

~~I remember the relentless heat of the midday sun as we alighted from Ines's car in the parking lot at We arrived at the One of a Kind Antique Mall, Canada's largest antique store, just as the midday sun burned relentlessly overhead. The heat was oppressive and pressed down on my neck and back pressed down on us like a tangible weight, and I'm sure Ines felt the same. But her mind was full of nothing but antiques, and the excitement was contagious. but it didn't matter.~~

~~The moment we stepped inside and enjoyed the welcome relief of air-conditioned comfort, I forgot all about the baking pavement outside, the world outside melted away. The three-story shop was like a labyrinth, with tables and booths laden with items around every corner. Maybe it sounds cliché, but it truly was like exploring the past.~~

~~Time seemed to unravel as we wandered through its labyrinth of history—rooms bursting with forgotten treasures, each artifact a whisper from the past.~~

~~It was fun rummaging through old things. I even spotted some Seeing toys from my childhood. We even saw an antique telephone switchboard desk. Ines and I sat there, pretending to be switchboard operators in the 1940s, making connections for callers. that we both had to sit at pretending we were connecting people.~~

~~Ines was the real treasure hunter, but I learned from her well-practiced eye. I made a few purchases:~~

~~I left with a few things: a large, weathered antique mirror, some homemade candles, and a 1914 relic from WWI: a tin containing a tin from 1914 a relie from World War I containing tobacco, cigarettes, and a small folded British flag. Princess Mary had sent these packages across the Atlantic Ocean as gifts to soldiers on the front.~~

~~It had been a Christmas gift from Princess Mary to soldiers at the front.~~

~~And then there was this chunk of malachite that I saw. The stone was sSitting in the window display at checkout. It was a symbol of transformation and emotional healing. I couldn't leave without it.~~

~~I saw it just as we were about to leave. A symbol of transformation, and emotional healing.~~

~~It had been six years since the my last great upheaval of my life. Now, and I could feel the stirrings of another, kind of like the first small Like the first tremors before an earthquake. I suppose that is why So, I bought the stone.~~

~~I tucked it carefully into my bag, and and took it home. I told myself I'd make some changes.~~

~~In fact, just about a week before this, my boyfriend, Jeremy, and I laughed about how much he'd changed over the years. I teased him about his dramatic transformation, asking when it might be "my turn for character development?" Strangely enough, just a week before, my boyfriend, Jeremy, and I had been laughing about how much he'd changed over the years. His transformation had been so dramatic that I'd teased him, asking, "When's it my turn for character development?"~~

~~Looking back now, I wish I could time travel back to that moment. Why? To warn myself that I just might get what I asked for, but not in the way I would want. step into that moment, take myself by the shoulders, and say, Oh, sweet girl. You'll get what you asked for.~~

~~It would turn out that my~~

Commented [SL5]: You didn't say how old the switchboard was, so I just guessed maybe it was from maybe the 1940s-70s?

Commented [SL6]: Do you mean you did this then, or that you remember doing this when you were kids? I just wanted to make sure because it wasn't clear from the phrasing.

~~That malachite would be~~ became the first breadcrumb on a path I'd never choose to take ~~never planned to take~~. This path has been defined by sadness and contrast: ~~A path defined by contrasts~~: grief and growth, despair and discovery. I became a seeker, unraveling the threads of my existence, relentlessly seeking meaning, ~~in a relentless quest for meaning~~.

I felt tied to the ground, burdened with the heavy emotion I carried for every step. Yet there was a trajectory of growth that was lifting me up. I could even say that more and more every day, my spirit dwelt with the stars.

Until this point in my life, I'd never had to survive the kind of path I would now need to travel. It blurred. Each step forward felt like carrying an anchor, yet somehow, I was tethered to the stars. My journey spiraled inward and outward, folding in on itself, blurring the line between the tangible and the abstract, the material and the spiritual. ~~It certainly wasn't linear, and~~ ~~It wasn't linear~~ nothing about it was simple.

I was both the traveler and the terrain. My inner world was, ~~mapping~~ an uncharted ~~inner~~ universe, ~~that defied explanation~~. I became the cartographer of my chaos. I sketched ~~sketching maps others might try to understand, but they could truly understand the terrain~~, follow, though they'd never truly understand the terrain.

Yet the purpose of my journey wasn't to seek answers. It was a wild rebellion against stagnation.

~~To walk this path was not to search for answers but to rebel against stagnation. I became the cartographer of my chaos, sketching maps others might follow, though they'd never truly understand the terrain.~~

This is my story of

~~This is the story of a metamorphosis, messy and slow. It's a journey that has taken all of my strength and courage to travel. It's a journey that demands courage, not just to face the abyss but to find beauty in it. To discover, in its depths, not only yourself but the threads that bind all things.~~

January 15, 2024

January began quietly, slipping in with a steady rhythm, ~~rhythm so steady it almost felt forgettable~~. The days were so predictable that they blurred together. ~~Days blurred together in their predictability soft and mundane but not unpleasant. I wouldn't say I was brimming with joy, but~~ I was content. Life felt solid and reliable, ~~there was a kind of contentment that felt solid, reliable~~. Enough to hold me steady, or at least keep me afloat.

Of course, I had my share of loose threads. Who doesn't? Lingering struggles from the past, the kind that you notice hanging around that like to tug at you just when you think they've been repaired ~~re-gone~~. But for the most part, I was fine.

And yet, there was an this undercurrent. It was a nagging sense that something just wasn't right. I felt ~~It was~~ as though I'd reached the end of a path, only to be faced with and found myself staring at a dense, impenetrable fog. Life felt ~~---~~ stuck. Still.

I'd ~~had~~ spent years clawing my way ~~here~~ to a better job, a better apartment, a better car. I even felt secure enough to adopt a kitten last October. ~~A~~ tiny ~~,~~ black ~~,~~ kitten named Tarot. By ~~most measures~~ ~~all accounts~~, I was comfortable.

But ~~the comfort had come with a cost. comfort comes at a cost.~~ I'd poured so much energy into surviving. ~~All the energy I'd poured into surviving,~~ into rebuilding after the chaos of 2020, I'd been left feeling ~~had left me~~ drained. Yes. Now that I'd arrived at "better," ~~but I realized~~ I had no idea what came next. My mind ~~had once been a workshop of plans and ambitions, but now it was blank. once a workshop of plans and ambitions, was blank. The road ahead was obscured, shrouded in a fog I couldn't see through.~~

So, I stood still. What else could I do?

~~It was in t~~That stillness, though, ~~that is where~~ it found me.

It wasn't ~~just~~ a whisper or a gentle nudge. ~~It~~ it was something foreign, something that didn't belong. At first, it was just a sensation. A presence. ~~It was so~~ alien that the only way I ~~can try to~~ ~~could~~ describe it ~~is with~~ ~~was through~~ imagery:

Imagine your mind as a calm pool of water. ~~Your thoughts are just gentle ripples on its surface. your thoughts rippling gently across its surface.~~ Then, out of nowhere, someone drops an anvil ~~into~~ it. The water surges and thrashes. ~~A,~~ and there, at the bottom of your pool, is ~~at this~~ heavy, ~~unmovable~~ ~~foreign~~ object. It doesn't belong. It's not part of you, yet it's undeniable. ~~You can't ignore it. Unignorable.~~

~~This is how I felt.~~

~~That's what it felt like.~~ Something had dropped into my mind, and it was ~~foreign to me. It was not part of me. n't me.~~

Gradually, ~~a message the abstraction~~ began to take shape. Words emerged from the haze. ~~They were,~~ clear, ~~positive and e~~ ~~Electric.~~

Change is coming.

~~These words Those words hummed with energy, like a spark in dry tinder. They didn't just nudge me out of my stillness. T~~they jolted me awake. ~~And I felt something I thought I'd lost: hope.~~

~~For the first time in what felt like forever, I felt something I thought I'd lost: hope.~~

I couldn't keep it to myself. It was too big, too buoyant to stay ~~hidden~~ inside.

~~I told Jeremy first.~~

~~Jeremy was the first person I told.~~ He smiled ~~and,~~ nodded, ~~probably chalking and chalked~~ it up to one of my whims. But when I told Ines, it was different.

I remember sitting in her car, my words tumbling out, urgent and excited. "I really believe good changes are in store for us this year," I told her, my voice practically buzzing.

~~She seemed amused and intrigued, examining my face. She looked at me, amused and intrigued.~~ I doubled down, painting ~~at this~~ vivid picture of all the good things ~~that I knew were~~ waiting just around

the corner. I was sure of it. My heart told me it wasn't just wishful thinking. so sure of it, so certain that this wasn't just wishful thinking.

Her laughter bubbled

I can still see the moment so clearly her laughter bubbling over as I rambled on, but my excitement pulled pulling her along for the ride. This was the first time in months that I hadn't felt stagnant. In that ear, with Ines by my side, it was the first time in months that life didn't feel stagnant. Something was moving, shifting.

Late January – Mid-February, 2024

My optimism seemed to rub off on Ines. must have rubbed off on Ines during this time. She started looking for a new place to live, a full-house this time. Her apartment Her apartment had been weighing on her for years. It was too cramped and, too chaotic. There was ,with barely enough space for her, her husband, and their pets to exist, let alone find joybreathe. The lack of room stifled her physically and left her feeling didn't just stifle her physically it seeped into her mood, leaving her drained and low.

Ines loved decorating, and she'd long dreamed of having more room to express herself in that way. In that tiny apartment, she had to keep her treasures, her décor, her personality all packed away, waiting for the day she'd have more space.

She'd always dreamed of having more room to express herself, especially through decorating, one of her greatest passions. But in that tiny apartment, most of her creativity stayed boxed up literally. Her treasures, her décor, her personality all packed away, waiting for the day she'd have the space.

I've never been much of a decorator myself. My style is more "I'm trying my best," but over the years, Ines taught me a lot. We discovered that our tastes aligned surprisingly well, though she was always the visionary and I was the willing audience. I've never been good at picturing things in my mind, but when Ines described her ideas, it was like she painted them into existence.

I still vividly remember Ines's Her vision for a Victorian-style mini-library still lingers vividly in my mind. She'd once described it in such detail that I could see it as clear as day. There was a grand, tufted couch, with sunlight pouring through a large picture window. bathed in sunlight pouring through a Towering window, surrounded by towering bookshelves that swallowed every inch of wall space. In the center, a small, elegant table waited for a pot of tea and a reading lamp. I could almost hear the soft rustle of pages turning, the faint clink of a teacup on its saucer.

Once, while driving, she told me about her idea of hosting a Victorian-themed tea party. She wanted the works an ornate tea cart, a delicate ceramic tea set, a dessert tray piled high with finger sandwiches, scones, and tarts. We'd already planned it out: dressing in elaborate Victorian costumes, calling each other "Lady Tasha" and "Lady Ines," and pretending we lived in a more lavish, glamorous glamorous time. era-

Her love for aesthetics extended into her spiritual practice. She was a Wiccan, but she'd never had the space for a proper altar. As a Wiccan, she had always wanted space for a proper altar, but her cramped apartment made it impossible. Even though I wasn't a practicing Wiccan, but I admired the the beauty

and symbolism. She had even helped me create my own altar, gifting me a few precious items to start. I still remember her laughing, half-jealous, that I had space for one when she didn't.

