, I told them I would hold onto these pictures forever, so that someday when we're all a bit older and our hair has more silver than shine, we can look back and remember how young we were when this friendship began. The words left my mouth without me overthinking them, and as soon as I said it, I saw their expressions soften. For a moment, we all just stood there in quiet agreement, gazing out at the rolling Vermont hills. In the background, an old oak swayed and a couple of birds flitted from turret to turret. Time felt mercifully slow.

We left the castle after wandering the halls, letting the staff know that we would soon return to schedule an overnight stay for purposes of photography. By then late afternoon was melting into evening. We made one last stop in Rutland before heading home: Chipotle for a quick dinner, because apparently climbing castle staircases works up an appetite for burritos. Conversation had gone lazy in the best way—that comfortable post-adventure

silence where everyone's just reliving their favorite parts of the day in their heads. Lucas mumbled something about this being the best day he'd had in a long time, and the murmured mm-hm of agreement from the others made me smile.

Back at the farm, evening fell soft and rose-gold. We kicked off our shoes and sat out by the porch as the last light faded behind the trees. The river down the hill was singing its usual twilight song, a gentle rush over rocks that has become the background music to my life here. There's a particular peace that comes in these quiet hours, when the adventures are over and you're left with the simplest, most profound contentment.

I looked at my friends, the three of them wrapped in a comfortable silence, and I realized that this—this right here—is what all the years of searching were for. The best moments in life are often these small ones, the in-between hours spent with people who truly see you. Not the big events, not the flashy milestones, but the small rituals and the easy togetherness: sharing moments that will be remembered, laughing over sticky s'mores, or watching dusk settle in companionable quiet.



In the growing dark, I felt past and present converge. I thought of the little girl I used to be—the one who longed for exactly this kind of belonging. She couldn't have imagined the winding road that would lead here, or that at 45 she would be surrounded by a chosen family that makes her feel so understood and loved. But here I am. I have a wife who is my best friend, and my constant companion in life's adventures. Amelia and I have the kind of love I used to dream about, and hardly believed could be real. I have real friends who accept every part of me—friends who don't flinch at my stories, who cheer my weirdness, who show up with open hearts. I have a forever home where the river crosses through the land, a little Vermont farmhouse that I can always return to; a place that grounds me with its steady whisper: you belong here. All those quiet childhood wishes I once made—for love, for friendship, for a place to call home—this weekend, they all found their way into reality.

I sit here now, the happiest and most laid-back 45-year-old woman I could ever imagine being. If I listen closely, I can almost hear my younger self laughing with relief. I wish I could tell her that the loneliness won't last forever, that one

day she'll have all the things she yearns for. In a way, maybe she knows—maybe she's here with me in these moments, marveling at how far we've come.

This afternoon I am truly thankful. Thankful for Amelia's steady love, for the likes of Maddie, Luke, and Lucas who've become the family of friends I once only dreamed of, and for my kind neighbors who proved that warmth can be found in the most unexpected places. They have all helped me become the happiest, most laid-back 45-year-old woman who ever lived. And under this perfect afternoon Vermont sky, with bees and deer tuning up in the fields, I can truly say I've never felt this happy or healthy before.

*But time, as it often does, revealed what glow and laughter can temporarily obscure. Within a few weeks, something subtle shifted. The conversations tapered off, the easy warmth turned stilted, and I began to sense that the closeness I had felt that night wasn't quite mutual. I realized, with a slow and familiar ache, that what had passed between us under the stars was fleeting—beautiful, yes, but ultimately unsustainable. The schism between us wasn't personal so much as generational: the cadence of my voice, my way of speaking, my convictions, my history—they didn't sit easily with them. The very things that make me me—my outspokenness, my refusal to shrink—were*

*received not with understanding, but with quiet retreat. Within a month, we had stopped talking altogether. No falling out, no harsh words. Just a silence that took up residence between our houses and never left. —Emily, August 3, 2025*

## ***June 20, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)***

*“At eleven I didn’t imagine my future—I recognized it. The girl on the dock saw me long before I ever became her, and she knew I wasn’t a mistake. I was just ahead of schedule.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

I went down to the river today because I needed to remember who I am. Not the version people expect. Not the one who always has the answer or the fuse already lit. Just me. Alone with the trees and the current and the kind of silence you can’t get when other people are around trying to make small talk, or ask what you’re doing next. I don’t always know what I’m doing next. Sometimes I don’t even know what I’m doing now.

But the river always knows. It doesn’t need me to explain.

And standing there, looking at the water slide past like it had somewhere more important to be, I remembered something I haven’t thought about in over thirty years. Camp Chateaugay. Merrill, New York. June 1991. I was eleven

years old, already walking around with that invisible weight on my shoulders, the kind you don't know how to describe at that age but you feel it anyway. It's in the pit of your stomach, and the back of your throat and the way you stop raising your hand in class because you already know they're not going to call on you.

The car ride up was long and dominated by listening to my parents go on and on about their expectations of what I was to experience, and the type of kids whom I befriend and network with. And tennis. Tennis was mandatory for me. I didn't know what they meant, or perhaps I knew full well, but regardless, when we arrived knew I wasn't one of them. I had short hair and a quiet voice and a look in my eye that made people uncomfortable. I still don't know exactly why. But I remember arriving, standing there with my beat-up duffel bag, the one that never zipped right, and the smell of pine trees hit me so hard I almost cried. Not because it was pretty. Because it felt real.

And before I even found my cabin or met my counselor, I realized that half of the women who worked there were going to hate me on sight,

After waiting in line at the nurses station with my paperwork in hand to pose for my Polaroid photo under the soft graceful and completely unassuming light that only comes from a 100 watt incandescent light bulb that's so 1990's. I put on a fake half smile in my "just in case" picture, which now had a staple buried deep in my forehead, attaching it to my file. I sat down while they checked for head lice, before exiting out of the back, and found the dock. I then walked out to the end of it, walking past the off limits rope as my first act of rebellion almost as if I was being pulled by the moment itself. I didn't plan to go out on the dock, I just didn't give a fuck, I could take care of myself. I just needed to look at something that wasn't another human being trying to size me up or take my mug shot. The lake at dinner time was the much needed refuge I craved.

That lake was still. Glassy. Deep in a way that made you feel like if you stared long enough, you'd see something no one else could. I looked down into the water and for the first time in my life, I felt like I was staring at my own future. I didn't know what it meant. I just knew.

I saw her standing there like a ghost that had waited patiently for me to catch up. An older version of myself—years ahead, but unmistakably me. She had long hair, the kind that falls loose when no one's trying to impress anyone. Her shoulders weren't tense anymore. Her eyes didn't flinch. She looked like someone who'd finally stopped apologizing for surviving the way she had to.

She was wiser, sure—but not in that polished, “all-knowing” way. More like she'd seen some shit, burned through the worst of it, and came out the other side softer, not colder. Happy, but not loud about it. The kind of happy that lives in the little things—coffee that's still hot, a front porch that creaks, the sound of river water against rock.

There was this calm about her. Not the kind you fake for other people, but the kind you earn. She looked like she'd lived with a reckless kind of grace—like she'd danced barefoot in parking lots and cried during TV commercials and fixed everything in her house with her own damn hands. Her face had the kind of lines that come from years of laughing and squinting into sunlight and not hiding from it.

She looked free. Not because life had been easy—but because she'd finally stopped carrying what wasn't hers. And standing there, I didn't see regret. I saw someone who'd stayed young in the places that mattered. Someone who loved fiercely, forgave slowly, and always kept a few pens and a diary stashed somewhere nearby and accessible, but totally hidden from view.

That was me. Just older. Braver. And finally—finally—at peace.

I wasn't scared. I was something else. Something quieter. Like the moment before a storm when the air gets too still and you know the world's about to change.

I sat there for what felt like an hour. Maybe more. The counselors didn't notice I was gone. Or if they did, they didn't care. Most of them looked at me like I was a problem they didn't sign up for. They would follow me with their eyes as I ran off into the woods, away from the camp. They used to have a look of momentary relief, knowing that I'd return for food like I was some stray someone forgot to leave a note about. I was the only girl in my cabin with short hair and no clue how to fit in. They



ignored me until they couldn't, and when they couldn't, they made sure I knew I wasn't wanted. That forgotten note needed to be a warning label, as my curiosity and insatiable thirst for adventure drew me deep into the woods behind the camp, where I'd hide deep in the forest to the point that the counselors would give up the search.

But that water didn't reject me. That dock didn't care what I looked like or how quiet I was or how confused I felt about everything I couldn't say out loud yet. It just held me. The air always smelled of fresh pine bark and damp wood. The wind picked up and the lake rippled like it was answering a question I hadn't asked.

And here I am now, sitting on my land by another body of water, three and a half decades later, and I finally understand what that girl saw.

She saw me.

She didn't know how we'd get here. She didn't know that she would soon bounce around through various places in New York such as Long Island, then Plattsburgh, then Middleburgh. She had no idea that she would

start out homeless at 16, and somehow, someday, her dreams would come true. I've never lived far from water. Not once. It's the one constant I never questioned. Like gravity, or scars which are an ever present scrapbook of mishaps and misadventure.

My body carries the scars you can see, but the ones you can't—those are deeper, harder, and more permanent. Still, somehow, I clawed my way through. Maybe it was luck. Maybe it was sheer fucking will. Probably both.

I didn't imagine my future that day. I recognized it. I just didn't have the words yet. But I had the feeling. And I've learned since then that the feeling is usually right. Even when the world says you're wrong. Even when people tell you you're too much, or not enough, or some kind of mistake. I wasn't a mistake. I was just ahead of schedule.

So yeah, I went back to the time I promised that I will remember the woods all my life today. And I saw her again—that kid on the dock. Eleven years old. Hair too short, heart too soft, eyes already tired.

And ironically, the one they all rejected would be the same girl who carried the woods with her for the rest of her life—not the camp, not the counselors, not the noise of it all—but the way it felt. The quiet. The trees. The ache of belonging to nowhere yet. I wanted to tell her it's going to be okay. But that wouldn't be honest.

Because it wasn't okay. Not for a long time.

But it's okay now.

And that counts for something.

## ***June 24, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)***

*“They could shove me in the boys’ dorm, tape their little notes to my door, and pray me into silence—but I didn’t go to West Virginia to be liked. I went to be forged. And goddamn, I walked out unbreakable.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

In the fall of 1998, I left New York and dropped straight into the Bible Belt. Rural West Virginia. A small college town where the air on Sunday morning was thick with hymns and everyone’s front porch had a flag—either American, Christian, or Confederate, depending on how honest they were.

I was nineteen. A lesbian. Intersex. From out of state and out of patience. It was a place where wearing a rainbow pin felt like a dare. Where people didn’t talk about things like queerness, and if they did, it was in whispers—right before they prayed about it in hopes of making it disappear.

I was the only student from New York that year. The only person who looked like she

didn't belong—and didn't give a damn about blending in.

I walked onto campus with my EMS certifications in hand—New York and West Virginia both—and within days, I had a radio, a badge, and full authority. I wasn't just taking classes. I was working shifts, pulling rescue duty, and training hard. People twice my age deferred to me on scene. I wasn't impressive. I was necessary.

And yet, the university didn't know what to do with me.

