

FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF ALL THIS HEALING IS KILLING ME

THE LAST CEREMONY

A MEMOIR

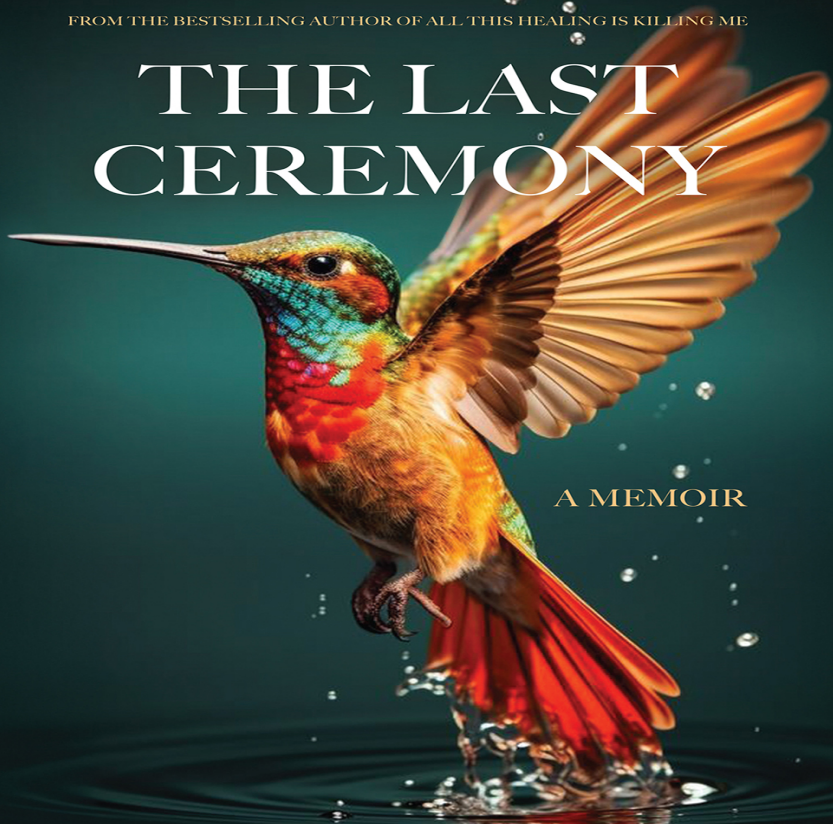
GABRIELLE PELICCI, PH.D.

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One Woman's Journey of
Healing & Creativity through Plant Medicine

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Gabrielle Pelicci, Ph.D. “Dr. Gabby” is a professor and coach, guiding individuals and groups towards wholeness using writing as medicine. She has certifications in Yoga, Bodywork, Meditation, Mind-Body Medicine, Energy Healing, Herbalism and Wellness Coaching. She completed her doctoral work in Transformative Studies with a dissertation on women healers -- and studied plant medicine with indigenous healers in New Mexico and Guatemala. Her first book, *All This Healing is Killing Me*, is a #1 Amazon bestseller. She leads writing retreats for first-time authors in West Palm Beach, Florida where she resides.

Prologue

July 2004

I entered the Cheetah Research Center wildlife sanctuary in a daze. We had been driving for several hours from Johannesburg, South Africa, to a rural area thick with bush camps and game farms. The air was hotter and drier than I expected, one of the many things about this dark continent that surprised me. The park guide offered a brief history of the conservation project before leading us toward the rehabilitation area. The grass beneath my feet was brown, well worn by previous visitors. Something about the enclosure made me hold my breath in anticipation. My shoulders tensed as I approached the high metal fence. I noted deep scratches on the wooden posts and traces of dried blood scattered around the dirt. *What was I about to see?*

I was visiting South Africa as part of a self-guided expedition to international sacred sites. Studying women healers and Indigenous medicine during my doctoral program at the California Institute of Integral Studies had activated a powerful wanderlust in me. I longed to see the birthplace of ancient wisdom and traditional healing practices, so I set off on a three-month adventure through Europe, Asia, and Africa. My travels took me from the Chalice Well of Glastonbury, England, to the Bodhi Tree of Bodh Gaya, India, from the tribal villages of Botswana to the Pyramids

of Giza. I expected to be most impressed with the historic monuments or colossal temples built to survive eternity. Instead, the experience that left the greatest impact happened at the Cheetah Research Center.

I followed the guide's finger, which was pointed toward the shadows in the habitat. I didn't see the cat at first because she blended seamlessly into the dappled sunlight. When my eyes finally adjusted, I saw her slender frame lounging on the ground with raw, regal energy. I moved closer to get a better look. Her eyes met mine. Energy pierced me, flooding my body with awe and adoration for her. *Holy shit*. Her eyes were like portals to a time before civilization, when beasts ruled the land and humans hid in caves. The black tear markings around her eyes and nose were painted with precision. The mesmerizing pattern of her beige fur and polka-dot spots captured my attention. I had never been so close to such an exotic creature before. Humility and a sense of profound respect made me want to genuflect.