I understood how much that mattered to her. I've always been particular about space myself. I wouldn't even move in with Jeremy until we found a two-bedroom apartment. I needed a sanctuary of my own, somewhere I could retreat and just *be*. Without that, I'd feel restless, irritable, even disconnected. It's like losing a part of yourself when your environment doesn't reflect who you are. I could only imagine I knew how much that tiny, cluttered apartment must have had worn on Ines.

~~After a few conversations and my recent spontaneous intuitive nudge, Ines started her search for a new home.~~

I joined her on some of the tours, walking through houses full of potential. ~~Her excitement grew with each visit, but the process dragged on longer than she'd hoped. The waiting gnawed at her. Whenever she thought she'd found the perfect place, she texted me in anxiety that her application wouldn't be approved. She'd text me in bursts of anxiety, worried she wouldn't be approved for any of the places she'd applied to. I did my best I tried to be her anchor, reminding her to just breathe and trust the process. I knew she needed the support, as patience was never Ines's strong suit. , though I knew patience wasn't her strong suit.~~

In so many ways, Ines and I were opposites. I'd always been kind of a

~~We were opposites in so many ways. I was calculated, stoic, a "think before you act" type who planned life like a chessboard. All my decisions and moves were , every move deliberate and controlled. Ines was very different. She was vibrant and impulsive, was vibrant, impulsive, and never afraid of the unknown. She leapt unafraid to leap into the unknown just to see where she'd land. It was one of the things I admired most about her.~~

But then, she got sick.

At first, none of us thought much of it. It was midwinter, ~~after all,~~ and everyone seemed to be coming down with colds and flu. to be battling colds and flu. That's why Ines brushed it off. She thought it was nothing but a bump in the road. Ines herself brushed it off as nothing just a bump in the road. But I had an unsettling feeling. something about it didn't sit right with me. For as long as I'd known my best friend, she'd never stayed sick for long. But mid-February arrived, and she still wasn't feeling better. In fact, she was getting worse. Ines never stayed sick for long a week, maybe two and yet, by mid-February, she wasn't getting better. If anything, she was getting worse.

~~She texted~~~~did text~~ me to share the fantastic news that she got approved for a house. She said she wanted to move in as soon as possible. let me know she got approved for one of the homes she looked at and was set to move in as soon as possible. Even though she was feeling so ill. Ines and her husband Travis started~~began~~ packing despite her condition. I tried to comfort her with bright images of the future. I tried to distract her with reminders of the future we were planning. I texted, "This summer, tea party, right?" She replied, "Hell yeah!" But later she said~~text later, she admitted,~~ "I'm in so much pain. I feel like I'm dying."

And then, there was only silence.

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

~~And then came the silence.~~

Days passed without communication ~~a word from her~~. I told myself it was nothing. She was just resting. ~~, that she was just resting,~~ letting her fever break, and recovering. ~~giving her body the time it needed to recover.~~

Around this time, I was hit by another wave of intuition. It was completely unlike the positive, hopeful emotions of January. ~~another wave of intuition hit me. It wasn't like the positive, hopeful feeling I'd had in January.~~ It was heavy, unshakable, and terrifying. ~~This one was heavier, and unshakable.~~ It arrived first as an abstract feeling, but quickly formed into words. ~~came to me the same way an abstract feeling that eventually formed into words as clear as a spoken sentence:~~

The people in your life today won't be in your life next year.

The thought wasn't mine. It felt like someone had passed through my mind, and ~~shouted the message,~~ and vanished. ~~before vanishing.~~ I told Jeremy immediately, trying to make sense of what I had perceived ~~it~~. "I don't get it? Am I supposed to make new friends?" I joked, trying to deflect this ~~distressing feeling. But it lingered, the dark undertone I couldn't explain. But the feeling lingered~~

By February 13th, a week had passed since I'd last heard from Ines. The worry that had been quietly simmering finally boiled over. I sent her one last text:

"Hey, are you okay?"

February 14th

It unfolded like a scene in a nightmare. I received a message from Ines's husband, Travis. ~~I couldn't wake from a play I never wanted a part in. The message came from Ines's husband, Travis.~~

His words were clipped, and I could sense that he was exhausted, almost detached. ~~, the tone reading as both exhausted and almost detached, the way someone sounds when they're barely holding it together.~~ He told me about ~~laid out~~ the events of the past week, and his revelations terrified me. ~~each revelation hitting like a blow I couldn't dodge.~~

Ines had been to the ER four times. Four times.

The first visit felt almost absurd in its cruelty. Ines waited ten hours. ~~A ten-hour wait.~~ Ten hours of unbearable pain. She couldn't endure it, so she left. She felt forced to turn away, ~~untreated and still suffering.~~

The second visit offered no solace. This time, she was seen, but only barely. The doctor found an "abnormality" on her kidney, tossing the word at her like a pebble instead of a lifeline. There was no urgency in their tone, no deeper investigation. No bloodwork, no urine tests. Just a hollow instruction to follow up with her family doctor. Which she didn't have. And then they sent her away.

By the third visit, her pain had grown. It was sharp and unrelenting. ~~worse radiating~~ through ~~her back, sharp and unrelenting.~~ She was plagued by constant bladder issues, and couldn't stop drinking

~~water. She couldn't stop drinking water, plagued by constant bladder issues.~~ The hours dragged by, a slow torture. And then came the indignity that still makes my stomach turn. A nurse, allegedly, ~~told her to be quiet.~~ Accused her of faking her pain.

They sent her home again.

And then there was the fourth visit.

This time, everything fell apart.

Ines went into cardiac arrest. ~~Fourteen minutes.~~ She was clinically dead for fourteen excruciatingly long minutes before they managed to bring her back. But she didn't wake up. She was alive, technically, but unresponsive.

I read Travis's message at work, sitting in front of my glowing desktop, as if the world hadn't just cracked open beneath me. My surroundings blurred, the hum of my computer, the sterile glow of the lights in my room. None of it mattered. I stared at my phone, the words swimming on the screen.

My best friend had died and been brought back to life. ~~But where was she now? And now she was...~~ ~~what?~~ Suspended in some awful, ~~unthinkable~~ limbo? ~~It was unthinkable. It couldn't be true, yet it must be.~~

I think I had twenty minutes left in my shift, but I couldn't finish. I couldn't even pretend to function.

My memory from that moment onwards is scattered in pieces of

~~From that moment on, my memory fractures into scattered pieces~~ sensations and fragments I can barely string together. Everything felt distant, unreal, like I was no longer fully inhabiting my body. I was watching my life unfold from somewhere outside of myself.

And yet, in that swirling chaos, there was a quiet part of me a part that wasn't surprised.

That unsettling intuition from before whispered again in the back of my mind. Its words were clear and sharp, as if etched into my consciousness.

February 15th

Today, I visited ~~I prepared to visit~~ Ines at the hospital. Shaune, a mutual friend, ~~came was coming~~ with me. The three of us had been close since 2015, back when we worked at the same company. We had a bond forged in ordinary days that had somehow led us here, to this unimaginable moment.

We shared an Uber to the hospital, but I have little memory of the ride ~~the ride felt like a blur.~~ I'm not sure if we talked, but if we did, the words must have passed. ~~The conversation, if there was any, was muffled words passing~~ over me like static, refusing to take shape in my memory. The only thing that I remember is the glitter of snowflakes that fell heavily from the sky, as if trying to obstruct our path, or perhaps to cushion the force of pain in my mind, heart, and deep in my soul. ~~What I do recall, though, was the snow.~~

~~It started to fall hard as we made our way to the hospital.~~

Commented [SL7]: Tasha--Oh my God, I'm so sorry! All of this is inhumane and disgusting behavior from "health professionals" who are supposed to help! Please report this nurse (and the other "health professionals" involved in this) to the hospital, your MP, MPP (Member of Provincial Parliament) and all the relevant professional and provincial authorities! I'm so sorry to hear this happened to your friend!

Thick, heavy ~~layers of white flakes~~ blanketed the ~~sidewalks and the little bits of sparse green and brown nearby, world outside,~~ as if the universe had decided to mark the day in its own indifferent way. ~~At that moment, it~~ felt symbolic, cruelly so. It was almost as if the cold snow, as it relentlessly fell, was wiping my slate clean, without my consent. I felt like a blank canvas, stripped down to my core, to the most fundamental part of my being. I was bereft of ~~, like my slate was being wiped clean leaving me as an empty canvas, stripped of everything~~ I thought I understood. Yet there was a serenity to the snow, its quiet beauty mocking my pain. ~~The snow fell relentlessly, its quiet beauty almost mocking in its serenity.~~ How absurd, ~~and how cruel,~~ I thought, that the world could dress up ~~such profound~~ devastation in ~~thisuch~~ soft, white silence. ~~It felt like a dark joke the universe was telling, one I couldn't laugh at.~~

Arriving and finding Ines's room was like stepping through a portal. One minute I was still in the Uber, hardly able to breathe, and the next I was in an empty hallway outside Ines's room, terrified to enter. It felt like a dream, surreal and disjointed.

~~When we arrived and found Ines's room, stepping inside felt like entering a dream a surreal, disjointed one where nothing made sense.~~

~~I froze the moment I saw my friend.~~

~~The moment I saw her, I froze.~~

She was lying there, motionless. I knew this person was Ines; I recognized her face and form, yet she was painfully ~~, her body~~ unfamiliar in ~~her~~ its stillness. My vibrant, lively friend had disappeared. This fragile, unresponsive figure had taken her place. ~~The vibrant, animated friend I knew had been replaced by this fragile, unresponsive figure. My mind struggled to reconcile the two, as if they existed in different realities.~~

Shaune stood beside me, just as stunned. ~~Neither of us felt able to move, , both of us rooted in place. Neither of us dared~~ to get too close to the bed. I labored to get enough oxygen from the heavy, oppressive air of this room. ~~The air in the room felt heavy, oppressive, as if the walls themselves were bearing witness to something I couldn't bear to name. too unbearable to name.~~

~~Eventually our thoughts spilled from our lips in soft whispers. We didn't want to say our words, but we couldn't hold them in. Our thoughts were the unthinkable: the aftermath, the what-ifs.~~

~~We started talking soft, hesitant whispers that spilled out between us. Words we didn't want to say but couldn't seem to stop. Dark, guilt-laden thoughts about the unthinkable: the aftermath, the what-ifs.~~

~~Our dearest hope was that she would pull through, but what kind of life would she have? She had~~

~~What kind of life could Ines have, even if she pulled through? She'd been dead for fourteen minutes. Her brain, her body could never be the same. they couldn't possibly be the same. Would it be kinder if she didn't come back? The thought spilled from my lips in hushed words: could it be kinder if she didn't come back? And as soon as it did, I was crushed with the guilt that~~

~~Even as the words left my mouth, they filled me with guilt, a crushing weight that sank into my chest.~~

But there was another part of me, a stubborn and irrational part of my psyche, that refused to believe what was happening. ~~stubborn and irrational that refused to believe any of it.~~ A small, desperate corner of my heart clung to the hope that Ines would wake up, that she'd somehow walk out of this hospital room exactly as she was before her illness. ~~completely unscathed.~~

I could still picture it so clearly: her laughing with us, planning tea parties, complaining about house-hunting as if none of this had ever happened.