Because I was born intersex, they housed me in the boys' dorm. That was their policy—penis equals male. No nuance. No discussion. I was even assigned female at birth, I'd lived my whole life as a girl, but they didn't care. They assigned me to a room in a building full of men. The only compromise was that I got the room to myself. The numbers on the doors to my dorm rooms both ended in 13. A consolation prize for institutional cruelty.

I kept to myself. My presence made people nervous. I wasn't trying to be anything but

myself—but in a place like that, yourself is exactly what they hope you'll keep hidden.

Some guys in the dorm were decent. Others stared too long or smirked when they passed me in the hall. They didn't know what to make of me—a tall, tattooed, masculine woman with a quiet mouth and a sharp stare who didn't flinch when they muttered behind my back.

I used to wake up to notes taped to my dorm door—anonymous, crooked, scribbled on notebook paper and torn bulletin scraps. They weren't threats exactly, just thin-lipped reminders. Slippery little messages that said, in so many words, "A queer lives here." Like I didn't already know. Like they thought their silence during the day gave them permission to whisper through walls at night.

I never responded. Not at first. I let them pile up. Week after week, the messages kept coming. Maybe they thought they were being clever. Maybe they thought shame came in paper form. But I didn't flinch. I saved every single one—smoothed them out, stacked them neatly, filed them like evidence.

And then one morning, I posted all of them—taped to the outside of my door. At the center of it all, I added my own note. Sharpie. All caps.

**Yes, I'm aware that I'm a  
lesbian (and female) living in  
the boys' dorm. We all like  
women here. Get the fuck  
over it.  
—Emily**

After that? Silence. Not the heavy, bitter kind that came before—but the kind you get when people realize you're not going anywhere. Not quietly. Not ever.

Professors were worse. Some wouldn't speak to me at all. One dropped me from her roster without a word. Another handed back an assignment I'd written about rescue work and said he couldn't, quote, "in good conscience grade something with that kind of perspective." I didn't ask what kind. I already knew.

I didn't go to that school to make friends. I went there to work. And work, I did.

Every weekend, I trained. Sun-up to sun-down, Saturday and Sunday. I was enrolled in a master-level rescue course with over forty contact hours. Rope work. Tactical bailout. Hostage scenarios. Confined space. High-angle everything. I was nineteen and already leading a team of five in simulation drills, and also as their supervisor during event coverage. While other students slept off hangovers, I was tying figure eights in heavy gloves before dawn.

One weekend, I hitchhiked to tac medic training because no one offered me a ride and I wasn't about to let that stop me. I stood on the side of a West Virginia highway with my blue medic bag over my shoulder with paperwork folded in half and sticking out the back pocket. I was there all day—ran every drill they threw at me, shot a tight group with a .45, and passed. Then I stuck my thumb back out and somehow made it back to campus.

There was a church-run coffee shop off campus. I walked in the following morning wearing a denim jacket with a tiny rainbow pin. Everyone stopped talking. The woman behind



the counter asked if I needed directions. I said, “No ma’am, just coffee.” She stood there staring at me, with an almost full pot of coffee in her right hand, but didn’t pour it. I left. That was my welcome.

I didn’t talk much that year. I wrote. I trained. I moved through spaces like a ghost with a pulse. I didn’t stay long. Two years. The rescue training was the only thing that made it tolerable. The isolation, though—it started to feel like rot. I wasn’t going to shrink just to survive. I wasn’t built for closeting or code-switching or fake smiles. I left not because I couldn’t hack it, but because I knew my worth.

I didn’t go to college to be accepted. I went to get trained. And goddamn, did I ever.

## ***June 29, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)***

*“Being a queer girl isn’t something you decide.  
It’s something you survive, until you get old  
enough to claim it.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

There are days—quiet, ordinary, well-behaved days—when everything is working just as it should. But somewhere in the periphery, somewhere behind the steady cadence of utility and discipline, something far more primitive stirs: the ache to remember who I am, beneath all of it.

And when I need to remember, I go back.

I return—mentally, emotionally, spiritually—to summer camp. To the breathless air of late July mornings, cool and heavy like a wool blanket soaked in nostalgia. To the sound of pine needles under my boots and the giggle of girls on the path ahead of me. I return to the way the lake looked at 7:00 a.m.—mirror still, the fog resting low and unmoving, like it, too, was reluctant to start the day. I return to the girl I was when I first learned how to say “this is mine”—not in the material sense, but in the

way you claim a feeling as your own.  
Independence. Belonging. Identity. Me.

I remember it all so vividly that it still stings. The creak of the mess hall screen door. The way we tied friendship bracelets like it was holy work, each knot sealing some sacred promise. The way we passed around a magic marker and wrote our names in the bunks, as if time itself would make an exception for us. That was the first place I was seen—not as something to be corrected, or molded, or silenced, but as a whole and wondrous contradiction of a girl. The girl with the quiet voice and the defiant eyes. The girl who always carried a camera and a pocketknife, who built forts in the woods out of stubbornness, and fished snakes out of the canoes because no one else would. I was always that girl. I am still that girl.

But somewhere along the line, something changed. The very same girls who once braided my hair with clumsy fingers and whispered secrets under flashlight moons became the grown women who looked at me like not with rage or malice—instead, it was indifference. The slow erosion of acknowledgement. The silence that swallows every attempt at reunion, every hopeful message, every “Hey, I miss you.”

They don't say it outright, of course. They don't have to. But I've been around long enough—and through enough—to recognize the particular sting of being discarded. It's quiet. Clinical. Cowardly.

It wasn't just the fact that I was different. It was that I dared to live out loud as myself. That I refused to lie, to pretend I wasn't born with contradictions that made people squirm. That I stopped explaining myself to those who wouldn't listen anyway. It was easier for them to pretend I didn't exist than to reframe thirty years of memories through the lens of someone they never truly bothered to understand.

That's what breaks me the most. Not the shunning. Not the cold shoulders. Not even the outright ghosting from people who once called me sister, soul-twin, forever-friend. No. It's the realization that maybe they never really saw me. Not then. Not now. Maybe they never actually knew who I was—they only accepted the pieces of me that didn't challenge their version of reality. The sarcastic, flannel-wearing, fearless, camera-wielding daredevil—she fit the narrative. But the intersex lesbian with the bulletproof sense of self? The one who

still loves the woods and still wears blue nail polish like a middle finger to every expectation? She's a problem.

What a thing it is—to be remembered only when you're convenient.

I've lost count of the things we throw away in this life. Relationships. People. Entire versions of ourselves, shed like snakeskin and forgotten like campfire smoke. We do it because we're scared, or because it's easier, or because facing the truth of someone else's existence means having to question our own. But the carnage of it—it's staggering. And most people don't even look back. They don't pause long enough to examine the wreckage. They just keep walking.

But not me. I look back. I remember. I always remember. I remember the girl I was, with a compass around her neck and a map in her heart, charting a course through the endless woods of Upstate New York. I remember the friends who once swore we'd never grow apart, who now can't even muster a text maybe once or twice in a lifetime. I remember what it meant to be chosen. And I remember what it felt like to be left behind.

And somehow—despite it all—I'm still here. Still growing pine saplings at the edges of my farm field. Still wiring my own damn electrical circuits because I don't trust anyone else to get it right. Still loving with my whole of my heart and soul, even when it's unreciprocated. Still believing in the girl I was, and the woman I am today, even if no one else does.

I'm still me, and maybe the most radical thing I can do now—the only thing left to do—is to keep showing up as myself. No matter how inconvenient that might be for anyone else. Because somewhere out there, another girl might be sitting on her own porch, wondering if she's the only one who remembers what was promised in the campfire smoke. Wondering if anyone else still mourns what we lost when we chose silence over truth. Wondering if it's okay to be herself even when the world keeps pretending it never saw her.

To that girl, if she's out there—I see you. And I haven't forgotten.

Written from the familiar perch of my pine-shadowed front porch, where even the wind feels like it remembers who I used to be.

***July 5, 2025—Watertown, New  
York (Makayla's Apartment)***

*"I don't need a mirror to know I exist—I see it in the woman I raised, and in the rain-soaked girl I once was, both running toward me, proving it was all real."—Emily Pratt Slatin*

Every human being who has ever walked this strange, spinning planet has, whether or not they admit it, dreamed of seeing themselves in third person. It's the secret behind mirrors, behind security cameras, behind every carefully framed selfie and the unspoken popularity of drones. We all want to see ourselves living—not merely existing, but being. We want proof that we were real.

In my memories, it's always raining.

The rain—my constant companion—has become the atmospheric pressure of my inner world. A drizzly blanket that hushes the chaos and renders everything around me just a little softer, a little less defined. I've long suspected that's why I love it so much. Rain doesn't just fall—it erases. Lines, noise, expectation. It

allows you to disappear, or maybe just be seen more gently.

When it rained at summer camp, we'd run to the main house for breakfast, slipping on muddy patches, shrieking with joy, our hair plastered to our foreheads. After breakfast, we'd dash back to our cabins, our towels already soaked, our socks hopeless, our spirits somehow bigger than our bodies. I see myself now—this impossibly young version of me—bolting through the wet, smiling like the whole damn world was a secret between me and the sky. And in my mind's eye, she's coming toward me—closer, larger, unmistakably me. Running up through the summer rain, like the sky itself had made her.

But that's not the only vision I've carried lately. Yesterday, I went to see my daughter. I took her back to where we both grew up—back to Upstate New York near Oneonta. The hills haven't changed, and the trees still remember our names.

Her name is Makayla, and I met her when she was just turning two years old. I was engaged to her aunt Angie for nearly twenty years, and very early on it became clear that family



dynamics—complicated as they were—meant that Makayla and I would be spending a lot of time together.

That time turned into something permanent. She started staying with us more and more often, until the boundaries between what was temporary and what was home blurred into the reality of our lives. I raised her. I was there for everything—every skinned knee, every birthday cake, every bedtime story, and every quiet cry that no one else heard. I came painfully close to adopting her legally. The hearing was scheduled, the paperwork signed. And then, at the last possible moment, it was canceled. Without cause, without logic, and without justice.

But the courts don't get to decide what love is. I wasn't legally her mom. I just loved her like one.

Makayla is my daughter. She always has been. She sees me as the person who's been her aunt, her mother, and now—without question—her lifelong best friend.

There's something I've never really put into words, but it deserves to be said plainly:

unfortunately, as much as I would have loved to send her to summer camp—she begged me to as a small child—it just never came to pass. I wanted so badly to give her that same experience that had meant so much to me. Instead, I did everything I could to recreate the magic of it through road trips, lakeside cabins, muddy hikes, swimming holes, and late-night storytelling under the stars. I brought her as close to that feeling as life allowed. I gave her campfire songs without the campground, marshmallows without the mess hall, and the feeling of freedom without the buses and bunks.

She slept on my living room couch. At the time, I was living in an 1800s one-room schoolhouse I'd spent a decade repairing with my own two hands—hauling beams, fixing plumbing, rewiring everything by myself because no one else was going to do it right. It wasn't glamorous. It wasn't spacious. It was drafty in the winter and too quiet at night. But it was mine, and it was home. And while Makayla lived with us on and off during those years, that living room couch became her bed. I was working 48-hour shifts back then—coming home bone-tired, boots caked with mud and soot, pulling them off in the same narrow

doorway where generations of schoolchildren once hung their coats—and still, I made time to sit with her. To hear her. To love her. Because that's what you do when someone becomes your whole world. You don't wait until life gets easier. You love them anyway. You love them through it.

A few months ago, I tried to push her away.

It's a shameful sentence to write. Amelia and I were going through a very tumultuous time in our lives—one of those overwhelming whirlwinds where everything feels like it's breaking all at once and nothing, not even love, feels stable or certain. I was trying to hold too many broken things together with fraying threads, and in the middle of all that noise, I hurt Makayla. I tried to push her out of my life—not because she had done anything wrong, but because I was drowning and didn't want her to see me sink. She didn't deserve that. She deserved grace. She always has.

Last night, after dinner in Utica, we said our goodbyes the way we always do. I told her that I loved her and that she was welcome to call me anytime. No performance, no fanfare—just that deep, wordless kind of hug that says, I know

you, and I love you. She got in her car, I got in mine, and somewhere along the long, quiet drive home, I started crying.

Not out of sadness. Not even nostalgia. It was something more complicated. More holy. I cried because I realized something that had been slowly blooming inside me for years.

She makes friends wherever she goes, not because she's trying to—but because people feel safe around her. She's the kind of girl who pulls her car over in the summer to hand bottled water to someone baking on the sidewalk. Yesterday afternoon, she was out driving when she stopped at a red light, got out of her car, and handed a homeless woman two bottles of cold water. No audience. No narrative. No glory. Just instinct. Just kindness. She doesn't post about it. She just does it.

That same kindness, that same quiet strength. She's the quintessential American girl next door. The one you sit beside on the porch swing, the one everyone waves to, the one people instinctively trust. But anyone who's paying attention knows—you don't fuck with her. She's got steel in her bones and lightning behind her eyes. She is smart—so goddamn

smart. Intuitive, quick-witted, fiercely independent. She's not just a product of her upbringing—she's proof that I raised someone extraordinary.

Raising her is one of the best and most rewarding things I've ever done in my life.

Not was—is.

She's still that girl who calls me when she's had a bad day. She's still the one I'd move heaven and earth for. She and I will always be friends. That's a bond no name, no judge, no piece of paper could ever define. She is my daughter. In the only way that matters.

So this afternoon, I sit barefoot on my porch in Vermont, my nails painted blue, my lungs full of wet July air. And I carry both visions with me—the little girl I was, and the woman I raised. Both of them running toward me through the summer rain.

And for once, I don't need a mirror. I don't need a camera. I don't need a fucking drone. I just need this moment, because it's all real, and it always was.

## July 8, 2025—Atlanta, Georgia (Peachtree Towers)

*“Resurrection doesn’t wait for prayers—it kicks the door in at midnight, dares you to pack fast, and lives in the grin of a woman who says tomorrow. Challenge fucking accepted.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

The call came in like they always do with her—out of nowhere, with the subtlety of a lit match in a fireworks store. Makayla doesn’t preface. She doesn’t build suspense. She just kicks the door in with her voice and waits for the world to catch up.

“Wanna go to Atlanta?”

She said it like we were talking about grabbing ice cream or taking a walk around the block. No backstory. No agenda. Just Atlanta. Just me and her.

And I, in typical fashion, said, “Yeah, when?”—knowing damn well this wasn’t going to be something reasonable.

And it wasn’t. Of course it wasn’t. It never is.

She waited a beat—just long enough for me to think maybe she was joking. Then:

“How about tomorrow?”

The silence on my end lasted maybe a second and a half, but it felt like the entire weight of who I’ve become compressed into one sharp inhale. The part of me that lives for this shit woke up from her nap, cracked her knuckles, and practically shoved my rational brain out of the way.

“Challenge accepted,” I said, and I said it out loud, not just to her, but to the air, the moment, the damn universe itself—like I was daring the whole world to throw something bigger at me. Like I was still some half-feral, myth-wrapped version of myself that used to run toward sirens, not away from them.

That’s the thing, isn’t it? You spend enough time surviving, and you forget that you were once built for more than just holding it together.

I packed in ten minutes flat. Threw jeans, a hoodie, and my Leica in a bag that still smells like smoke and metal from my past life. Told

Amelia where I was headed, kissed her cheek, and promised not to die or get arrested. She just smirked and said, “Text me when you land.” That woman gets me like nobody else.

By the next morning, we were in Atlanta, standing in the humidity like we belonged there. I hadn’t slept. Makayla hadn’t shut up since Vermont. Everything felt unhinged in the best possible way. We ordered greasy food, made fun of everyone’s shoes, and talked about heartbreak like it was a shared language.

And then she did it again.

“We should go to Nashville next.”

This time I didn’t even blink. I pulled out my phone, booked the flight, and paid extra for two first class airline seats.

No one tells you how good it feels to just go. Not to plan. Not to overthink. Just—go. To hell with itineraries. To hell with stability. Stability never wrote a good story anyway.

We’ve been bored before. We’ve done the safe route. We’ve waited on other people to catch up, to approve, to give us permission. Not



anymore. Not this time. And certainly never again in my lifetime.

There's a reason she calls me when it's time to light a match. I'm the one who never needs a reason. I'm the one who says yes before she's even heard the whole question.

I think I always wanted to be the kind of woman who could be summoned with chaos and coffee. Who shows up in a denim jacket smelling like gasoline and answers every dare with her middle finger and a smile.

I don't know what we'll find in Nashville. I don't care. This isn't about destinations. It never was. It's about remembering that I'm still her—rescue girl, dark horse, the woman who built herself from ashes and wire and whispered truths. The one who never needed a map because she was the map.

Sometimes resurrection looks like a last-minute trip to Atlanta. Sometimes salvation comes in the shape of a woman who says “tomorrow” like it's a lifeline. Sometimes, the only thing between you and the version of yourself you thought you'd lost is the courage to say, “Challenge accepted.”

Emily—

*Makayla is 25 now, and as of this writing, we've gone our separate ways. There was no fight, no fallout—just the slow, quiet drift that happens when someone no longer needs you. And that's the thing—I know she doesn't. Not anymore. She's grown, capable, astonishingly self-sufficient. She's standing on her own two feet in a world that chews most people up, and in that way, I couldn't be prouder. But pride doesn't cancel out grief. I'm not angry. I never was. Devastated is the more accurate word—devastated in a way that rearranges your bones, the kind of heartbreak that sinks into the structure of your days and doesn't let go. I don't know if I'll ever fully recover from the ache of her absence, but I do know this: I'd still do it all again. Every ride to school, every sleepless night, every lesson, every story, every damn effort to make her life better than mine was. Loving her was never a mistake. Losing her wasn't either. It was just the price of being someone's mother when the world never signed the paperwork. —Emily, August 3, 2025*

## ***July 16, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)***

*“She was already me at sixteen—ink on her hands, fire in her chest—and all I’ve ever done is keep that promise alive.”—Emily Pratt  
Slatin*

There’s something in the air today—maybe it’s the way the breeze carries the scent of warm pine and worn wood, or the low, lingering dust hanging in the air like a ghost of someone you used to know. I cracked open the bedroom window and just stood there for a moment, barefoot on the floorboards, inhaling the unmistakable scent of summer camp with its arms around rebellion. And just like that, I was sixteen again. A girl with a Walkman in one hand and a pencil-sketches diary in the other.

God, I miss the ’90s.

Not because everything was good—it wasn’t. But it made sense. There was a rhythm to life then, one I could actually follow without tripping over the tempo. You didn’t need to have a brand. You didn’t need to file your trauma under hashtags or debate your gender

identity through the opinions of strangers who never even learned how to talk to someone in person. Back then, it was enough just to be. Just to exist—complicated, messy, real.

You could be a girl with duct tape on your boots and no answers in your mouth, and that was enough.

I remember when the internet felt like sneaking into a hidden backroom—like a basement you weren't supposed to be in but found anyway, full of static and dial tones and strange little windows into other people's truths. Now it's a goddamn glass lobby with cameras in every corner and a million people screaming across every echoing surface. Back then, if you wanted to talk about something hard, you'd look your friend in the eye and say it. Or you'd scribble it down in ink and fold it like a secret. You didn't need a platform to survive. Just a notebook, and maybe a camera.

And the music? Jesus. The music was oxygen.

Sarah McLachlan cracked me open with a piano key. Counting Crows made my sadness feel like scripture. R.E.M. handed me language for what I hadn't figured out yet. And the

Indigo Girls? They were my church. Two women harmonizing about truth and longing and the quiet courage of staying who you are. I never needed a sermon—I had Closer to Fine.

We didn't consume music back then. We lived inside it. We put it on mixtapes for the people who mattered. We played it through tiny plastic speakers and felt it vibrate in our bones like it had been written just for us. There was no nostalgia in it—it was the present. It was everything. It still is.

What I remember most about the '90s—besides the music, besides the incense and the denim and the stolen hours spent writing poetry by flashlight—is that it was the last time I felt like the world knew how to hold me. Before it all fractured. Before I had to defend every piece of myself from being dissected, renamed, or questioned.

Back then, I didn't need to explain why I existed. I just did. I was intersex. Female. A romantic. Lesbian, and queer as all hell.. A girl with calloused hands and a defiant mouth. And even when no one else knew what to do with me, I did.

That decade made space for girls like me—girls who didn't have the words yet, but had the fire. Who didn't know how to blend in, and didn't give a damn. We were allowed to be outsiders without needing to justify it. No thesis. No diagnosis. No content strategy. Just us.

I wasn't trying to be understood. I was the understanding. I was the story. And maybe that's what I miss the most—the way everything felt like a story instead of a transaction. Pain didn't need a filter. Love didn't need a label. Identity wasn't a fight. It just was.

And now, when I queue up that playlist—when those songs start to play and the windows are open and the room smells like sun and memory—I don't feel stuck in the past. I feel like I've returned to something holy. A sacred echo.

The girl I was at sixteen didn't need to become me. She already was me. And I'll spend the rest of my life honoring her—writing like she did, with a rawness that doesn't ask for permission. Loving the way she loved—quietly, fiercely, with no apologies. Living the way she dreamed—out loud, off-grid, utterly true.

The world may not make sense anymore. But I  
still do—

## ***July 17, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)***

*“I was never writing a comeback story—I was writing the margins into a map. What I kept is what saved me: these hands, the grit, this truth that still answers to my name.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

I never set out to make sense of my life. I just wanted to survive it.

Somewhere between New York sirens and Vermont silence, I learned that memory doesn’t arrive like a knock at the door—it comes as weather. Sudden. Heavy. Familiar. Sometimes, it sounds like a woman’s voice saying goodbye for the last time. Other times, it’s a piano. A mandolin. The kind of music that doesn’t ask for attention—it just knows.

I’ve spent years inside burning buildings, twisted metal, and broken systems, trying to pull people out before they gave up. Some I saved. Some I didn’t. Most days, I don’t talk about that part. But the truth is—it’s all still here. In the callused palms, the quiet



mornings, the playlists I shuffle like tarot cards.

I wasn't built for small talk. I was built for the unspoken, the moment just before collapse—the place where everyone else gets scared and steps back, and I step in.

So no, this isn't a comeback story. It's not a victory lap. It's just... me. A woman who never got to be soft until it was safe. Who never got to be known until she told the story herself.