I didn't know what to feel. Guilt, hope, disbelief ~~they~~ churned together in a storm, in a tangle of bitter emotions that I couldn't sort out. I was left utterly empty: as hollow as a human being can be. ~~leaving me hollow.~~

I had found myself

~~Standing in that room, I felt trapped in a moment I couldn't comprehend. Like I was stuck in a scene that shouldn't exist, watching a version of my life I wasn't supposed to live. A joyful path that the universe had intended for me was gone, had been stolen from me. It could never return.~~

February 16th, 2024

I was at the hospital with Jeremy, Shaune, another friend, and Ines's family when we were told that my dear friend had been ~~the words finally came: Ines has been~~ declared legally brain-dead.

Even now, I can't fully grasp how I felt in that moment. Perhaps I'll never be able to.

I can only describe it as ~~It was~~ a whirlwind, a storm of loss, shock, disbelief, anger, guilt, and a helplessness so overwhelming it left me hollow. I stood in shock at the words. They didn't belong in my world. They couldn't. ~~The words circled me, heavy and incomprehensible, as though they didn't belong in my world. I heard them, but they refused to settle, slipping through my mind like smoke.~~

I heard them say she would be kept stable for

~~They told us they would keep her stable for~~ a couple more days, but eventually, she would let go. Those words hung in the air. I still refused to believe it, to fully accept it as a truth. ~~like a weight the room couldn't hold.~~

We had plans this year. ~~---~~

We were going to unpack and decorate her new home together. We were finally going to ~~finally~~ have our tea party this summer, complete with elaborate costumes and sweet treats on an ~~an~~ overflowing dessert tray. We were going to visit the Toronto was hosting an ~~Oddities convention in Toronto too,~~ where we planned to spend a whole day, ~~and we were supposed to spend the day~~ marveling at strange treasures. Nightwish was releasing a new album in September, and we were going to sit together, picking apart every lyric and melody.

Like we always did.

_____ ~~In September, Nightwish was releasing a new album, and we were going to sit together, picking apart every lyric and melody like we always did.~~

But these

~~But now, those~~ plans were unraveling, one by one. I could feel them slip through my fingers, falling to the floor and dissolving, no matter how desperately I tried to hold them., ~~slipping through my fingers as I tried desperately to hold onto them.~~

And then cruel clarity arrived~~the thoughts came~~, sharp and cold. ♪

It was like ~~like~~ glass shards cutting through my mind. ♪

I would never again

~~I'm never going to~~ get a random text at 1 a.m., asking if I want to grab an iced cappuccino and hang out on the swings at the park, talking until the sun rises. Or a call

~~I'm never going to get a call from you,~~ asking if I can be ready in twenty minutes because you've found some hidden thrift store in the middle of nowhere, and we just have to go.

~~I'll never see another flood of messages from you about tea earts because you knew how much I loved them. You'd roll your eyes and tease me about how picky I was. And I'd always say, "I'll know it when I see it." You were determined to help me find the perfect one.~~

I'll never hear your laugh again.

What do I do? What am I supposed to do without you?

Ines had been a part of me for so long that I couldn't imagine who I could be~~was~~ without her. It felt like a piece of my soul had been ripped away the moment I found out she was in the hospital. And now, with every passing second, that piece of me was slipping further and further out of reach. It was, disappearing into a ~~the~~ void.

Jeremy's voice interrupted my spiraling thoughts.

~~My spiraling thoughts were interrupted by Jeremy's voice. I realized that h~~He still held~~was still holding~~ my hand, his grip steady, grounding me in the chaos. His words were quiet, yet they cut through the noise in my head:

"You saw this."

For a moment, I didn't understand. My mind was too fractured, too overwhelmed to piece it together. But then I remembered ~~the~~ feeling I'd had.

The people in your life today won't be in your life next year.

The weight of those words settled into my chest like a stone, cold and immovable.

February 17th, 2024

Jeremy and I spent most of the day at the hospital with Travis and Ines's family, and we stayed into the night. ♪

Hours after dark, As the night stretched on, there was a moment when it was~~there were~~ just the four of us in the room. Travis, Jeremy, Ines's sister Ana, and I sat around her bed. ~~me, Travis, Jeremy, and~~

Ines's sister Ana sitting around her bed. The air felt impossibly heavy, like it was pressing down on all of us, suffocating yet still bearable because we were together.

We reminisced, sharing stories about Ines, our voices low but alive with memory. We played her favorite music, filling the sterile quiet with something warmer, something that felt like her. We even managed to laugh a little bit. small, soft bursts of Humor ~~that felt out of place, but we desperately needed to lift the oppressive atmosphere. and yet desperately needed.~~ Half-hearted jokes somehow managed to keep the crushing grief at bay.

~~Jokes were cracked, half hearted and fleeting, but they kept the crushing grief at bay, like we were building a fragile shield to hold the despair just out of reach.~~

We existed in the kind of timeless void that only hospitals seem to create. It was like the world outside had ceased to exist. The faint hum of machines, the smell of antiseptic, and the pale fluorescence of the merciless lights above all blurred together into something surreal. It chilled me to the core.

~~The hours dragged on endlessly in that muted space, the kind of timeless void that only hospitals seem to create. The faint hum of machines, the smell of antiseptic, the pale fluorescence it all blurred together into something surreal, like the world outside had ceased to exist.~~

I've cried so much these past few days. I think this is the most that ~~Honestly, this is probably the most~~ Jeremy has ever seen me cry in the six years we've been together. I could see the worry in his eyes.

I'm so tired. Physically, emotionally, mentally. In every way a person can be. ~~Not just physically though I am but emotionally, mentally, in every way a person can be.~~

Grief is exhausting in a way I never fully understood until now. It doesn't just weigh on your heart. It seeps into your bones, your mind, your very sense of self. It hollows you out, leaving the kind of ~~pain an ache~~ that feels impossible to extinguish. ~~fit.~~

I am so grateful that I brought myself to touch Ines before Jeremy and I left the hospital that night.

~~Before Jeremy and I left for the night. I finally brought myself to touch her. I hadve been terrifiedso seared to even get near her in this state. It didn't feel right.~~

As I held her hand, I knew deep down it would

With tears in my eyes, holding her hand for what I know will be the last time, and I could barely stop the tears in my eyes from spilling down my cheeks.

~~-I said out loud so she could hear, "You canI know you're probably going to make fun of us now! that yYou get to peace out while the rest of us are stuck here paying bills. But I love you, ya big idiot. And I will always miss you."~~

Every step I took distancing myself from her bed felt like falling backwards into a black hole. brought more tears to my eyes. ~~I desperately wished Wishing my last memory of her didn't have to be the last memory I had of her wasn't~~ seeing her in this state.

February 18th, 2024

The morning began ~~with an unsettling stillness~~. I felt scared to open my eyes, to get out of bed, and to hear anything about Ines.

But I knew I had to be brave. ~~stillness but not the peaceful kind. This was the heavy, suffocating kind that presses against you from the moment you open your eyes, making it hard to breathe.~~

~~Almost forgetting to breathe,~~ I reached for my phone, ~~half-dreading what I might find. And what I most feared was there. there it was a~~ text from Travis.

Ines passed away early this morning.

I read the words once, then again. ~~Maybe I thought if I gave them more time, they would change shape. as if giving them more time might somehow change their meaning.~~ But they didn't. They stayed fixed on the screen, ~~cold and final, staring back at me like a stone wall, cold and final. I couldn't move past.~~

Travis mentioned he'd keep me updated about the Celebration of Life Ceremony, but the words barely registered. My mind clung stubbornly to the first part of his message: *Ines passed away.*

I put the phone down and sat there, staring at nothing. ~~The room felt cavernous, the air too thick to move through. I felt unbearably heavy, like gravity had singled me out, pulling me deeper into the earth.~~ Every motion, every breath felt impossible, like my body had been drained of energy and filled with lead.

The day blurred into a haze of crying and emptiness. I couldn't do anything. I couldn't even think. It felt like my body was shutting down in protest, refusing to process the enormity of what had happened.

By the time Jeremy came home from work, he found me lying on the floor. Not asleep, just lying there staring at the ceiling, the cold, hard surface beneath me grounding me in some faint, cruel way. Other times, he'd find me sprawled across the couch, arms limp, eyes open but unfocused, unmoving.

I felt like stone.

But not ~~unbreakable stone. the kind of stone that's unbreakable.~~ No, this ~~kind of stone was was the kind of stone already~~ riddled with cracks, fragile and brittle. ~~It was~~, ready to shatter under the slightest pressure.

Jeremy tried, ~~he tried so hard.~~ He sat beside me, rubbing my back in small, steady circles. He whispered reassurances, his voice soft and full of care. Sometimes, he just sat there quietly, offering his presence like a lifeline I couldn't reach for. It wasn't his fault. He cared more than anyone. But there was nothing anyone could do.

I had lost a piece of myself.

Ines wasn't just my best friend. ~~She~~ She was part of who I was. She was woven into the fabric of my life, her presence stitched into every laugh, every adventure, every late-night conversation. Losing her felt like someone had taken a knife and sliced that part of me away, leaving a jagged, bleeding wound that would never truly heal.

She was the person I turned to for everything. The one who knew me better than anyone else. The one who could make me laugh even on my worst days. Without her, I felt hollow, like a shell of the person I used to be.

~~But this hollowness wasn't light. It wasn't weightless. It was crushing, a relentless pressure that settled deep in my chest, pressing down until I could barely breathe.~~

Everything felt wrong. ~~Like a~~ vital thread had been pulled from the fabric of my existence, leaving the rest of it unraveling.

I don't know how long this will last. This suffocating heaviness, this terrifying silence ~~illness~~ ~~that feels like both too much and not enough~~. I don't know if it will ever go away.

All I know is that today, I cried until there was nothing left inside me. Then I lay still, staring at nothing. Her absence is a jagged wound, one that I know will never fully heal. ~~feeling the jagged wound of her absence. A wound that I know will never fully close.~~

February 20th, 2024

This morning, Travis sent me a text with the date of the Celebration of Life Ceremony. It was February 28th. ~~letting me know that the Celebration of Life Ceremony would be held on February 28th.~~ He asked if I had any pictures or videos to share, and that simple request sent me spiraling back into memories. Moments I'd tucked away, not realizing how precious they would one day become.

My mind landed on one night in particular. I even have an audio recording of it.

It was late summer in 2020. For as long as I can remember, driving has been a source of anxiety for me. ~~A shadow that looms large despite how small it might seem to others.~~ I suppose it started with the horrifying accident videos I saw online as a kid. ~~too much unrestricted internet access as a kid. A handful of horrifying accident videos, and suddenly,~~ The idea of holding other people's lives in my hands felt like an unbearable responsibility. Every decision or mistake could make the difference between life and death. ~~he idea of holding that kind of responsibility having people's lives in my hands felt unbearable.~~

That night, Ines and I were driving home back to our hometown after watching a double feature at the drive-in theater. It was close to 1:00 a.m. when, out of nowhere, Ines turned to me with that signature spark in her eye and said, "Do you want to practice driving in the mall parking lot?"