And if you're here, listening—thank you. That means you're willing to stay for the hard parts.

The rain's coming. It always does. But so does the music.

And in this life of ashes and aftershocks—sometimes, that's enough.

People always want to talk about the fire. About the sirens, the rescues, the so-called, "heroics". They want to know how many lives I saved—how many times I walked into hell and didn't blink.

But they never ask what it cost.

They don't ask what it's like to come home after a watching a family burn up in a house fire, shower three times, and still feel like blood is under your skin.

They don't ask how it feels to lose someone you were never supposed to know by name—but did. Because she reminded you of someone. Because you remembered her shoes.

They don't ask what happens when the pager goes quiet—but your head doesn't.

But this—this story? It's not just about fire. It's about everything that comes after.

About finding peace in a town with more cows than people.

About letting your body heal, even when your memory won't.

About finally buying that HomePod and giving your playlist the room it deserves.

It's about painting your nails pure blue because that color has always felt like freedom.

About being happy, healthy, and completely whole despite the world insisting you shouldn't be.

It's about women. God, it's always been about women.

The ones I've loved.

The ones I couldn't keep.

The ones who broke me.

The ones who built me back.

And Amelia—my part-time lover and full-time best friend, my mirror, my tether to something that still felt worth protecting.

And it's about music. Always music.

Because when the words failed, the songs didn't.

When the trauma silenced me, the harmonies carried what I couldn't say.

I've lived in the margins.

In the "other" box.

The unknown gender.

The unspeakable trauma.

The untold story.

But I'm not afraid of the margins anymore.

Because this isn't a story about what happened to me.

It's a story about what I kept.

My hands.

My grit.

My clarity.

My name.

My truth.

So if you're still here, past the wreckage, past  
the rain, past the mandolin and the memory—

Welcome.

You found me.

And that... that's enough.

## ***July 19, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)***

*“I don’t miss the ’90s as much as I miss the girl  
I was—the one who never filtered her feelings,  
never apologized for caring too much, and  
knew that showing up was everything.”—*

*Emily Pratt Slatin*

Whenever I think of the early 1990s, it hits me like a half-remembered melody from a mixtape someone made just for me—the kind you played until the tape wore thin, because it was the only thing that ever made you feel understood. That time wasn’t just a backdrop. It was a frequency I lived on. Everything felt heavier, louder, harder to reach—and for that very reason, infinitely more real. There were no shortcuts to connection. No digital scaffolding holding up half-hearted friendships. You either showed up or you didn’t—and when you did, it mattered.

I miss the 1990s the way you miss someone who understood you before the world convinced you to tone it down. It’s not nostalgia. It’s not aesthetic. It’s grief for a time that had the balls to be imperfect—loud, messy,

inconvenient, analog—and honest. It was a decade that didn't apologize for being hard to love. A decade that made you work for everything—relationships, music, connection, identity—and in that work, it made everything matter.

Back then, friendship wasn't frictionless. It wasn't pre-approved by shared interests on a glowing screen or curated through a fucking algorithm. It was earned through showing up. Calling someone's house phone. Hoping their dad didn't answer. Risking awkwardness. Waiting too long on a street corner. Writing letters and not knowing if you'd ever get one back. You found your people by accident and kept them on purpose. There was no instant gratification. You either put in the time or you lost them.

We weren't accessible 24/7. We didn't carry the whole world in our pockets. If someone wanted to reach you, they had to try. They had to leave a message on your answering machine, or better yet, show up unannounced because sometimes you just needed someone to come knock on your door and ask if you were okay. You didn't have five backup options waiting in

your DMs. You had them—and that was it. So you held on.

The music wasn't background noise. It wasn't built for dance challenges or streaming numbers. It was the truth you couldn't say out loud. We didn't just hear music. We belonged to it. We lived in it. We wore it like second skin. The first time I heard "Closer to Fine" by the Indigo Girls, it felt like someone had been reading my diary with a flashlight. That's what music used to do—it saw you, held you, gutted you, healed you. Not because it was engineered to do so, but because it was written by people who had no other way to survive.

We've lost the depth. The edges. The awkwardness that made things real. Now it's all packaging. Connection has been reduced to a marketing strategy. Vulnerability is a performance. Truth is edited down to whatever's digestible. Even sadness has a brand identity now. Everyone's busy performing authenticity while being careful not to scare anyone with actual emotion. God forbid you cry without subtitles or rage without a call-to-action. Everything raw gets sanded down into content.

And still—we're supposed to call this progress.

We used to sit in parking lots at midnight, chain-smoking and solving the world's problems with a Tori Amos CD and one working headlight. That was connection. That was intimacy. No one took pictures. No one performed. No one was thinking about optics or algorithms or how it would all look on a feed. We were there. Fully. Unapologetically. We said the wrong things. We overreacted. We forgave. We stayed. We were too much—and it was enough.

I miss the weight of everything. I miss the way it all cost something. Every song, every photograph, every friendship. You didn't get a hundred chances to get it right. You had to mean it the first time. You had to show up when it mattered or risk losing the moment forever. And that risk—that tension—is exactly what made it real.

Now? Everyone's disposable. Every conversation feels like a placeholder. Every "I miss you" sounds like a default setting. No one means anything because no one stays long enough to prove they do. We've gamified being human, and we're surprised we feel hollow.



I don't want to be "seen." I want to be known. There's a difference, and the world today has no goddamn clue what it is.

I miss blurry photographs and overexposed memories that lived in shoeboxes, not in cloud storage. I miss showing up to someone's door without warning, because you just had to see them. I miss silence that wasn't awkward. I miss the pause in a conversation that meant someone was really thinking before they answered. I miss when "I love you" felt risky, not rehearsed.

And maybe—just maybe—I miss the version of myself that didn't question whether being intense was too much. I miss the girl who didn't filter her feelings, who didn't pace her words, who trusted that if she cared hard enough, the world would care back. The girl who didn't have to explain herself. Who didn't have to make herself easier to swallow.

Maybe what I miss most about the 90s... is her.

## ***July 20, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)***

*“I don’t need gods or arms that let go—I need  
rain on pine, bark against my skin, and the  
proof I’m still standing when everything else is  
gone.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

It rained today on my 46th birthday.

Not a long, cinematic storm—no thunder, no sky-wide crescendo, no poetic deluge to make it mean something larger. Just one of those sudden summer stutters that slips through the valley like it remembered something it meant to say, then lost interest halfway through.

The air shifted like it always does right before the world exhales. The house got still. Not cozy still—alert still. The kind of hush that arrives right before something moves. A storm without volume, but with intent.

I was inside folding laundry. Or pretending to. I had a stack of nothing-important shirts, except one—the soft, broken-in gray tee I stole from my ex-girlfriend in 2020. I should probably let it go. She sure did. But I haven’t.

Stealing it felt like a moral victory at the time, and keeping it still does. It fits wrong. It smells faintly like stale longing. It's soaked in a version of me I don't even recognize anymore. But it's mine now. And that's enough.

I draped it over the bottom right corner of my bed and did what I always do when the rain moves through—I slid on the nearest pair of Crocs, still wet from the last time, and stepped outside like I was answering something older than language.

Not chasing. Answering.

I always go straight to the pine tree; it's been my anchor since the day we moved here. It doesn't care how I show up—shaking, silent, blood on my shin, mascara from three days ago. It doesn't need words. It doesn't blink. It doesn't need.

It just is—anchored, steady, unsentimental, and alive in a way humans rarely manage to be. The needles were heavy with rain, drooping like they were trying to forget something. I leaned in—face close, shoulder pressed against rough trunk, cheek to bark like I was listening

for a heartbeat deeper than my own. I wasn't looking for answers. Just acknowledgment.

And then there it was. That smell that I have known all my life, yet can't describe. Wet pine. Soil. Sap. History. Breath. It's the kind of scent that doesn't just land in your nose—it cracks something open in your chest. It reminds you that the earth is still spinning and you're still here and things have died and bloomed a thousand times without you. That's not a comfort. It's a truth. And I'll take that over comfort any day.

This is what keeps me alive. It's not love, not therapy, and not even instinct. It's this quiet, post-storm ache. This scent that says you're still here, girl. The reassurance that yes, I made it through. Again.

Sometimes I think I love the smell of rain on pine because it's the only thing that never hurt me.

People talk about safety in arms. I never trusted arms. They hold—until they don't. They let go. They flinch. They push. They change their minds. I've learned the hard way that comfort offered by a body can disappear just as

fast as it came. But trees? Trees don't lie. Bark might be rough, sure—but it's honest. Roots might trip me, might catch the toe of my boot or rise up where I least expect them—but they mean well. They never pull away. And the pine? The pine never shrinks from me. Doesn't care how jagged I am that day. It's always there—silent, solid, and listening. A shelter that doesn't question why I came. A witness that never walks away.

When I was little, I used to run into the woods after it rained—mud-streaked and quiet, pockets full of rocks and secrets. I didn't have the words for it back then. I just knew that the trees didn't ask anything from me. They didn't require me to shrink or explain or pretend. They just let me exist.

I've been told my whole life that I'm either too much or not enough. Too intense. Too quiet. Too smart. Too queer. Too wrong. But the pine trees? They never needed me to be anything other than present.

Muddy. Bruised. Beautiful. Furious. Soft. Wordless. Whatever I brought that day—it was enough. They don't care if I'm bleeding or if I've put myself back together. They don't care if

I haven't spoken all day or if I've been screaming internally since 6 a.m. They just wait.

And tonight—like always—they were waiting.

I pressed my face into the bark like it was the last real thing left on this planet. Maybe it is.

Maybe this ritual isn't about the smell at all. Maybe it's not even about the tree. Maybe it's about remembering who the fuck I am beneath all the noise and damage and performance.

Not what I've survived. Not what I've lost. Not who hurt me, or who couldn't stay.

Just me.

Emily.

The girl who still runs outside when it rains.

The woman who keeps a stolen shirt like it's sacred because it reminds her that she once walked away without looking back.

The one who doesn't need a god, a man, a savior, or a story.

Just breath.

Just bark.

Just rain.

And the memory of the pines.

## ***July 23, 2025—Stamford, New York (Mom's House)***

*“Maybe healing isn’t a cinematic reunion—it’s a mother and daughter finally sitting in the same room, choosing not to wound each other anymore.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

It’s 11:48 p.m., and I’m lying on a mattress that used to belong to someone else, in a room that isn’t mine anymore, in a house I never thought I’d walk back into with an open heart. But here I am. Forty-six years old, purse on the dresser, boots by the door, and the familiar hum of passing cars outside like they never stopped keeping track of time. It’s a strange kind of comfort—like finding out your childhood scars glow in the dark, but no longer sting.

I came home today. Not back—home. There’s a difference, and anyone who’s ever had to build themselves from the wreckage of their own childhood knows exactly what I mean. This wasn’t some gauzy, sepia-toned reunion. No slow-motion hugs on a front porch. No made-for-TV forgiveness arc. Just me—an adult woman with a well-worn soul and a history that doesn’t fit on a Hallmark card—pulling into the



driveway of the woman who brought me into the world... and whose father kicked me out of her house when I was sixteen.