~~I hesitated immediately.~~ My stomach twisted into knots at the thought of sitting behind the wheel. But her tone imbued me with confidence. She sounded so certain I could do it. ~~her tone was so casual, so brimming with confidence,~~ as if she'd already decided I was capable.

"C'mon," she said, grinning. "It's empty. It'll be fine."

I don't know why I said yes. Maybe it was her confidence rubbing off on me. ~~Or perhaps it was just curiosity. certainty rubbing off on me, or maybe it was my own curiosity daring to peek through the cracks of my fear.~~ Either way, I found myself in the driver's seat, gripping the wheel with clammy hands as Ines sat beside me, laughing and encouraging me the entire time.

Formatted: Superscript

~~The~~ hours passed like minutes. ~~The experience was strangely peaceful, and I fell into what felt like a sort of hypnotic state with the quiet hum of the engine. The quiet hum of the engine, the glow of streetlights casting long shadows on the empty pavement—it was peaceful in a way I hadn't expected.~~

~~As~~Then, just as I was beginning to relax, ~~Ine~~she turned to me and said, "I want a drink from 7/11."

I froze.

"You can't possibly mean me driving us there."

She absolutely did.

Her optimism was unwavering. "It's 3:00 a.m. ~~It's 2020.~~ No one's on the road."

I protested, of course. Rational, overthinking me kicked into overdrive.

"What if I get pulled over? I'll get three to six months easy!"

"It'll be fine!"

"What if I hit someone? What if I damage your car?"

"We'll be fine!"

She made it sound so simple, so inevitable, as if failure wasn't even in the realm of possibility. Her confidence, paired with my stubborn curiosity, was a dangerous combination. I said yes.

The audio recording of that drive is burned into my memory. I was a wreck audibly inhaling and exhaling like I was in labor. At one point, I blurted out, "Holy shit, my peripheral vision just improved in seconds!" I was panicking, but I was laughing too.

When we finally pulled into the 7/11, the universe couldn't resist its little joke. Right in front of the store was a car with its front wheels up on the curb, emergency lights flashing.

~~Despite my nerves, I couldn't help a brief moment of arrogance.~~ "Ha, I don't even have my license, and I'm driving just fine!" I muttered as we rolled past.

She burst out laughing, and I couldn't help but join her. ~~The tension in my chest loosened, if only a little.~~ Fear gave way to the pure joy of being with her, of sharing that ridiculous, unforgettable moment.

I found myself in bed listening to that recording again. Not for comfort. ~~It,~~ it didn't comfort me. It hurt. Hearing her voice, her laughter, the way she teased me for my paranoia ~~tore just-tearing~~ open a wound that hadn't even begun to heal.

At one point in the audio, she's laughing so hard she can barely speak, but she manages to say, "I love you."

I noticed in the audio, I didn't say it back.

I lay in bed, clutching my phone, tears streaming down my face. The laughter, the jokes, the love; it all felt so real, so vivid, and yet impossibly far away.

Commented [SL8]: Did she say the words, "It' s 2020," or did she say something like, "There' s lockdown" ?

Formatted: Don't add space between paragraphs of the same style, Line spacing: single

Formatted: Don't add space between paragraphs of the same style, Line spacing: single

Why did I decide to listen to it? Maybe I wanted to hold onto her for just a little longer, to keep her alive in the sound of her voice. Or maybe I wanted to punish myself. I don't know. All I know is that hearing her say, "I love you," devastated me. Because now, I know I'll never ~~have~~ be given another chance to say it back ~~to her~~. ~~I was listening~~ Realizing I had just listened to a moment in time when I unknowingly wasted a precious opportunity. ~~where I wasted the opportunity.~~

I felt like a bad friend.

I'll always keep this recording, but I'll never listen to it again.

~~I've decided I'll keep this recording for as long as I can. But I'll never listen to it again.~~

February 21st, 2024

~~In some cruel, morbid twist of fate,~~ I received a call from the hospital today. Yes, the same hospital that refused to run a simple blood or urine test for Ines. The same hospital that caused her death. The same hospital where I agonized over my best friend.

~~that hospital the same one where I spent days agonizing over Ines, where they couldn't be bothered to run a simple blood or urine test, and now she's gone because of it.~~

The call wasn't about her. It was about me.

Back in July 2023, my family doctor had ~~requested~~ put in a request for an MRI to investigate my chronic migraines. And today, the hospital finally called to let me know they had an appointment available. February 28th at 6:00 p.m.

February 28th.

The same day as Ines's Celebration of Life Ceremony.

I reeled with the profound injustice, the mindless cruelty. A wave of sickness and frozen rage ~~overwhelmed~~ rolled over me as I processed the unimaginable timing. On that date. That day, I'd spend the early day mourning my best friend, a vibrant, wonderful human being ~~the person~~ who should still be alive. She should be moving into her new home, and I should be there, helping her decorate.

But in this living nightmare, I would spend the later hours of that day in, ~~moving into her new home, and I help her decorate.~~ By night, I'd walk back into the very building where Ines's ~~her~~ life was neglected ~~mishandled~~ and cut short.

You have got to be kidding. No. I cannot do this. I will not do this.

I've been cycling through overwhelming agony, unreachable anger, and a crushing disbelief that won't loosen its grip. None of this feels real. How am I supposed to accept that she's gone?

Ines ~~She~~ wasn't just a friend. She was *my* friend. My best friend. My only friend for the past decade. I didn't need anyone else.

Ines checked every box I wanted in a friend, and then some. She was understanding, funny, spontaneous, and deep in ways most people never are. ~~She could hold a conversation about anything and laugh at a terrible meme the next. And, honestly, our inside jokes were unbeatable. Top tier.~~

~~Memories started creeping in, as they always do.~~

I thought about the first time we met, ~~a moment so small it's hard to believe it grew into something so massive. It was~~ during a work break about ten years ago. I was outside, smoking a cigarette. ~~I usually kept to myself, but I heard her nearby, keeping to myself, but she was nearby,~~ chatting with a ~~few people~~ small group of people. I wasn't trying to eavesdrop, but I overheard her mention ~~a familiar term~~ something I recognized: depersonalization.

~~I'm not quite sure why I spoke up, but I did.~~

~~I don't know what compelled me to speak up, but I did.~~

"Are you talking about depersonalization?"

~~She turned to me, Her group parted like a scene out of a movie, and I saw her standing there, wearing a quizzical expression. parting the group like a scene out of a movie, and asked, "What do you know about it?" she asked. "What do you know about it?"~~

I explained that ~~told her~~ I'd experienced ~~gone through~~ it myself a couple of years earlier. ~~And we clicked, just like that, we clicked.~~ We chatted and swapped stories for the rest of the break. We got acquainted very quickly. It wouldn't be long before I'd feel like I had known her for years. ~~For the rest of the break, we swapped stories, and for the first time in a long time, I felt like someone understood me.~~

When the break ended, we walked back into work together. She asked what kind of music I listened to, ~~and her face lit up when I said symphonic and power metal. and when I said symphonic and power metal, her face lit up. She immediately exclaimed that~~ Nightwish, ~~she told me,~~ was her favorite band. ~~Mine too! -I couldn't believe it. It may sound like a tiny thing, but that was when I knew I'd found a kindred spirit. Finding someone who loved them as much as I did felt like discovering a kindred spirit. That day cemented our friendship.~~

~~From then on, we only grew closer. For the first time in a long time, I felt like someone truly understood me. We quickly grew closer and created our own traditions. Every day after our shifts ended, we'd pick up Iced Cappuccinos and head to the park across town, where there were massive saucer swings. We'd lounge on them and talk for hours, discussing everything under the sun, from history and religion to spirituality and personal struggles.~~

~~We started a tradition: after our shifts ended, we'd pick up Iced Cappuccinos and head to the park across town. There, we'd swing on the massive saucer swings, talking about everything history, religion, spirituality, personal struggles.~~

Hours ~~would pass~~ passed in what felt like minutes. ~~Occasionally, most nights, we wouldn't go home~~ leave until the sun ~~started rising. began to rise.~~

One night in 2016 stands out more than the rest. We were lying on two saucer swings, staring up at the sky. We were deep in conversation, musing about life. ~~deep in conversation about life.~~ I spotted a shooting star and pointed it out. Then another. And another.

I thought the ~~repetition~~consistency was strange, so I Googled it. Turns out, we were witnessing a meteor shower.

There we were, two friends lying under a celestial show, talking about everything and nothing. It was one of those rare, perfect moments: ~~simple~~simple, yet ~~but~~ profound.

The pain this precious memory created in my heart was too much to bear. I tried to hide it away somewhere, but its image still remained in my mind's eye. I couldn't help myself. My thoughts and emotions fell into a tailspin, reviewing and dwelling on

~~I tried to shake the memory from my mind, but it clung to me. My thoughts spiraled, cycling through every plan we'd made together that~~ could~~will~~ never happen. How could life be this cruel?

~~She's there, so clearly, just out of reach stuck in my memory.~~

I felt sick.

My mind drifted back to January, when I promised that the year ahead would be an amazing one, and that we had so many positive changes to look forward to.

~~Sick thinking back to January when I was hyping her up, telling her this year was going to be amazing, that good changes were coming.~~ Why did I say that? Why did I feel that?

But despite all my efforts, I also thought about the ominous intuitive feelings I'd had. I started to panic. Why did I have these feelings? What did they mean? And most painfully, why did I have to be right? The panic crept in as I thought about the intuitive feelings I'd had. I couldn't understand them. Why had I been so certain something big was coming? Why did I have to be right?

~~At the same time, I felt oddly grateful I'd told Jeremy about those feelings because if I hadn't, I might have convinced myself I'd imagined them. It was all too much.~~

~~Today, everything feels like too much.~~ Too much to process. Too much to carry. As if torturing me, or punishing me, my mind keeps I keep replaying these agonizing memories, these devastated plans. They haunt me, like ghosts. ~~that now feel like ghosts haunting me.~~

February 28th, 2024

I woke up in disbelief and dread, with a knot in my stomach that felt like it could bend me over and break me in two. I woke up with a knot in my stomach, dreading the day ahead. A This disgusting, tragic duality, poetic duality was waiting for me. Immediately after mourning - mourning my best friend at her Celebration of Life ceremony, I must enter the cursed doors of the hospital where her fate was sealed, and where she died.

~~only to follow it with a visit to the very hospital where she died.~~ All I wanted was to surrender to my delusional denial. ~~I was desperate to, to let myself let myself~~ believe just for a little longer that none of this was real, ~~and that Ines was still in this world.~~

~~All This week has been has been a blur. I lost all sense of time with so many sleepless nights and tear-soaked days. Everything has felt surreal, disjointed, an endless mess of sleepless nights and tear-soaked days where time has lost its meaning and everything feels disjointed, unreal.~~

Grief ~~was is~~ foreign to me. ~~Up until the loss of Ines, I was never touched by it My whole life, I've been untouched by it~~ in any profound way. ~~Of course, I was sad when I lost my grandparents, but it felt expected. Losing my grandparents was sad, of course, but for my perspective it felt expected. My brain was able to rationalize it part of the natural order.~~ It didn't shatter my world or stop it from turning.

But losing ~~a friend as close as Ines someone as close to me as Ines was?~~ I don't know how people survive this. How do they face the loss ~~of such a friend, or~~ of a spouse, a child, or someone ~~else~~ so deeply entwined with their lives, and still find a way to carry on? ~~These are people The people who~~ we expect to ~~be keep~~ with us for the ~~rest of our lives, majority of our lives.~~

~~I requested a leave from work. I knew I wouldn't be able to talk to anyone without falling apart. I would dissolve into tears, or maybe even lash out in anger.~~

~~I haven't been to work in days. I requested a leave because I can't trust myself to talk to anyone without falling apart. If someone so much as looks at me, I either dissolve into tears or lash out in anger.~~

~~You will remember how I described my personality. I thrive~~

~~For someone like me — someone who thrives on control. I no longer have that, and it feels like hell. — this loss feels like hell. I've lost the ability to Losing the ability to keep my emotions in check. I cannot, to mask my vulnerability around others, and this leaves me feeling nauseated, weak, and embarrassed in a way that cuts deep.~~

~~But at least I've done one thing that is productive: I made an appointment with a psychologist my family doctor recommended. It's on March 4th.~~

~~At least I've done one productive thing: I made an appointment with a psychologist my family doctor recommended. March 4th.~~

~~So, I forced myself out of bed and, pushing myself forward with robotic motions, Dragging myself out of bed, I started getting ready for Ines's Celebration of Life ceremony. Nothing felt real, and nothing felt right. Something within my mind still said it cannot be real, and it would never be right.~~

~~None of it felt right. Friends and family would were going to gather, to comfort each other, to share stories, cry, and even laugh. But adding to my already unimaginable burdens was the fact that this would be my first time in Ines's new home. But all I could think about was how this would be my first~~

~~time in her new home. The one she had just signed a lease for. The one we were supposed to decorate together. And she wouldn't even be there.~~

Her belongings were still packed in boxes. Travis and her family had spent the past few days unpacking and decorating, making the house feel like a home before people arrived. Ines's mourners would experience more of her new home than she did herself. A home she never got to really live in.

~~Trying to hold myself together while I was there felt impossible. Ines was what you'd call a *maximalist*. A collector of stories, of history, of beautiful, strange things. She and I shared the same dream of making our homes feel like antique shops. Filled with oddities, old trinkets, and relics from lives long past. Pictures covering every available inch of wall space, books stacked in every corner, an endless collection of objects that made you stop and *notice*. We wanted our spaces to feel alive. A place where every visit revealed something new.~~

It was unbearably cruel. I had to sit in the house of which Ines had dreamed but that she would never enjoy. I was expected to stay calm and composed, to stay sane, surrounded by all of her things, unpacked and arranged without her watchful eye.

~~So to sit there, surrounded by all of *her* things, carefully unpacked and placed without *her* it was unbearable. We were supposed to decorate this house. This was something we were supposed to do together. We were supposed to fill this space with laughter, with ideas, with plans for how to arrange everything just right. But instead, I was here alone, in a home that was fully decorated, fully *hers* and yet, she wasn't.~~

Everywhere I looked, there was a memory waiting to undo me. Every framed picture, ~~every carefully placed~~ object, every piece of furniture she had picked out ~~felt like a thread of my psyche, was a thread~~, and I was terrified that if I pulled on just one, I'd unravel completely. I don't think I had ever felt as fragile as this before. It felt ~~I felt so fragile~~, like all it would take was one stray thought of her, just one moment of letting my mind wander to crack me open and spill me onto the floor.

Even after all my resistance, I realized I had to go to my MRI appointment. I know Ines would want me to go. If she were here, she would force me to. She would drive me there. As it was, though, I had to go without her. I was forced to leave her memory here in this house.

So, at 4 p.m., I left. I left my friend's memorial because the hospital that killed her through negligence decided that was the most convenient time for my appointment. An excruciatingly painful time for me, but a convenient time for them. It all felt like a diabolical plan to torment me.

~~I stayed until 4:00 p.m., leaving early because of my MRI appointment.~~

Walking into the hospital was like stepping into a nightmare I'd already lived. The halls were cold, both in temperature and atmosphere. Overhead, the fluorescent lights buzzed faintly, casting a sickly yellow glow that seemed to drain the life from everything. The sharp, clinical smell of antiseptic clung to the air and stuck in my throat.

I couldn't stop my eyes from scanning the walls, reading the ~~same~~ "We Care!" posters plastered everywhere. Each one felt like a slap in the face. They enraged and sickened me. ~~their hollow reassurance mocking me.~~

The memories were fresh, burned into my mind like scars. I'd walked these very halls just days ago, in emotional and spiritual agony, wondering if Ines would pull through. And now, here I was for myself. The irony of it was bitterly cruel.

I sat down in the lifeless, silent waiting room. Everyone else was staring at their phone, and I was left with nothing but my rage. Justified, righteous rage that I couldn't express. Anger clawed at my chest, and my heart raced. It was hard to catch my breath. I just

~~The waiting room felt lifeless. The stiff chairs, lined up in rigid rows, were designed more for punishment than comfort. The walls, painted a muted institutional beige, sucked whatever warmth might have been left in the air. People sat scattered across the room, staring blankly at their phones or thumbing through outdated magazines. The silence was deafening.~~

~~Anger bubbled up inside me, wild and untamed, clawing at my chest. I wanted to scream at the hospital staff, to demand answers. Why couldn't they do their jobs properly? Why did they fail Ines? Why do you say you "care," but you didn't care enough about my friend to save her life? ,to ask them why they couldn't do their jobs properly why they failed her.~~ But the words wouldn't come. I was trapped. Trapped in a system that swept aside my friend's life and my emotional well-being.

So, I buried my rage deep. It would I didn't know what to do with the rage, so I buried it deep, letting it fester with the devastating grief and guilt already consuming me. I had to turn off my mind, and pretend this wasn't happening.

The MRI itself was a blur. I was in and out of that metallic machine, eager to leave the building and its ghosts behind. I didn't look at anyone. I didn't say much. I just wanted out.

When I got home, my mind was a tangled mess. ~~An angry, sad mush of emotions swirling together in a threads I couldn't untangle.~~

And in my infinite wisdom, I decided this was the perfect time to try the psilocybin chocolate bar that had been sitting on my desk since January.

February 29th, 2024

I feel like I owe some context for this left-field direction I'm about to take.

~~I've~~ I've been curious about psilocybin since 2023. I knew I wanted to try it. Not for fun, not to escape, but as something deeply personal, something exploratory. I spent months researching the substance and, watching trip reports. ~~I absorbed, absorbing all of the knowledge I could find on everything I could about~~ how it affects the brain. I learned that it was used in therapy in the 1950s, but was later demonized. I also found out that some I read about its history in the 1950s, how it was once used in therapy before being demonized, and how people today still turn to it for insight and ,healing, ,and sometimes, answers.

At the beginning of the year, I bought a 5g psilocybin chocolate bar. I still remember sitting in Ines's car while we were out Christmas shopping just months ago, telling her about my plans. She was

Commented [SL9]: Make sure to keep the format of these date headings uniform. This one was missing the year.

Formatted: Superscript

curious ~~too~~. Intrigued, but cautious. “Try it first,” she ~~’d~~ said, “and then tell me how it goes.” I promised her I would. I was just waiting for the right moment.

And now, here I am days after losing her. The person who knew me to my core, the person I was supposed to share this experience with. And she’s gone. It feels like she took a piece of me with her.

Armed with that chocolate bar, I decided: *Why not?*

I spent the morning preparing. ~~I drank plenty of water and skipped food, and I rewatched reassuring, pleasant trip videos. drinking water, skipping food, rewatching videos of people describing their pleasant trips. I needed the reassurance. Trying to be cautious, I started with one square of chocolate. I wanted~~ Around noon, I ate one square of chocolate to test my reaction. ~~You can always take more, but you can never take less. About thirty minutes later, I started to feel~~ Thirty minutes passed. I felt a light buzz. ~~It was, a mix of being a little tipsy and a little high. It didn’t seem like much of an effect, so I decided to eat another square. Still, I didn’t feel very much, so I ate another square. Still nothing.~~

~~I was frustrated and thought that I’d been ripped off, so~~

~~Frustrated, convinced I’d been ripped off,~~ I ate four more squares in one go. ~~Thankfully, I was still wary of having more than that. I tossed the rest of the bar aside. Taking more would be out of the question at this point. I sat and waited. So I sat and began to wait.~~

~~I soon started feeling something. First, I experienced~~

~~It wasn’t long before I started feeling something. First,~~ a deep wave of ~~nausea~~ ~~motion sickness~~ as I sat at my desk watching another trip report video. ~~It felt like motion sickness.~~

I turned my head slightly, and that’s when I saw it. The table runner on the chest beside me was *moving*. The patterns were swirling ~~and~~, shifting. ~~It was, almost~~ ~~as if they were~~ breathing.

Oh shit, it’s starting.

I leaned into the experience with pure curiosity, taking mental notes as reality began to warp. My eyes started watering, which, oddly, seemed to help me see the patterns more clearly as they twisted and curled along the carpet. They reminded me of ancient South American art—detailed, intricate, ~~and~~ mesmerizing. I quickly discovered that ~~when if~~ I focused without blinking, the patterns ~~grew would grow~~ sharper and more elaborate, ~~but if~~ The second I blinked, they reset completely. This turned into a game, testing how long I could hold my gaze before resetting the visuals.

Then, the patterns rose from the floor.

They spread across the walls, weaving into the fabric of my home. My cottagecore-style ~~decor~~ ~~décor~~ ~~with the antiques, the~~ warm, dim lighting ~~was it all made~~ the perfect backdrop for this trip. My apartment no longer felt like a living space. ~~It was as if I had slipped into another dimension. but an ancient place, as if I had stepped into another dimension layered over my own.~~

I wandered from room to room, enchanted. Everything felt so *alive*. I stopped in front of two framed photos of my great-great-uncles from the early 1900s, ~~and~~ something shifted. Their faces began to morph, stretching into something unnaturally sharp, gaunt, almost *vampiric*. An eerie, unsettling energy radiated from those pictures. I checked the other photos of my family in the apartment, but they didn’t

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

hold the same strange intensity. When I returned to the uncles' photos later, that same eerie energy remained. It wasn't terrifying, just *odd*. ~~Something about those pictures felt off. I found the experience so interesting.~~

I felt like a child again, wide-eyed and filled with wonder. Sunlight streamed through the windows. ~~It hit the walls at just the right angles to make the shifting patterns glow. , hitting the walls at just the right angles, making the shifting patterns glow.~~ Faces emerged, beautiful women draped in hoods, golden crowns obscuring their eyes. ~~I didn't perceive them as entities. They were just shapes the patterns wanted to make. They didn't come off as entities to me, just the shapes these patterns wanted to make.~~

Curiosity led me to my full-length mirror. I wanted to see how dilated my pupils were, but as I stared at my reflection, something unexpected happened. I felt a deep, overwhelming sense of calm. The patterns danced across my face. ~~I was a~~ peace. The usual overthinking voice in my head was silent. All I could do was *observe*.