He's gone now. And if I'm being honest, I didn't feel anything when the call came. No grief. No relief. Just the faint click of a lock somewhere deep inside me, sliding shut. Love? That had long since withered from neglect—if it ever existed at all. The man didn't just throw me out; he made sure I knew I wasn't wanted long before he said the words out loud. And she—my mother—stood by and let it happen, too scared or too compliant to stop it.

I wasn't pregnant. I wasn't on drugs. I hadn't stolen a car or flunked out of school. I was just... me. Queer, introspective, unapologetically intelligent, with a quiet defiance that threatened men like him. I read books instead of smiling on command. I asked questions that made adults uncomfortable. I knew things I wasn't supposed to know, and I said things I wasn't supposed to say. I saw through people—and he knew it. That's what did me in. That's what got me packed off and shut out before I could legally vote or sign a lease.

And yet, here I was—decades later—pulling up the long driveway to my mother’s house. Not to make peace. Not to perform penance. Not to reclaim anything. I’ve got nothing left to prove. This was something quieter. More defiant, in its own way. I came because I could. Because I survived. Because the girl who once slept in her car and lived on vending machine offerings deserved to stand on this land again—not as a guest, not as a ghost, but as a woman who made it all the way through the fire and didn’t burn.

I didn’t bring flowers. I didn’t come for closure. I came because this place—this history—no longer holds power over me. I’ve carried the weight of what happened here long enough. Today, I set it down. Not for them—for me. And for once, that’s enough.

We talked. Let me say that again, because it’s never happened before—we talked. For hours. No yelling. No slammed doors. No weaponized guilt. No walking on eggshells. And none of those strategic silences, either. Just two people—older now—sitting in her living room, surrounded by the ghosts of who we used to be.

She asked me questions. Real ones. Like she actually wanted the answers. She wanted to know about the firehouse, the photography, the years on the road, what it felt like to transport a human heart in New York City while trying not to get stuck in midtown traffic. She asked about Amelia. And she listened. No interruptions. No sighs. No sideways glances when I said my wife. Just a nod. Like it made sense. Like maybe it always had.

At one point I mentioned how I used to call her sometimes—from a payphone, while I was sleeping in my car—and she didn't try to rewrite history. She didn't say, "Well, you never told me that," or "Why didn't you just come home?" She just said, I'm sorry.

And I sat there, hands wrapped around a Nalgene bottle filled with iced tea that tasted like nostalgia and forgiveness, and didn't know what to do with the quiet that followed. So I said, Thank you. And I meant it.

It's technically tomorrow now, but the clock hasn't earned the right to reset the day yet. I'm still wide awake, staring at the ceiling I used to count cracks in, listening to the creak of the old house. There was a moment before I drifted

toward sleep—just one—when I realized I wasn't holding my breath anymore. I used to clench my jaw every time I stepped foot in this house. I used to brace for the barbed questions, the judgmental glances, the sense that no matter what I achieved, I'd always be the disappointing daughter with too many secrets and not enough shame.

But tonight? Tonight, she didn't just tolerate who I am—she honored it. And that changes everything.

I didn't expect reconciliation. I didn't even expect comfort. But we sat in the living room for what felt like years, passing truth back and forth without keeping score. Maybe that's what healing actually looks like—not some big cinematic moment, not a teary hug with swelling music in the background, but two women with shared DNA quietly deciding not to hurt each other anymore.

I'm still cautious. Still protective of my heart. Still aware that forty-six years of patterns don't dissolve in a single night. But for the first time, I'm hopeful. And I don't use that word lightly.

So here I am—under the covers, in a house that once felt like exile—writing this by the dim glow of my phone screen, amazed by the simple, breathtaking fact that I spent the evening talking to my mother about everything. My childhood. My trauma. My fire and EMS career. My marriage. My intersex body. My queerness. All of it. Without a single goddamn fight.

That's never happened before. And I don't know if it ever will again. But it happened today. And that's enough.

## ***August 9, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)***

*“My own father tried to bury me under shame and silence—but I kept on surviving, becoming the daughter he could never erase.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

Some people are raised by fathers. I was handled like a problem to be solved, a miscalculation to be corrected. It wasn't parenting; it was a slow, relentless campaign.

I was born on July 20, 1979, in New York City. My father, Harvey L. Slatin, was sixty-four years old, with a worldview weathered in the early 1900s—rigid, resistant, entirely unwilling to bend toward something he didn't understand. I was born intersex, labeled female by the doctors after a battery of tests. To my father, that was a technicality, a loophole that meant he could make the choice himself. My mother had chosen a name for me—Emily. Instead, my father had the hospital type a male name on my birth certificate. I imagine my mother sitting in that hospital room, the air smelling faintly of antiseptic and machine oil from the medical equipment, holding me while

the first shot in what would become a lifelong war had already been fired.

Despite the name, I was raised as a girl. In preschool in the early '80s, I was just another little girl with a boy's name—something that, in New York City, was curious but not impossible to explain. We finger-painted, we built block towers, we ate goldfish crackers from paper cups. The teachers knew me as I was. My classmates accepted me as I was. It was at home where the lines blurred and the fight began.

When I turned eight, my pediatrician looked at me and asked if I was a boy or a girl. "Girl," I said instantly, without hesitation. It was a word that felt like mine in a way nothing else ever had. The doctor began talking to my parents about surgical options to help me fit socially as female. My father's jaw tightened when they suggested surgery to make my genitalia look more female. A decision had to be made in that moment—one I had no say in. My father snapped, "Absolutely not. I have a son."

Within days, we were in my parents' 1980s Nissan sedan heading north on the Taconic, the city skyline shrinking behind us. The back seat

smelled like rust and dog vomit—an English Springer Spaniel’s legacy from too many road trips over an hour. She loved the car, but like clockwork, if the drive stretched, she’d throw up. My parents absolutely had the money to replace the car or at least get it cleaned, but they never did. That smell settled into the fabric and lived there, like a permanent passenger.

The night before we left Manhattan, my father and I walked across the street to say goodbye to Charles Kuralt, who lived in our neighborhood. It was summer and the air carried that warm, faintly metallic tang of the city at night. At the corner of Bank Street and Waverly Place, under the light of a buzzing streetlamp just flickering on at dusk, Kuralt looked my father in the eye and asked, “When are you going to allow [name redacted] to be your daughter?”

I stood there with my toy adventure belt—army canteen knocking against a battered metal flashlight, hung next to a compass—listening. Kuralt crouched down, his knees cracking, and asked me what I wanted to do with my life. “Be a firefighter or a writer,” I told him. He turned to my father and said, “One day your daughter is going to be one hell of a prolific writer.” My



father's face went flat and cold. "My son is going to be a world-renowned surgeon," he snapped.

They never spoke again.

Five days after my eighth birthday, we moved into a creaky old house in Stamford, New York. My first day at Stamford Central School, my father drove me himself, walking me into the office with his hand clamped on my shoulder like a vice. He made sure the administrators knew I was his son. But new students meant new paperwork, new physicals, and a school nurse who read my medical history in silence, the scratch of her pen loud in the small office. She repeatedly looked up from the paperwork while she sat across from me at a municipal-looking desk.

The paperwork stated the obvious: female body, male-appearing genitalia. Someone scrawled "unexplained natural female development despite male genitalia" into my file in blue ink. That became another tool for my father to use. Soon after, the words "major mental disorder" found their way into my school records—another mark against me.

Life became a rotation of therapy—hospital-based sessions that smelled like bleach and waiting rooms, and quiet, echoing offices in the school where the psychologist sat in a too-small chair and asked the same questions over and over. Could I stop feeling female? Could I be remade into a boy? I learned how to sit still, feet flat on the cold tile, eyes fixed on a spot on the wall, and wait for it to be over.

On my first day, my father sent me dressed unmistakably as a boy. The teacher put me at a desk next to Melanie, the girl who lived next door. We were friends within hours. I found myself orbiting toward the girls in the class, as if there were magnets in the soles of my shoes. My father found out, and the pressure ratcheted up—more appointments, more lectures, more attempts to “fix” me.

Melanie couldn't stand to see me in boys' clothes every day. One morning, she whispered a plan: I'd stop at her house before school, change into her clothes, and walk in beside her. After school, I'd change back before I went home. For a while, it worked. I'd walk into class in a floral top or a soft cardigan, feel like myself for a few hours. But my father always found cracks in the walls I built. When he discovered

the truth, the punishment was swift and brutal. Contact with her was forbidden. We still talked, fingers curled through the chain-link fence between our yards, because sometimes survival is measured in stolen conversations.

By eleven, my father was done pretending. The principal at Stamford Central gave me a permanent in-school detention for the rest of the year—a kind of slow suffocation meant to grind me down.

That summer, I was sent to Camp Chateaugay in Merrill, New York, enrolled as a boy. When school started again, I was enrolled at Cooperstown Central School. My mother drove me an hour each morning; my father picked me up an hour later in the afternoon. The commute was long and dull, the back roads lined with fields and weathered barns, but the time between drop-off and pick-up was mine. I made friends with every girl in my grade. No one questioned me, no one tried to define me. They just accepted me.

Still, the school nurse “assigned” me a friend—Gretchen—to look after me. We were inseparable. One day, the school therapist asked if I wished I was a girl. I looked him dead

in the eye and said, “I’m not the one here who needs help if you think I want to be a girl when I already am one.”

Two weeks before the end of eighth grade, I was expelled. The school therapist told my parents *I was going to grow up and become transsexual if I didn’t get immediate inpatient psychiatric care*. My parents were told I wouldn’t be allowed to graduate with the rest of my class due to my *psychiatric disorder*. My diploma arrived in the mail a few days after graduation.

My father escalated. He took me to our family doctor—not to the office, but to his house. I was told he was a “family friend” now. In the living room, with the curtains drawn and the air heavy with furniture polish, the doctor injected me with testosterone. The pain was sharp and lingering, but the deeper wound was knowing my father would physically alter me if it meant winning.

That doctor’s cousin was Allen Ginsberg, who became my mentor not long after. The irony isn’t lost on me—one man trying to erase my identity, the other encouraging my voice. Allen knew the truth about me being a girl, but he also knew better than to say anything.

When I came home, my father announced I'd be going to an all-boys boarding school near Buffalo, New York until I graduated high school. My parents drove me there in the Honda station wagon I would later inherit—a faded, once-practical car that smelled faintly of gasoline and dust baked into the upholstery. The trip was long and quiet, the kind of silence that made you aware of every seam in the road and every change in pitch as the tires hummed over asphalt. The air vents blew just enough to carry the ghost of the farm stand peaches my mother had bought the week before.

When we arrived, I walked straight into my dorm—the building that would become my “second home” for the next four years. It looked like a scaled-down Kirkbride asylum: long, echoing hallways lined with identical rooms on both sides, and at the far end, apartments for teachers who lived on campus. The walls were painted that same sickly beige as old personal computers from the 1980s—the color of cigarette stains steeped into plastic. The air carried a mix of floor wax, cafeteria grease, and the faint tang of wet cotton drying too slowly in the radiator heat.

On my desk sat a manila envelope with my paperwork, and I was told to hand it to the administration in the morning. I couldn't resist looking. I slid out the medical form, the paper cool and stiff between my fingers, and there it was in the clinical language only a doctor could use:

*"Female, Intersex. XX chromosomes (SRY-positive), Partial Androgen Insensitivity, Ovotesticular Disorder of Sexual Development, Autism. Natural female phenotype with atypical male-appearing genital characteristics. Personality is female. Hermaphroditism."*

Then I saw my father's handwriting in the margin—thin, deliberate, and damning: *"Confused. Actually male."* His words directly contradicted the medical report, but there they were, inserted into the official record as though they carried the same authority.

That first night, I was alone in my room. The radiator clinked and popped every few minutes. My suitcase sat unopened at the foot of my bed, and the institutional blanket scratched at my skin no matter how I shifted. I pulled it tight anyway and cried myself to sleep, knowing my father hadn't just rejected me—he

had handed me over to an institution willing to help him erase me.

I never fit in there. While the other boys stood shoulder to shoulder at the urinals, I slipped quietly into a stall—the only space in that bathroom where I could breathe and be left alone. One day, I walked into a stall and found someone had written in thick black marker: *"[name redacted] is a girl."*

At first, I felt exposed, called out. But after sitting there a moment, my knees pressed against the cool metal partition, I realized that someone here saw me for exactly who I was—and wanted me to know it.

That summer, I got my first period at summer camp—in the boys' cabin of Wilderness. It was a cold morning when I woke up, the air thick with pine and damp wood, and the cabin smelled faintly of lake water tracked in on muddy sneakers. I told no one. I did what any girl would do in a pinch—improvised—folding a paper towel into the front of my underwear, praying it would hold until I could sneak away to the infirmary without anyone noticing. I buried my soiled underwear in the woods.

The next four years of my life alternated between boarding school, school vacations my father begrudgingly allowed me to spend at home, and summer camp. At sixteen, the doctors finally told me I was female and intersex, and that I'd never have children. I told my parents I was a lesbian. My father called it the final straw. Unless I was in boarding school or home on vacation, I wasn't allowed in the house. I was kicked out with a '91 Honda station wagon, \$800, and a duffel bag packed with what I could grab in minutes. I took a dishwashing job at the summer camp I'd once attended. My body had shifted by then—breasts, hips, long hair—and people looked at me differently. I began to see the slow schism forming between those I had known in childhood and who I was becoming.

In the summer when I was seventeen, my father demanded I enroll in a college class at SUNY Cobleskill in C++ programming. I finished the course with a B+. I never graduated from high school because at eighteen, I skipped most of my senior year and hitchhiked to Buffalo to start training at the fire department. I went to college anyway, despite not scoring well on my SAT, due to my IQ being measured at 178.



Recently, Amelia asked if I had autism. I told her yes—I'd been diagnosed as a child—but I'd hidden it well enough to survive in the fire department. She told me I'd been circling my father's abuse for weeks. She's right. Some stories aren't told once; they live under your skin and leak out in pieces.

Looking back, the pattern is undeniable. Every school transfer, every therapy session, every punishment, every injection—it was never about raising me. It was about erasing me. My father believed he could grind down the truth of who I was through control, shame, and force.

He lost. I didn't just survive him—I outlived the story he tried to write for me.

## **August 17, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)**

*“Survival was never about nobility—it’s about dragging the ghosts with me, every laugh, every name, every silence they left behind. It’s about spitting blood when the world calls it strength, pulling myself back together with grease-stained hands, and refusing to fucking quit, no matter how hollow it gets.”—Emily Pratt Slatin*

There are days when the silence swallows me whole, and it is not the kind of silence I once cherished—the silence of a cold Vermont night where even the pines seem to breathe in rhythm with me. This is the kind of silence that drips bitterness on the tongue, like chewing aspirin dry. It tastes like loss, like absence dressed in an echo, and it lingers longer than anything sweet ever could.

I have lost more people than I ever thought possible, more faces than my mind can catalog without burning out. Some left quietly, their absence like a chair suddenly pushed back from the table, no goodbye, no flare of drama—just gone. Others were stolen by violence, by fire, or

by choices that ripped them out of the script entirely. A select few I pushed away myself, thinking I was strong enough to handle the fallout. I wasn't. Losing everyone I used to know is less a singular event and more a slow bleed. It is a series of small funerals I carry inside me, unmarked by flowers, unspoken by anyone but me.

The strangest part? I can still picture them all in frightening detail. I remember the cadence of their laughter, the way they'd fumble for a cigarette, the smell of leather drying against the truck radiator. I remember how we'd lean against the truck, trading stories that felt eternal at the time. None of it lasted. The world swallowed them in its indifferent way. Death, distance, disinterest—it doesn't matter what name you give it, the lingering bitter taste is the same.

When I was younger, I thought memory was a friend. I kept everything—words, moments, snapshots of abandoned buildings—tucked into diaries and photographs as if archiving would save me from the erosion of time. But memory doesn't protect. It's a double-edged blade that keeps what I want to forget polished and sharp. The more I try to hold onto them, the heavier

the weight becomes. I carry their shadows in the way my hands tremble sometimes, in the way my voice catches on certain songs, in the way I scan a crowd for someone I already know is never coming back.

There's a peculiar cruelty in surviving long enough to outlast the cast of your own story. I thought we'd all grow old in some form of camaraderie, telling exaggerated tales about the days when everything was smoke and sirens and raw adrenaline. Instead, I walk into a grocery store in the town where I grew up in Upstate New York, and there is no one left to recognize me. Not one person to call me by the names that once anchored me. Emily, Dark Horse, Rescue Girl—each name belonged to a chapter, each gifted to me by someone who thought they'd stick around long enough to keep saying it. Now the names rattle around my head, orphaned.

Even family is gone. Some by choice, some by cruelty, some by time. I used to think blood meant permanence, but I know better now. I was disowned long before I knew how to stand on my own, and the bitter irony is that I made it anyway. That survival has never once softened the sting. If anything, it sharpened it.

It made me realize how cold the world can be when there's no one left to call home except the echo of your own voice.

People love to tell you that loss makes you stronger, as if grief is some kind of gym you can bulk up in. What it actually does is hollow you out. It scrapes the marrow and leaves a space you can't fill with anything tangible. Strength is a byproduct, sure, but not the kind they imagine. It's not bravery or resilience in the way they want to package it. It's just knowing how to keep breathing when every part of you would rather not.

I've built a life here in Vermont—middle-class, blue-collar, soil under my nails, grease in the cracks of my hands. I fix things because it is the one act that reminds me not everything is doomed to be broken forever. But no matter how tight I wrench down a bolt, no matter how cleanly I wire something, there's no repairing the absence of human beings who once shaped the edges of who I am. Losing them is not an event. It is a condition. A chronic one.

When I sit outside at night, under the pure blue Vermont sky fading into black, and the moon returns to hold place for the sun, I sometimes

wonder what they'd think of me now. The colleagues who didn't live long enough to retire. The friends who drifted away. The family who chose to shun over difference. Would they even recognize me if they saw me, older, scarred, weathered, still carrying that same intensity they both feared and relied on? Or would I just be another stranger to them, a ghost wearing familiar skin?

I tell myself I don't need them anymore—that I've built enough grit, that I've earned the solitude. But the truth sneaks in on quiet afternoons, in the way the radio hums low on the kitchen counter. WQBK for the reckless kid I was, WAMC for the thinker I became, WIZN for the fighter who survived it all. The stations are still here, still speaking to me like old friends. The people aren't. I can tune the dial and hear echoes of my youth, but I can't dial back time and pull a single one of them out of the wreckage.

And so, I sit with the bitterness. I don't try to sweeten it anymore. I don't tell myself it's noble or poetic. I just let it burn across my tongue, because pretending otherwise feels like another kind of lie. Losing everyone I used to know has left me with the kind of loneliness

that doesn't vanish in a crowd, the kind that sits heavy in the bones. It is not about being unloved or unnoticed—it is about being unanchored, set adrift with only the memory of shorelines that no longer exist.

If there is one truth I've managed to hold onto, it is this: survival is not a victory march. It's a quiet trudge, boots against gravel, breath against cold air, holding on to the smallest reasons to keep moving. I take pictures. I write words that may outlive me. I do it because there is no one left to do it with me, and because doing it alone is still better than stopping altogether. And I do these things to remind me of what was real, what was lost, and what still matters.

## **August 19, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)**

*“To them I’m the ghost in the doorway; to me,  
I’m the one who owns the threshold—whole,  
unbroken, and gone on my own terms.”—  
Emily Pratt Slatin*

I disappeared. Not in the tidy, storybook way people want to believe—no heartfelt goodbye, no neat conclusion, no time for anyone to brace themselves. I vanished in the rawest sense. One morning I stood up, walked out, and never came back. No explanations. No apologies. Just a chair left empty and the sound of me still clinging to the air like static after the channel cuts out. To those I pushed away, I know I became a ghost overnight. They still catch me in the wrong places at the wrong times—through a song on the radio, a familiar road at dusk, the silence of a room that suddenly feels too heavy. My absence pressed itself into their lives like smoke slipping under a door. You can’t lock it out. You just breathe it.

The truth is, I was never built for permanence. I was born into a world that has never been amused by difference, only to arrive different in



every single way—the many labels came later, but the reality was stitched into me from the start. My body was a contradiction, my mind ran on an unmatched frequency, my existence refused the categories people tried to force on me. The world wants sharp definitions, clean edges. I was born blurred. And when you live as a blurred outline, people either sharpen you into something you're not or erase you altogether. Holding my shape against that pressure took everything I had.

Autism meant every interaction was heavier, more complicated, more costly. It took an enormous amount of energy to hide it from the fire department, but my test scores were undeniable. They had no choice but to hire me. And once I was inside, once I was standing on scene, no one could ignore that I got results. I became stoic, commanding, the one people looked to when the chaos turned cinematic. I could mask well enough to pass for “normal” at work, but it bled me dry. Behind the mask, I was still carrying the static, the overload, the endless second-guessing. And no matter how much the world applauded the career, the quiet truth was that I was still a loner. Always the girl who was seen but not remembered, fed

pleasantries instead of genuine connection, tolerated rather than truly known.

I think about that childhood nickname—dark horse. It was never meant as affection, but it stuck. The one you never saw coming. The one who slipped in unnoticed, only to shock you with what she could do. Dark horse meant outsider, anomaly, surprise. I learned to wear it like armor. I became what dark horses do: ran races quietly, carried my weight without fanfare, and when the moment came that should've broken me, I pushed through. But even in victory, I was still the odd one out—still the anomaly no one knew how to place.

And then one day, I decided I'd had enough. I threw my backpack and camera in my car and drove away. I left my universe behind holding the hand of my ex-girlfriend—the same woman I later sold our house to for a single dollar, because that's how much the past was worth to me by then. I bought a house in another state, married my best friend, sold my childhood home in New York City, changed my name, and started over. For years and years, I had roamed trying to find a place where I fit. I built a wildly successful career, but in my personal life I was

always the loner. The one who showed up, made an impression, then slipped into the background until I was nothing but a vague memory. The girl who tried to form friendships, remembered only in fragments, never in full.

So when I disappeared, I know it looked like betrayal. I'm sure they asked why, wanted reasons, tidy explanations they could fold into drawers. But my life has never offered tidy explanations. My presence was intensity—sparks and wires humming too hot. And when the whole system burned out, I didn't stay to fight the fire. I walked away. Easier to vanish than to keep proving why I could never fit their version of me. That doesn't mean I meant to haunt them, but I know I do. My absence left an outline they can't erase. They may curse my name, call me selfish or impossible, but they still remember.