Next to me sat my altar, the one Ines ~~had~~ helped me create. I ~~remembered-could recall~~ how she had been so excited to move into her new place and set up her own altar again.

And then, I felt it.

~~I experienced the same sensation I'd felt before she died, and a thought shaped itself in my mind. It was clear and somehow familiar:~~

~~A familiar sensation entered my mind the same one I'd felt before she died. It wasn't a voice, not exactly, but a presence. A thought shaped itself clearly in my mind, foreign yet familiar:~~

Light the incense.

I stared at the incense holder on my altar, my fingers twitching with an impulse I ~~wouldn't~~~~didn't~~ ~~bother~~ ~~to~~ resist. Curiosity had already won. Without hesitation, I grabbed an incense cone, lit it, and placed it in the holder. ~~I~~ ~~watched~~ ~~ing~~ the ember glow ~~and then~~~~before~~ the first wisps of smoke curl ~~ed~~ into the air. That's when I felt it: ~~a~~~~that~~ subtle pull, ~~a~~~~the~~ shift in focus. My eyes drifted, unprompted, to my ~~T~~Tarot deck sitting at the center of the altar, waiting.

Do not shuffle. Draw three cards. Past, present, future.

I followed the instructions. ~~s.~~

As I drew the first card, I didn't feel anything. My past card: *The Page of Swords*. I don't know much about ~~T~~Tarot. I only recognize a handful of cards and their meanings, but this one wasn't familiar to me. I placed it face up on the altar, staring at the illustration. A figure, eager and sharp, holding a sword like they were ready to cut through the unknown.

I moved on, reaching for the second card, the present.

As soon as I flipped it over, my stomach dropped. *The Tower*. My breath caught in my throat, and panic surged through me like ice water.

No. No, no, no.

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

I knew exactly what this card meant. Sudden upheaval. Destruction. Death. I blinked hard, as if I could change what I was seeing, as if I could un-flip the card and pick a different fate. My hands started shaking. Tears welled in my eyes before I could stop them, and then, like a dam breaking, I was sobbing loud, gut-wrenching sobs that I couldn't hold back.

It felt like something had ripped through me, tearing my very being open. This card didn't just *remind* me of grief. ~~It~~ It was grief, embodied in ink and paper, staring me down like it had been waiting for me to see it. The sheer weight of it, the undeniable specificity of it, sent me spiraling.

Through my tears, a single thought surfaced:

I don't know where you are, but I hope you're okay.

I whispered it. Again and again, like a prayer, a plea to the silence around me. My voice cracked, barely audible over my own crying. I didn't even realize how tightly I was gripping the card. ~~My~~ My fingers pressed ~~ing~~ into the edges as if I could pull something out of it. ~~an answer, a response, something.~~

Eventually, the sobs slowed, turning into quiet hiccups as I wiped my face with a tissue, one of many now scattered across my floor like the remnants of a storm. My body felt wrung out, like I had physically *expelled* grief. Like *it* had decided when it needed to leave, not me.

I placed *The Tower* next to *The Page of Swords*, my fingers lingering on it for just a second longer. I could still feel *something*, whatever presence had been lingering since I started just waiting. Watching. There was one more card left to draw.

I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself. My future card. My hands still trembled as I reached for it. I flipped it over, bracing for another emotional gut punch.

And then, I blinked. *The Wheel of Fortune*.

I let out the breath I had held onto. My chest still ached, but this card didn't terrify me like the last one had.

A shift in fate. A turning point. Change.

I let out a small, shaky laugh. "What am I supposed to do with this? How does this help me?" My voice was hoarse from crying. I was amused by how vague this was.

I wiped at my face again, sniffled, and glanced back at my past card. *The Page of Swords*. I grabbed my phone ~~and did a search, struggling with the intent to find the meaning of this card. After a search, and trying~~ to concentrate through the visual patterns that still lingered. ~~I found its meaning.~~

Curiosity. Learning. Exploration.

My months of research, the endless hours spent watching videos and reading about psilocybin, my desire to push beyond what I knew and *experience* something. *That was my past.*

I stared at the three cards in front of me, their meanings sinking in. Trying to rationalize the probability of this ~~kind of synchronicity, even happening.~~

I didn't move them. I left them laid out on the altar, their presence looming over me. They felt too specific, too *pointed* to be dismissed as random. Whatever had been with me, ~~w-~~Whatever had guided me to pull *these* cards, seemed to fade. And with it, the visuals, the swirling patterns, the fluidity of reality itself began to still.

Jeremy walked in not long after, finding me sitting on the floor, eyeliner streaked down my face, tissues scattered like fallen leaves. I must've looked like an absolute disaster. But as soon as I saw him, I couldn't stop myself. I started *babbling*, dragging him over to the wall of photos, the altar, explaining everything I had seen and felt. He listened, letting me ramble through the whirlwind of emotions still crackling through my system.

When we got to the altar, I pointed at the cards. "Look," I said, my voice still thick with lingering tears. His gaze moved over them. Then he smirked, pointing at *The Wheel of Fortune*. "Well, this is vague." I laughed, despite everything. And in that moment, I swear, I fell in love with him even more.

Later that night, I stepped outside. The cold air bit at my skin as I ~~lifted my face to~~ looked up at the sky. ~~I allowed the weight of the day to settle over me, accepting its weight. ,letting the weight of the day settle over me.~~

Was it all coincidence? Just my subconscious at play? Or was that feeling of a presence real? Something had told me not to shuffle those cards.

The last time I ~~d-had~~ touched my tarot cards ~~them~~ was when I first moved in. ~~I just took them out of their box and gave them a shuffle. After that, I just placed them on the altar. I had taken them out of their box, shuffled them once, and placed them on the altar.~~ They had sat there ever since, almost -as if waiting for this moment. ~~Waiting.~~

~~For this moment.~~

~~As if this was a message in time, sent from the past, waiting for me to be ready to receive it.~~

March 15th, 2024

It's been a couple of weeks since my first shroom trip. It was an unnerving experience, but one that gifted me with transformative insights. It didn't fix everything, but ~~As insightful and at times unnerving as that experience was, it didn't fix everything.~~ I didn't expect psilocybin to magically solve my depression or make losing Ines any easier. I'm still ~~Instead, I'm still here,~~ deep in the trenches of my grief, trying to make sense of a world that feels empty without her. ~~her without her.~~

The grief is affecting my life in

The grief is seeping into my life in strange, unexpected ways. Lately, it seems like I'm always cleaning and organizing. ~~Lately, I've started cleaning, a lot.~~ Nothing ever feels clean or orderly enough. ~~I've become obsessive about it I've bought ,to the point where I'm buying bins from the Dollar Store in~~

bulk, ~~so that every item in my home can have its designated place. organizing everything in my home until every item has its own designated place.~~

~~At first, I didn't think much of it. At first, it~~ felt productive, almost therapeutic. But then Jeremy made an offhand comment one morning as I crouched over yet another bin. "You know you can't organize your problems away, right?"

I froze mid-bin, the lid in my hand, his words hitting me like a slap of clarity. I let out a groan and facepalmed. "Oh God, that's exactly what I'm doing, isn't it?"

Jeremy nodded, sipping his coffee with that maddening air of calm.

~~"Because I have control issues," I continued, the realization tumbling out in real time. "So if I can't control death, I can control the things in my house."~~

~~Another nod.~~

~~"I'm such a textbook case, aren't I?"~~

~~"Oh yeah," he said, entirely unfazed.~~

~~I glared at him, pointing an accusing finger. "What did I say about making me self actualize without my consent?"~~

~~He smirked, his face smug. Jeremy has this infuriating way of gently calling me out, cutting straight to the heart of things without making it hurt too much. I hate how often he's right about me.~~

It's not just the cleaning ~~that that has 's~~-changed. ~~Something else has crept into my awareness.~~ I haven't listened to a single song since Ines passed away. Not one. It's because I've been avoiding the music Ines and I both loved and listened to together.

~~I understand avoiding music we loved together bands like Nightwish or Sabaton. It feels like an~~They feel like emotional~~mental~~ landmines right now, loaded with too many memories. But the silence has extended to everything. Even music that has no connection to her feels unbearable.

Music has always been more than background noise to me. It's woven into my meditation practice, helping me align my energy with the vibrations I want to reach. Finding the right song has always felt like finding a compass. ~~It~~ makes exploring my mind feel effortless.

But now? The thought of listening to anything ~~hurts twists~~ something inside me. It's as if the very act of hearing music would mean that I couldn't hold in my emotions any longer. break me open.

I've stopped talking to people. I'm exhausted with seeing and hearing from those who are still smiling~~Social media is practically nonexistent in my life now. It's not just the exhaustion of dealing with others who are alive, smiling,~~ and carrying on as if the world hasn't ended.

I hardly ever use social media. Ines's presence in those online spaces makes them unbearable. It's the unbearable presence of Ines in those online spaces.

My Facebook is still full of her comments, interactions, and photos. All those, little moments frozen in time. ~~I can't bring myself to see them.~~ The idea of stumbling across something she said or shared terrifies me. I don't know what it would do to me, but I know it wouldn't be good.

Lately, I've been contemplating deleting my social media entirely. It feels like the only way to avoid the ghosts of what once was.

March 19th, 2024

Yesterday was my birthday. I turned 33.

Under normal circumstances, I might've at least tried to muster up some kind of reaction, a forced smile, an obligatory acknowledgment of the day. But this year? I couldn't bring myself to care. I don't think anyone could blame me for not being in a celebratory mood. All I wanted was to be left alone, to retreat into myself and attempt to somehow make sense of this loss.

I've been thinking a lot lately, trying to figure out

~~I've been reflecting a lot lately, trying to process~~ just how lucky I was to make it 33 years without being truly touched by death. Manyest people don't get that kind of grace. But the more I think about it, the more I wonder if that luck has worked against me. If I'd experienced loss earlier, maybe I'd have built some kind of framework for this. Maybe I'd know how to carry it.

But who am I kidding? No amount of early exposure could've prepared me for this specific, suffocating grief. The kind that comes with knowing Ines's~~her~~ death didn't have to happen. That it could've been prevented. The thought of how the hospital failed her festers inside me like molten rage, simmering just beneath the surface. I don't know what to do with it, how to process it, or where to direct it.

This morning, I woke up from the most vivid dream I've had in over a decade.

~~It was. It wasn't just real it was unsettlingly real.~~ The kind of dream that erases the lines between waking and sleeping, that leaves, ~~leaving~~ you unsure which world you're in. From the moment I became aware that I was dreaming, it felt off, like I'd been dropped into an alternate version of reality where the rules were just slightly skewed.

The dream began with me waking up in my bedroom. It felt so normal, so familiar. I was lying on my side of the bed, on my right side, facing the door. The room was dark, except for the faint glow of the bathroom's nightlight spilling through the crack of the door. Jeremy's back was pressed against mine, his warmth radiating through the blankets.

And then I saw her.

Ines was lying in front of me on a cadaver tray, facing me.

It was surreal in its casualness. One moment, it was just a regular night in my bedroom. The next, there she was my best friend, the person who was supposed to be gone, lying there as if she had always been.

By the time I realized I was dreaming and became lucid, we were already mid-conversation. Her voice was exactly as I remembered it. Lighthearted and teasing, the way she always softened heavy moments. She was in the middle of telling me about her final thoughts the day she went into cardiac arrest.

"I heard them talking about a surgery or some procedure on me," she said, grinning. "I said to myself, 'Well, I don't know what good it'll do, but sure, I guess.'"

It was such an Ines ~~her~~ thing to say. Her delivery was so perfectly *her* that I laughed, even in the dream.

And then, without warning, a flatline pierced the air.

Sharp. Final.

Her eyes lost their spark, her expression went still, and I watched her die in front of me.

I called her name. Nothing. I called her again, my voice rising, ~~panic setting in~~. Still nothing. My heart raced as I called out over and over, desperate, frantic. Then, I blinked.

I was back in my bedroom, lying in the exact same position as in the dream. Facing the door, Jeremy's back pressed against mine. The lighting was identical. The laundry basket sat in the same spot. Every detail of my waking world matched the dream perfectly.

But instead of the panic I'd felt just moments before, I woke up calm. It was as though I'd floated ~~effortlessly~~ from one reality to another. One second, Ines was there, and the next, she was gone.

March 22nd, 2024

Lately, I've noticed something unsettling about myself: I've become too aware of mortality. Not just my own mortality, but mortality in general. ~~, not just of my own mortality, but of mortality in general.~~

It's like some cruel switch has been flipped in my brain, and now I can't unsee it. Death is no longer just an abstract concept that only exists in other people's worlds, not mine. No, it's here. It's sitting next to me. ~~, isn't an abstract concept looming far off in the distance anymore. It's here, sitting next to me,~~ whispering in my ear, painting vivid, grotesque scenarios of how it could happen.

I don't even remember the last time I left my house. I'm too afraid.

The moment I think about stepping outside, my mind starts constructing these horrifyingly detailed scenes. Getting hit by a bus. Stabbed by a stranger. Crushed under falling construction equipment. A car accident.

I don't just see it. It's not just that I see it, I feel it. My brain simulates every detail: the panic, the pain, the unbearable sharpness of realizing my life is ending. It even scripts my final thoughts, like some twisted, self-directed horror movie on loop.

Why is this happening to me?!

But the fear doesn't stay outside. My home, my supposed sanctuary isn't safe either. My brain works overtime to conjure freak accidents: falling down the stairs and breaking my neck, choking to death while I'm alone, a freak accident where I somehow impale myself on a kitchen knife. Even the smallest, most mundane actions feel like ticking time bombs.

I can't sleep anymore. Every time I start to drift off, I jolt awake, heart pounding like it's trying to escape my chest. The exhaustion only makes my anxiety worse. *What if I'm so tired that I trip on the stairs and break my neck? What if I'm so sleep-deprived that I make a mistake that costs me my life?* It's relentless, ~~—~~this loop of doom my brain keeps running.

The irony? My entire life, I've had aphantasia. ~~I've never been able to clearly picture things in my mind. My mind has never been able to picture things clearly and -mm~~ my imagination has always been fuzzy, unimpressive. ~~But my third eye has now~~ ~~But now, suddenly, my third eye has~~ decided to spring to life, and the only thing it seems interested in envisioning is my death. *Thanks for nothing, brain.*

And it doesn't stop with me.

For every five horrifying scenarios about my own death, there's at least one about Jeremy's.

I can't stop worrying about him. ~~I remembered t~~hat feeling I had in February. *The people in your life today won't be in your life next year* ~~it~~ doesn't feel like intuition anymore. It feels like a threat. A shadow looming over him.

Every time he leaves for work, I see danger. He's a welder. He drives to and from job sites every day. He comes home with burns, cuts, and injuries like they're badges of honor, but to me, they're constant reminders of how fragile ~~life~~~~everything~~ is.

If he's even a few minutes late coming home, my mind spirals. I imagine every possible scenario. My fingers itch to text him, just to make sure he's okay. But then my brain screams, *WAIT! DON'T! What if that text distracts him? What if you're the reason something bad happens?!*

~~It's a cocktail of fear, helplessness, and worst-case scenarios, and it's paralyzing me.~~

~~It's paralyzing a cocktail of fear, helplessness, and worst-case scenarios that I can't seem to turn off.~~

Sometimes it hits me so hard that all I can do is cry. Big, ugly sobs that leave me gasping for air. The thought of losing him terrifies me because if I ~~did, I would have nothing. -do... I will have nothing.~~

Underneath it all, I'm just like everyone else: terrified of being alone.

I've always been fine with solitude. I'm an introvert. I've spent my whole life being selective about the people I let into my world. I never needed a crowd, ~~I~~ just needed one person. Someone who truly saw me. Someone who understood me.

For ten years, that person was Ines.

Now, it's Jeremy. He's the only one I have left who understands me. ~~The only person,~~ who sees me in a way no one else does.

And I'm terrified of being alone in a way I've never been before. The kind of alone where there's no one left who understands you. No one to sit with you in the dark, to remind you that you're not so small in this chaotic, overwhelming world.

March 30th, 2024

Sometimes I wonder if I have a talent for making my own life harder, or if I'm just immoderately ~~irreversibly~~ curious. Either way, today I decided to take another trip, not the kind you pack a bag for.

The truth is, my mind has felt like a wildfire lately, chaotic and suffocating, burning through everything in its path. I can't meditate anymore. My anxiety just gets louder every time I try. It screams every time I try, the anxiety grows louder, screaming over the quiet I'm trying to reach. Therapy helps, but it's like skimming the surface of a deep, dark lake. I needed something that could take me deeper.

So, I grabbed the psilocybin chocolate bar that had been sitting in my drawer. Originally, I'd planned to stick with three grams; something manageable, considering this was only my second trip. Five grams would be excessive. Five grams felt excessive, but I didn't intend to go there.

Not at first, anyway.

I ate the first three grams around noon. Each bite felt heavier, like I was already bracing for the weight of what was coming. After swallowing the last piece, I prepared myself. I drank water, laid a pillow and blanket on the floor, and tried to meditate.

About 30 minutes in, I felt the familiar wave of nausea, like my body was tilting on some unseen axis. I glanced at the carpet and saw the first signs of movement, faint patterns starting to swirl like ripples on water. I closed my eyes and let myself sink into the sensation, waiting for the stillness inside me to speak.

Eventually, it did.

What are you looking for?

The question wasn't mine, but it felt familiar like something I'd been avoiding answering for a long time. "I want to learn," I said, unsure if the words even made sense.

What would you like to learn?

That stopped me. What *did* I want to learn? My mind fumbled for an answer but came up empty. "I don't know," I admitted finally.

I cannot teach you that.

This response wasn't malicious or impatient. It was a simple truth.

Its response carried no malice, no impatience—just a simple truth.

I thought for a moment before asking, "Well, then how do I figure out what I want to know?" I asked, grasping at the edges of this moment, hoping it would guide me somewhere.

Commented [SL10]: It's important to keep consistent about whether you have a number or word for numbers. For example, you wrote "five grams" in an earlier paragraph, but here you said "3 grams." In many style guides, it's best to use the word for numbers under 10, and the number of numbers higher than 10. So, in that system, five and three would be best. I'm sorry I didn't mention that before. And if you ever had to write a number over 10 (like 11 or 12), you'd say 11 or 12 (instead of eleven or twelve). I just went back and changed numbers under 10 for measurements to the word forms earlier in the manuscript.

It didn't answer with words. Instead, I felt a nudge. It was —an urge I couldn't ignore. I opened my eyes and saw ~~My eyes opened, landing on~~ the remaining chocolate bar.

All two² grams of it.

The suggestion was so absurd I almost laughed. ~~This~~ was^{is} my second trip, I ~~didn't~~^{te} ~~not~~ think I ~~could~~^{an} handle five⁵ grams. But ~~my~~ curiosity won out, and ~~as it always does~~. I ~~ate~~ ~~forced down~~ the rest of the chocolate. I alternated ~~alternating~~ bites with gulps of water, until there was nothing left.

I'd never experienced anything like what happened next.

~~What happened next was unlike anything I'd ever experienced.~~

The patterns swirling across the carpet grew vivid and alive, twisting into intricate designs that crawled up the walls and coated every surface. It was like my entire home had transformed into a living, breathing kaleidoscope. Colors pulsed in time with my heartbeat, ~~and~~ Sshapes shifted like they were trying to tell me something.

And then *it* returned, the presence.

I don't know if it was my subconscious, or something else entirely, but it felt ancient, collective, as if it carried the weight of every life that had ever existed.

Despite this unimaginable being sitting with me in my mind, I disregarded that. I grew angry and arrogant. "What happened to my friend?!" I demanded.

There was no reply at least, not in words. Instead, I felt a wave of disappointment. It wasn't judgment, exactly. ~~It was~~ Not judgment, exactly, but something softer, quieter, as if it was gently reminding me that this wasn't why it was here ~~what I came here for~~. Guilt settled into my chest, and I whispered an apology.

The silence that followed was filled with images. Patterns and colors danced behind my eyes, coalescing into scenes that felt like a play performed just for me. The cycle of life and death unfolded in vivid detail, blending human and plant-like forms into something both alien and familiar. I saw humanity as carnivorous plants walking through a nursery garden, feeding, flourishing, dying, and returning to the soil. Death wasn't an end. It was a phase, a necessary part of an infinite cycle.

"So, what happens after death?" I asked, my voice trembling with equal parts fear and curiosity.

That's not for this time, it replied.

The presence shifted, guiding my focus inward. Flashes of my past surfaced, moments I hadn't thought about in years, memories that seemed random but felt deliberate. Like every event, every interest I ever had led me to this exact moment in time. ~~I~~ saw the spare room in my childhood home, where my parents stored my toys when I was grounded. The unfinished floor, the foam substitute, the way the sunlight poured in through the window at sunset. It was so vivid I could almost smell the air, feel the heat of that light on my skin.

I wasn't just remembering moments. I was *in* them.

Formatted: Font: Italic

~~Time unraveled. I wasn't just remembering the moment — I was in it,~~ reliving ~~them~~ as if the years between now and then had collapsed.

Eventually, the visions slowed, and one thought rose above the noise, clear and undeniable:

"Existence is the only way it can contain itself, but it cannot be contained. This is the paradox."

The words felt heavy, anchoring me back into my body.

Then a wave of suffering came. ~~Not just mine. It was the suffering of all humanity.~~

~~It wasn't just mine, it was the suffering of everyone,~~ of existence itself. ~~I felt~~ The collective anguish of being. It was unbearable, and I cried out, "This can't be all there is! It has to mean something!"

I don't know how else to be, the presence replied.

By the time the trip ~~started fading~~ ~~began to fade~~, I felt like I'd been turned inside out, stripped bare and rebuilt.

This wasn't just a trip. It was a reckoning, a conversation with something far bigger than myself. I asked, "How do I find what I want to learn?" and I think I got my answer.

I don't know if it came from me, the universe, or something else entirely. But I know this: I'm in the middle of a metamorphosis.

And I don't think my next trip will be kind to me.

March 31st, 2024

I woke up with a migraine today.

No surprise there. After yesterday's trip, it feels like my mind has been through a storm, ~~with~~ images swirling like leaves caught in the wind. My head aches, but it's not just physical. It's the ache of trying to carry too much, of grappling with questions too heavy to answer.