And yet, disappearing never meant I stopped existing. I still walk fields under open sky, still write my name into blank pages, still carry the weight of being blurred in a world that insists on clean lines. To them, I'll always be the ghost in the doorway. To me, I'm just a woman who

finally learned that vanishing was the only way  
to stay whole.

## **August 23, 2025—Middletown Springs, Vermont (Home)**

*“I was the girl who ran barefoot through pine and mud, the teenager who carried a dog and a notebook like lifelines, the woman who stood in fire and flood refusing to break. All that I am, and all that I ever was, is still here—still me—Emily the Dark Horse.”—Emily Pratt  
Slatin*

I sometimes think my whole life can be traced back to two places—the farm near Buffalo where I first learned how to breathe, and the steel box of a rescue truck where I learned how to survive. Both places carried me when I was weak, both scarred me in different ways, and both taught me hard truths I didn’t want to know. If I close my eyes, I can still smell the pine and hay of that farm mingling with the diesel and sweat of the ambulance. Those scents, those memories, are the map of my existence. Everything starts and ends with those two worlds: the wild little girl at her grandparents farm and the battle-hardened woman in the rescue rig.

At the farm, I was just a little girl with a black-and-white Springer Spaniel named Emma, a stuffed frog missing an eye named Frog, and a wildness in my spirit that could not be broken. The house itself was a three-ring circus of characters and vices. My grandmother would spend her days half-drunk and chain-smoking in the living room, an ashtray always overflowing by her elbow. She'd mumble old stories under her breath while sipping gin from a chipped mug, cigarette dangling from her lips as if it were a natural extension of her being. The rugs and curtains hung heavy with decades of smoke and pine dust that drifted in from the fields. My uncle Bob—worked the kind of blue collar labor that turns people into living machines, leaving permanent calluses and cracks blackened with motor oil and soil. He spoke little, and when he did, his voice was as rough and tired. My aunt Holly was usually found in a lawn chair on the rear porch off the living room in a haze of cheap beer by mid-afternoon.

My father was angry in a way that settled into the walls like toxic mold, unseen but ever-present. He wasn't a tall man, but his rage made him loom large. Every slam of his fist on

the table, every low growl of disappointment, soaked into that house's very bones.

My cousins swirled around this familial storm and each played their parts to keep the fragile balance. James was the charismatic ladies' man even at nineteen. John, his younger brother, was the serious and grounded one; at thirteen he already spoke like a forty-year-old, with the weight of the farm in his voice. John would always be inside reading a book, while James and I would be outside building forts in the woods. And then there was me: the oddball, the misfit, the girl, a constant question mark. I was too sharp-tongued for a child, too curious for my own good, too feral to fit the polite mold of a "young girl."

I think the adults didn't quite know what to do with me. I had my mother's facial features, and my father's intelligence. There was something about the way I watched everyone that always made them uneasy—like I was taking notes on all their failures and dreams. I was a little girl they couldn't quite pin down, a little wildcat who refused to be tamed. But outside—that's where I truly belonged.

Outside, under the open sky, I was more than the oddball kid underfoot in a smoky living room. I would run barefoot across the grass and hayfields, Frog tucked securely under one arm, and Emma bounding joyfully beside me with her big floppy ears and tail wagging.

The moment my toes touched dew-soaked earth, I felt something release inside me. The pine trees that encircled our fields stood tall and wise, their branches like open arms ready to hide me when I needed hiding. I learned to disappear into those woods whenever the house got too loud or when my father's temper started shaking the walls. I'd press my back against the rough bark of a pine and become part of the forest. I'd listen to the hum of cicadas and the buzz of dragonflies hovering over the marshy pond out back.

I'd close my eyes and let the summer air—thick with sweetgrass and wildflower—fill my lungs. In those moments I pretended I was free. In those moments, I was just another creature in the woods, unburdened, unafraid. Even when reality insisted I wasn't truly free—that I had to eventually tiptoe back to that house of smoke and shadows—I savored the illusion. Outside, I



felt alive and safe in a way I never did inside those walls.

One early morning, when I was about seven years old, I slipped out before anyone else woke up. Dawn light was filtering gold through the pines, and the air was cool and filled with birdsong. Still in my thin cotton nightgown, I raced Emma down the hill behind the pond, both of us kicking up dew as we went. Emma barked with excitement, and I laughed out loud, feeling a wild joy thrumming in my chest. We must have looked like a scene from a storybook—the scrappy little girl and her faithful dog on a grand adventure. In my imagination, we were explorers, maybe even heroes. In reality, I was just a barefoot kid running reckless through brambles and mud.

I soon enough got caught up in a thicket of blackberry brambles, and trying to free myself, managed to tear huge holes in the night gown, that by now was so covered in mud and pine sap that I didn't think mom could wash it all out. I remember tugging off my nightgown and leaving it in the woods, as if claiming this patch of wild as my own kingdom. For a few minutes I danced barefoot and carefree in that hidden

corner of the woods, Emma splashing in the pond nearby.

That's when I slipped on the muddy bank and went tumbling through a patch of tall grass, straight into a cold, slimy puddle left over from the night's rain. The mud was thick and cool, and it clung to my skin like it wanted to keep me. I came up sputtering and laughing, absolutely coated from head to toe in dark brown muck, with bits of leaves sticking to my hair and tiny scratches crisscrossing my arms and legs.

When I finally trudged back to the farmhouse, I was barefoot, naked as the day I was born, mud-soaked with pine needles and burrs stuck out of my tangled hair. I was a naked muddy pine needle covered mess, but I was grinning like I had swallowed the whole sun. I must have been a sight to behold, this mud-slick child standing proudly in the porch doorway. My grandmother took one look and let out a long, smoky sigh.

Without so much as blinking, she jabbed her lit cigarette towards the yard, the red cherry for a split second growing brighter with the sudden acceleration and said, "Outside. Hose off before

you step foot in here, child. I'm not about to have you ruin my rug." Her voice was raspy from years of smoke and Manhattans. She took a long pull off her cigarette, eyeing me with a mix of irritation and a flicker of resentment.

I was about to obey—truly, I was—when Emma, my beloved partner in chaos, came barreling in right behind me. She'd been following on my heels, just a few moments behind, because Emma—adorable as she was—wasn't very bright. While I picked my way along the grass where water met land, she charged straight through, swimming as if it were the only path forward. She burst through the door dripping pond water, caked in mud from nose to tail.

Before anyone could stop her, she gave one of her signature full-body shakes. In an instant, droplets of muddy water and flecks of algae went flying across the kitchen and into the living room. I ducked, but there was no escape—mud splattered the walls, the ceiling, the light fixture, and, of course, my grandmother's prized rug. For a heartbeat, time stopped. We all just stared at the dripping chaos: brown sludge sliding down the wallpaper's faded roses, the rug now a modern art masterpiece of

mud, my grandmother's mouth open in utter shock.

Then all hell broke loose. Grandma started cursing, shuffling after the dog with a dishrag, while Emma, thinking it was a game, scampered around leaving paw prints everywhere. My father thundered into the room, saw the mess and my muddy, naked self, and bellowed my name in that dangerous low tone that meant I was in for it. My aunt slurred something about "that damn dog," and Uncle Bob poked his head in from the porch, took one look, shook his head, and wisely retreated back outside. And me? I just threw back my head and laughed.

I laughed so hard I thought I might lift off the ground. It was perfect. It was the truth slapping everyone in the face. Because you can close all the doors, lay down all the rules, try to keep life tidy and safe—but sooner or later, the mud gets in. The wild, the truth, the chaos—it finds a way in. No matter how mad my family was at that moment, they couldn't stop the wild from seeping into our lives, whether through a rebellious little girl or a happily dirty dog.

That lesson stuck with me long after Emma was gone, long after childhood had burned itself out. Even years later, I would look up at a ceiling and remember that constellation of mud stains and think: truth has a way of sneaking in. Of course, at seven I didn't put it in such terms—but I felt it deep down. Some part of me quietly understood that the real stuff of life isn't easily contained.

Emma lived to a ripe old age for a dog. She saw me through the rest of grade school, through countless other adventures on that farm, big and small. Losing her was the first real heartbreak of my life.

By the time I was twelve, a new dog named Penfold had taken Emma's place as my four-legged companion. Penfold was nothing like Emma in looks—Emma had been sleek and nimble, while Penfold was a big, shaggy mutt with ears that flopped, which gave him a perpetually goofy, inquisitive look. He had soft brown eyes that saw right through you. I named him Penfold after a bumbling cartoon sidekick I remembered from *Danger Mouse*, some early childhood TV show I used to watch that made me smile, and I desperately needed something to smile about back then.

From day one, Penfold was my shadow. He followed me everywhere—trailing me through the my adventures, dozing under the kitchen table at my feet, pressing his warm side against me on nights when the shouting inside the house got too loud. He was my witness and my comfort, a tether to something gentle in a world that often wasn't gentle at all.

Penfold lived longer than anyone expected—stretching across my life from those turbulent teenage days into my early thirties, outlasting entire versions of me I thought I'd never survive. He was there during nights when I sobbed into his fur because I felt like the world had swallowed me whole.

When I say Penfold saw everything, I mean *everything*. He was there the night my father finally threw me out of the house for good. I remember that night vividly—hot and humid, the air thick with a mid-July thunderstorm brewing. I was sixteen and full of sadness, hurt and angry at a life I couldn't control. My father and I got into a screaming match—probably the climax of a hundred smaller fights. I can't even recall what sparked it. Maybe I mouthed off when he snarled at me for coming home late, or

maybe he was just drunk enough to unload every resentment he'd been carrying. Words flew like knives. I told him I wasn't afraid of him anymore, that I wasn't a little girl he could scare into silence.

He told me to get the hell out of his house, face twisted in a rage that almost looked like satisfaction. Perhaps he'd been waiting for an excuse to eject me; perhaps I'd been the one waiting to leave. Either way, it ended with him grabbing my arm in a vise grip and physically dragging me toward the front door. I can still feel the burn of his fingers on my skin as he shoved me out onto the porch.

“Go on then! You think you know everything? See how far you get on your own. And leave anything I paid for except the clothes on your back!”

The front door slammed shut, and that was that. I was cast out into the dark, the sky about to burst open with rain, truly alone for the first time. I sat on that porch, heart hammering, the night air alive with the buzz of cicadas and distant thunder. I was shaking all over. Part of me wanted to pound on the door and scream to

be let back in; another part of me felt an unexpected rush of relief.

The worst had happened—he'd done exactly what I always feared—and I was still standing. He made good on his promise to erase me, but in the wreckage I was free. The door creaked open again, and for one reckless second I thought maybe he'd changed his mind. Instead it was Penfold, my mom letting him out like an afterthought. He padded over, tail low, wearing the same rejection I felt. My battered spiral notebook sat beside me, pages full of unsent letters and rage my father would never read. Penfold pressed his body against mine, and I buried my face in his fur, sobbing like the bottom had finally fallen out.

'Looks like it's just us now,' I whispered.

He lifted his head, those big brown eyes—Falkor eyes—locking on me, and then he licked the tears straight off my face. Not comfort. Not pity. Just truth: I'm with you. Always.