Out of everything I experienced during that trip, one thing won't let go:

"Existence is the only way it can contain itself, but it cannot be contained. This is the paradox."

~~Those words. at quote.~~

~~They~~ ~~It~~ didn't feel like ~~they~~ ~~it~~ came from me. ~~They were~~ ~~I didn't craft it, didn't invent it. It was~~ given to me, placed in my mind like ~~a~~ seeds, and whoever or whatever planted ~~them~~ wanted ~~them~~ to grow.

And grow ~~they have~~ ~~it has~~. The words have taken root, spreading through my thoughts, wrapping around every quiet moment. I keep turning them over, trying to untangle their meaning.

"Existence is the only way it can contain itself..."

To me, that means existence doesn't rely on anything outside itself. It doesn't need a frame or a reason or a container. It just *is*. Every moment, every atom, every life—it's all part of the same self-sustaining whole. There's no "outside" to compare it to. It's the thing and the thing holding the thing, all at once.

But then the second part hits harder:

“...but it cannot be contained.”

Even though existence holds itself, it also refuses to be held. It overflows. It stretches beyond every attempt to define it. The tighter you try to grip it, the more it slips ~~out of~~through your hands, ~~—~~like water through fingers. And yet, the water is somehow ~~’s~~ still there. You didn’t lose it. You just can’t keep it in one place.

That’s the paradox.

Existence is both the container and the escape. It’s finite—we live, we die, we count time—but also infinite. It reaches, ~~reaching~~ into places the mind can’t follow. It’s real and obvious and ~~here~~here, ~~---~~ but also elusive. Trying to truly understand and connect with it feels like, ~~like~~ trying to chase your own shadow.

Maybe that’s the point. Maybe it’s not meant to be boxed up or understood completely. Maybe it’s just meant to be *witnessed*. Felt. Marveled at. It’s messy, contradictory, and impossible to hold still, but — ~~and~~ maybe that’s why it’s beautiful.

Naturally, I Googled the quote. I wondered, ~~half-curious~~ if anyone else had landed on the same idea. The first hit was *Russell’s Paradox*.

Bertrand Russell was a logician and philosopher. His paradox wasn’t about existence, but about self-reference: a set of all sets that don’t contain themselves. If it includes itself, it shouldn’t. If it doesn’t, it should. It’s a closed loop that snaps the system under its own contradiction.

~~Here is~~There’s a simple version of it. The barber paradox.

Imagine a town with one barber. He shaves every ~~man~~one who doesn’t shave ~~himself~~themselves. Only ~~—and only~~ those people.

So ~~---~~ does the barber shave himself?

If he does, ~~then~~ he’s not supposed to—because he only shaves people who *don’t* shave themselves.

But if he doesn’t, ~~then~~ he *should*—because he shaves everyone who doesn’t.

It breaks the whole system. It’s a A-loop with no way out.

But my quote isn’t about math. It’s not a riddle to solve. It’s more of a feeling. A kind of knowing that no one can explain, ~~can’t be explained~~.

Existence holds itself. But it can ~~not~~’t be held.

The difference is what we’re supposed to do with those contradictions. Russell’s Paradox demands resolution. ~~---~~My paradox asks for acceptance. It’s not meant to be solved. It’s meant to be ~~but~~ *lived*.

And yet, even as I write this, I can’t stop wondering: Why these words, and this concept ~~is quote~~? Out of everything I experienced yesterday, why did this stand out so sharply? Why did it carve itself into my mind, and refuse to let go? ~~refusing to let go?~~

The plant analogy from the trip lingers, too. I saw us not as “sheep” with a “shepherd,” but as “plants” with a “gardener.” We’re a bit like walking, ~~Walking~~, carnivorous plants, part of an endless cycle of

Commented [SL11]: “Then” isn’t necessary here because of the comma. If you didn’t use a comma, you’d have to use then. Many people get confused about this, and using then after the comma isn’t usually called out as incorrect anymore (in fact, many people think it’s necessary), but it’s not necessary. I guess because so many people don’t understand this, and AI is trained on human data, it also puts in the unnecessary then!

flourishing, consuming, dying, and returning to the soil. Death wasn't an ending. ~~—i~~It was a step in the dance, a phase in the nursery garden of existence.

And with these images, these ideas, comes a new crisis.

For most of my adult life, I've been an atheist. I've been comfortable with the belief that this world—this life—is all there is. The physical world was the beginning and the end.

But now? Now I'm not so sure.

Grief has already thrown me into an existential crisis, and now I'm staring down the barrel of a spiritual one, too. I can't deny the coincidences anymore. They've stacked too high, too neatly, to be brushed aside. Something *is* here. Something beyond what I can comprehend.

I feel like I'm standing on the edge of a journey I never asked for. A journey inward, into the mysteries of existence itself.

~~It's as if something wanted to speak.~~

May 15th, 2024

Back in January, I bought Jeremy tickets to see Periphery for his birthday. It felt like the perfect gift at the time. ~~—a little escape for the two of us.~~ A road trip to Toronto, a night immersed in his favorite music, and a way to celebrate everything he is to me. I was excited then. It felt like something good, something we could hold onto in a year already pressing its weight down on me.

But now, the timing feels cruel.

When I bought the tickets, the show was set to be at The Danforth Music Hall, a venue I'd never been to. But, in what ~~felt like I can only assume was~~ fate deciding to twist the knife, the venue ~~was~~ changed at the last minute.

~~The new venue was History. I remembered the last time I was there.~~

~~To History. On May 4th, 2022. With Ines and Travis, to see Nightwish.~~

~~The last time I was at History was May 4th, 2022.~~

~~For Nightwish. With Ines and Travis.~~

~~That night left me with memories. The memories of that night are~~ so vivid they don't feel like memories at all. They're etched into me, woven into my sense of self.

And now, two years later, I'm ~~returning walking back into that same venue~~ with someone else, under completely different circumstances.

I felt sick the moment I realized where we were going.

Why this venue? Why now? Of all the places this concert could've been moved to, why did it have to be History? Even its name was ominous.

Commented [SL12]: I checked on Google, and it seems like this has a capitalized "the." So, I changed the to The.

My mind was already spinning with memories before we even left for Toronto. By the time we got there, they weren't just memories anymore. ~~—They were ghosts, pressing against the edges of my mind.~~

~~It felt like the universe had dropped me into some twisted reenactment of my own happiest memories. I was being forced to relive them, but without Ines by my side. . forcing me to relive them through a lens of loss.~~

I did my best ~~I tried to act happy and relaxed~~normal on the way there. ~~I didn't want Jeremy to feel like he had to~~ Jeremy didn't need to carry my grief with him tonight. This was supposed to be his night, not mine.

~~But inside, I was unraveling. It felt like the universe had dropped me into some twisted reenactment of my own happiest memories, forcing me to relive them through a lens of loss.~~

~~But I started feeling nauseous standing in line outside the venue. My body knew, just as my mind did, that this night would hurt.~~

~~As we stood in line outside the venue, nausea hit me. It wasn't just physical—it wasn't just the kind of sickness that rises from somewhere deeper, twisting your stomach and squeezing your chest. My body knew, just as my mind did, that this night would hurt.~~

The memories began flooding in the moment I stepped through the doors.

~~I could feel Ines's presence. She was there in my memories but forever beyond my grasp. If I closed my eyes, I could imagine her standing next to me. Her excited laughter still echoed in my mind.~~

~~I wasn't just here with Jeremy, waiting for a band he loved to take the stage. I was here with Ines, her laughter still echoing in my mind, her excitement still buzzing in the air around me. It was like I was living in two timelines at once, —one foot in the present, one foot firmly planted in the past.~~

~~Inside, it only got worse.~~

Jeremy could sense something was wrong. He offered to stay with me ~~at the back, but I told him to go up to the stage. ,but I told him to go. This night was for him.~~ He deserved to lose himself in the music. ~~I wanted him, to mosh and scream and be free. I didn't want to drag him into my storm.~~

~~As he disappeared into the crowd, I found a spot by the stairs and tried to ground myself. But there were ghosts everywhere. But no matter where I looked, the ghosts were everywhere.~~

There was the merch table where ~~Ines and I had we'd~~ stood together before the Nightwish show, ~~deciding figuring out~~ which shirts to buy. There was the spot where we stood during the concert. I could almost hear her voice blending with the crowd, ~~and with the music she loved so much. ,~~

~~These sacred memories now felt attacked. They felt fragile, almost overwritten~~

~~Those memories had always been sacred to me —untouched, untainted.~~

~~But now, they felt fragile, like they were being overwritten just by my being there. I felt panicked and heartbroken at the thought that I was betraying her. That I could be I felt like I was betraying her, like I was somehow~~ tarnishing the joy of that night by stepping into this space without her.

~~The air started feeling heavier. Almost suffocating. The air felt heavier with every passing minute. Suffocating. I don't know how I got through that concert, but I did. Seeing Jeremy emerge and appear through the crowd was a blessed relief.~~

~~I stayed until the concert ended, though I couldn't tell you how. Every second felt like an eternity, and by the time Jeremy found me, I was ready to leave before I even said a word.~~

~~I could finally breathe again when we got in the car and back on the road. I felt better with every mile we traveled away from History. It was like escaping danger.~~

~~Each mile we put between ourselves and Toronto loosened the grip that place had on me. The further we drove, the easier it was to breathe again.~~

~~When I was able to think clearly again, it occurred to me again that none of this could be a coincidence.~~

~~But even as the tension eased, I couldn't shake the feeling that this wasn't just coincidence.~~

Why History? Why now? Out of all the venues in Toronto, why did it have to be this one? It felt like an attack. Maybe it's all just coincidence, but ~~I'm it's~~ starting to feel like there's no such thing.

Jeremy was sweet on the ride home, ~~and he tried his best to cheer me up. trying to cheer me up. I appreciated it more than I could say, b~~ But I ~~just~~ couldn't find the words to explain what I'd felt. How do you tell someone what it's like to watch your happiest memories collide with your deepest grief? To feel like you're walking through a haunted house where the ghosts are your own memories?

I don't think I'll ever go back there.

Some places aren't meant to be revisited. ~~They should They're meant to~~ stay in the past, untouched. ~~That way, they can remain as they always were: , where they can remain as they were:~~ sacred, unspoiled, and safe.

May 17th, 2024

It's been almost three months since Ines passed, and I feel like I'm sinking deeper into a place I no longer recognize. Every day feels heavier, like gravity has chosen me as its personal experiment, weighing me down more than anyone else.

This isn't the kind of heaviness that comes after a bad day or a restless night. It's the kind that burrows deep, taking root in my bones, anchoring me to the ground. Every step, every movement, feels like dragging myself through quicksand. Even my obsessive cleaning. ~~—once my misguided attempt to regain some semblance of control—~~ has fizzled out. ~~At first, it gave me a sense of control, but now,~~ ~~At first, it helped. Scrubbing, sorting, organizing—it gave me a sense of control. But now, no matter how much I clean,~~ nothing ever feels clean enough. No matter how much I rearrange, everything feels wrong, cluttered, dirty. It's as if my surroundings are mirroring the chaos inside my mind.