With what felt like the entire world on my shoulders, I started taking everything I could out of my room that I might need to survive and put it in the back of my hand-me-down



1991 Honda station wagon. I had no real plan, just a fierce resolve that I would not crawl back to that house. I managed to convince my old summer camp to hire me for kitchen help, and the following morning, I was on my way to Merrill. The first night, I slept in my old cabin where I'd slept as a child. I built a small fire in the living room fireplace and wrapped myself in an old blanket.

Through the unscreened window, I could see one bright star winking in the ink-black sky. I remember I was still crying a little, but at some point I realized I was smiling, too. It hit me that for all the fear and hurt pulsing through me, I also felt something almost like peace. I was on my own. The worst had come, and I was still me. There's a strange calm that comes when you have nothing left to lose. Lying there alone with the open sky above, I discovered a dangerous, wonderful sort of freedom.

In the weeks that followed, I drifted through the Adirondacks doing whatever kept me fed—hauling wood, scrubbing shit-stained toilets, washing dishes, dragging trash. At night I hunched over a lantern, bleeding my teenage rage into spiral notebooks. On weekends I watched the campers roast marshmallows,

aching for a childhood I never got—just scraps of it two summers earlier. But now I was sixteen, cut loose, expected to toughen up and survive, stuck in the brutal limbo between girl and woman.

Autumn arrived, crisp and golden, and with it the withering of old leaves and the ever-present question of what to do next. My father, in a rare moment that felt more like dismissal than mercy, suggested I enjoy a few days of freedom before being sent back to boarding school. Freedom, to him, meant absence from his sight; to me, it meant throwing a blanket in the backseat of the Honda and taking off with Penfold riding shotgun. For a handful of days, it was just us—windows cracked to let in the cool mountain air of Upstate New York, gravel roads that lead to nowhere under our tires, Penfold's ears flapping in the wind like some shaggy co-pilot. We ate out of gas station paper bags, dozed in the car under the whisper of falling leaves, and parked by trailheads where he'd nose through the underbrush while I scribbled into my notebook. It wasn't much, but it felt like stolen treasure—a brief, ragged stretch of belonging before I was shipped back into confinement.

Those drives on empty back roads felt healing. I spilled my thoughts to Penfold as old rock songs played on the radio. He listened with those wise, patient eyes. He had no answers, but his presence was enough. Driving felt like moving forward—each mile put distance between me and the broken pieces of my past.

Two years later at eighteen, I ran away from boarding school in the middle of winter and enrolled in an EMT course in Buffalo, New York, determined to do something exciting and useful with my life. By my mid-twenties, my life had narrowed into a rotation of 24-hour shifts, roaring sirens, and endless highways seen through a smeared ambulance windshield. Some days (and nights) the ambulance barely stopped moving. We'd go from one call to the next: a car wreck at dawn, a heart attack by noon, an overdose at sunset, a shooting past midnight.

Then maybe, if we were lucky, a brief lull around 3 a.m. before the next crisis came in. My entire world had shrunk to the size of that rescue rig and whatever emergency lay at the next address on the pager. Forty-eight hours on duty, sleeping in snatches, became routine. The ambulance was my second home, a home on

wheels that often smelled of antiseptic, diesel, and stale sweat. I learned to cat-nap sitting upright, to inhale a lukewarm cup of coffee in three gulps between calls, and to keep my hands steady for an IV line even when adrenaline wanted to make them shake.

The interior of the rig was all hard plastic and stainless steel—benches lining the sides with hidden compartments full of supplies, a narrow stretcher in the center, overhead cabinets with clear panels showing neatly strapped equipment. Those walls witnessed some of the best and worst moments of my life.

They saw me deliver a baby girl on a snowy highway shoulder at 6 a.m., my own hands gently catching her as she entered the world wailing, her mother sobbing with joy and relief. They also saw me slumped in a corner after a call where nothing we did was enough—the echo of a mother’s scream still ringing in my ears after I had to tell her that her little boy was gone.

The ambulance floor was often littered with wrappers, gauze packs, and coffee cups—a functional mess we didn’t always have time to clean on busy days. We cleaned up when we

could, but on the busiest days, organization took a backseat to sheer survival.

After particularly brutal calls, I sometimes parked the ambulance in a dark empty lot, opened the back doors, and sat on the rear step to let the night air wash over me in silence. The rescue truck would loom behind me like a fortress, its engine ticking as it cooled, and I'd run my hand along the bumper in gratitude for carrying me through.

I used to half-joke that if a stray bullet ever came our way on a scene, the rescue would stop it like a shield. Absurd, I know—an ambulance isn't bulletproof—but that tiny thought kept me steady in neighborhoods where gunfire echoed in the night. Oddly enough, I felt safer in that truck than anywhere else on earth. Safer than home ever was, safer even than the open farm had been, because inside those thin metal walls I knew exactly who I was and what I needed to do. Those doors would close, the siren would wail, and for a time I belonged to nothing but the mission: keep someone alive, get us all through 'til morning. My own pain, my own past, all of it was left on the curb while I fought chaos with everything I had.

And then came Irene. Hurricane Irene hit New York in 2011 and tore through the region like the end of the world. I'd seen big storms—blizzards that buried whole towns, summer squalls that sent trees crashing through roofs—but nothing like this. Torrents of rain turned familiar creeks into raging rivers. Whole villages went underwater. Our radios crackled nonstop with emergencies: evacuations, rescues, people trapped in their houses, some clinging to rooftops as the floodwaters rose.

By the second night of the storm, every first responder I knew was bone-tired and running on pure willpower. We parked on what we hoped was high ground and waited in the hammering rain, the four of us in the rescue, the crew soaked and anxious. Lightning spiderwebbed across a black sky, illuminating the devastation in flashes. In the morning, dam failure sirens went off—a long, eerie wail cutting through the wind. Over the radio came a panicked order: the dam was failing, evacuate now.

My stomach lurched. If that dam broke, a wall of water would be on us in minutes. I shouted to my crew, “We’re leaving—get in, now!” as I dove into the driver’s seat. My partner barely

had time to grab the dash as I fired up the engine.

But the two local volunteers—just stood there in the deluge, shaking their heads. They didn't believe it. "Bullshit!" yelled, refusing to budge.

To them I was just a young woman who had moved there from out of town, and they weren't about to take orders from me. My heart was a drum in my ears.

"Get in the truck!" I screamed through the rain. They still refused. In that moment I felt a flash of fury so intense it surprised me. I jumped out and marched toward them, rain stinging my face. "If you want to die, fine, but not on my watch!" I shouted, pointing at the truck.

He yanked away, eyes full of stubborn pride and disbelief. We stood there face to face in the howling wind, two fools in a floodplain. And strangely, a calm washed over me. In the middle of all that chaos, I felt everything go quiet inside. I remember thinking, If the water comes now, I'll drown doing my job. Maybe that's enough. I wasn't going to abandon them, and I wasn't going to run.

After a few endless minutes, an all-clear crackled over the radio: the dam held. Someone had called to report the dam failure as a prank; the state has responded by sending a NYSP chopper to investigate. We sat in the eerie gray dawn, rain still pounding on the roof, and we just looked at each other—soaked, exhausted, realizing we were alive.

Life went on, as it does; the storm eventually passed and the floods receded, and to anyone else it was just another bad weekend that could have been worse.

But something in me broke loose that night and never fit back into place. Irene wasn't just a storm; it was a mirror held up to all of us. It showed me how paper-thin the line is between order and chaos, between confidence and foolishness, between life and death. Two stubborn men almost got us all killed because they refused to believe the danger until it was at the door. And I learned that in the face of true chaos, I could find a kind of calm. I was willing to stand my ground, even if it meant I might not walk away. In the worst moment, I met a version of myself I wasn't sure I'd find—the one who doesn't flinch.



I've lived through things I shouldn't have. I've survived the kind of childhood beatings that leave more than just bruises on the skin. I've endured betrayals that cut just as deep as any knife. I've run into burning buildings when every sane part of me screamed to turn back. I've stood in the charred ruins of someone's home, choking on smoke, knowing we couldn't save everyone inside. I've pulled bodies from mangled cars that looked like crumpled tin cans, my heart breaking at the sight of an empty car seat in the back. I've known silences that cut deeper than words—the silence after a slap when I refused to cry, the silence of an empty house that should've been filled with a dog's bark or a father's apology, the silence on the other end of the line when I tried once to call home and got nothing but a dial tone.

I have literally sat in the mud—first as that wild child in the pine woods, and later as an adult kneeling in a roadside ditch with a dying stranger's hand in mine. I've bled on my own boots without even noticing, and I've watched people die despite all my efforts to save them, because sometimes offering quiet comfort is all you can do. I've laughed when I should have cried, using dark humor as a shield against the horrors I've seen. And I've carried ghosts that

should have buried me by now—ghosts of the people I couldn't save, of the family I left behind, of every innocence I lost along the way. They weigh on me, yes, but they also drive me. Every ghost is a reminder of why I must keep going, why I cannot give up.

But I'm still here.

And when I look back now, I can see a line running through it all, connecting all the selves I've been. I see the little girl on the farmhouse porch, muddy and grinning, defying the world to tame her. I see the teenager under the stars, Penfold's head on her lap, refusing to break despite all the broken things around her. I see the young paramedic lieutenant sitting on the back step of her ambulance after a grueling night, head tilted up to a sky that offers no answers, wondering why people hurt each other and why she has to see so much of it. I see the woman standing in the driving rain of a hurricane's wake, heart thudding in her chest, knowing she might die and still not backing down. All of them were me. All of them are me, woven together into one messy, complicated, resilient life.

The truth is, life doesn't hand you neat, happy endings. It hands you storms and scars. It hands you mud on your best rug and phone calls in the dead of night that change everything. It hands you nights in an ambulance where the only familiar sound is your own heartbeat in your ears. But it also hands you small mercies and unexpected beauty. It hands you Emma's wild, wet shake that left everyone sputtering but also laughing. It hands you Penfold's long years of companionship—the gentle weight of his head on your knee on a lonely night, reminding you that you aren't alone. It gives you laughter that bubbles up in the darkest moments because sometimes laughter is the only way to keep from breaking. And sometimes, if you're patient, life hands you a sunrise after the storm, a moment of stillness when the world is quiet and, just for that moment, it feels like it all makes sense. Those are the moments I live for: the pink dawn after a night of sirens, the hush when I sip a cup of coffee with shaking hands and realize I made it through once again.

I don't need closure. I don't need to tie up every loose end of this story in a pretty bow. I don't need to justify or explain away the ugliness to find the beauty. I just need it to be real. All of it

—uncensored, unfiltered, as it happened. This messy, brutal, beautiful survival is as real as it gets. It's not a clean narrative, but it's mine, and I'll take it, every scar and every joy.

So if this is the last page, if this is the way the book ends, let it end like this: I was a child who ran naked through fields of pine needles and mud, unafraid and untamed.

I was a teenager who carried a dog and a notebook like lifelines, finding hope under campfire stars when there was none at home.

I was a first responder who stood in storms and floodwaters, who ordered her crew to higher ground even when they wouldn't listen, learning how strong I could be when the world was falling apart.

I was a woman who kept going, even when life broke me into pieces, stubbornly putting one foot in front of the other on the roughest days.

And I am still here.

Still me.

Still Emily.