"At the current rates, cheetahs may be gone in our lifetime," the guide said.

Her words jolted me from my reverie. The guide must have been speaking the whole time, explaining about poachers and the exotics trade, about how cheetahs were hunted for their skin. But I hadn't heard anything until that moment.

Cheetahs may be gone in our lifetime? WTF? How could anyone hurt her or kill her?

My stomach clenched. I couldn't comprehend it. Her beauty was so hypnotic. Tears rolled down my face as unconditional love and a ferocious desire to protect the cheetah overwhelmed me. Her vulnerability beckoned me to give up everything and stay with her—to forget about my life in the United States, graduate school, and my plans for an academic future. I had never felt this way about an animal. She was an irresistible vortex, bewitching me to be with her.

I lingered as the tour moved on to the next viewing area. I didn't want to leave the cat. I didn't want to leave Africa. I felt the pull of my real life and this imagined one, tugging me in opposite directions.

Could I really stay here? How would that work?

The tour was over. The guide motioned for us to move on.

The unexpected pain of parting from the cheetah followed me out of the park and into the van. I cried on the drive across Botswana. I mourned on the plane flying home. I was still upset when I reached my apartment in California. My encounter with that big feline felt as if it represented something much bigger than wildlife conservation or protecting endangered species. It touched a nerve running deep through my body and my history. My separation from the cheetah was my separation from all of nature, from

her organic elemental matter, her intuitive flowing movement, her glorious untamed freedom. My marriage to modern life was a sacrifice of something ancient and intangible—my birthright, maybe. I didn't have words for the heartbreak. Still, I sensed I was making the wrong choice by committing to a life of modernity, conformity, and voluntary participation in my own civilized slavery.

Separation from the cheetah was also separation from myself, from my most primal needs and wants, my uninhibited desires and expression. It symbolized the gap between who I was and who I wanted to be. It was the reason for my chronic anxiety, disassociation, and depression. The cheetah resonated with the part of me that I was not yet willing to acknowledge or release for fear that it would shatter the illusions of my identity upon which I had built my life.

I sensed the cheetah could guide me to a more authentic, honest version of myself—if I was willing to surrender. But I wasn't ready. I had not yet seen the facade of my American life for what it was.

Before I refocused my attention on graduate school, I made a silent promise to the cheetah in my mind: *Someday, I'll return to you.*

If I had to let her go, I would carry the dream of reuniting with her in the future. I told myself I just needed to graduate from the PhD program, to

complete my lifelong goal, and then I could indulge in my wildlife fantasies.

By the time the COVID-19 pandemic came 16 years later, I had all but forgotten the cheetah.

But she had not forgotten me.

Chapter 1

August 2019

The group treatment room was brightly lit with large windows reflecting the desert sun. The front wall was dominated by two whiteboards hung side by side, filled with inspirational sayings like “Healing is a journey, not a destination” and “You are stronger than you think” written in erasable marker. A half-circle of cozy chairs was arranged in the center, surrounded by a pile of discarded foam bats and a wastebasket full of tissues—tangible evidence of the emotional battles fought inside the room. Outside, the wide Arizona highway painted a picture of normalcy and the promise of freedom.

I sat across from Dr. Maya, the resident psychiatrist at the Meadows Ranch, feeling a profound emptiness and exhaustion. Her expression was serious yet gentle as she began talking.

“Gabby, I know this week has been intense for you. You’ve done a lot of hard work.”

I nodded, barely able to concentrate. “Yeah, it was...a lot. But I think I’m ready to get back to my life now.” I shifted in my seat, eager to leave the place behind.

“I understand the urge to move on, but I need to emphasize that the process of integrating what you’ve learned here will take time—at least six months,” Dr. Maya said, leaning forward slightly.

Integration? What does that even mean? I frowned, confused. “I don’t understand,” I admitted, my fingers fidgeting with the notebook on my lap.

“Integration is about taking the insights and coping strategies you’ve developed here and incorporating them into your daily life. It’s a gradual process of healing and change. You won’t see results overnight,” she explained patiently, tilting her head slightly.

I nodded again, still feeling unsure. My eyes drifted to the window. The wildflowers outside looked so inviting. “Okay, I get that. But I’m just really tired and want to get back to my routine,” I said, hoping she would relent.

“That’s completely understandable. However, it’s crucial that you have support when you go back. I strongly recommend finding a therapist near your home,” she said. I could feel her genuine concern.

Home? Yeah, right. More like homeless.

Even though I had shared so much with Dr. Maya during the weeklong Survivors Workshop, she didn’t know that I was untethered and nomadic, sleeping on friends’ couches and air mattresses, unable to find comfort anywhere since the breakup with my boyfriend, Rick, a few weeks earlier.

“Sure, I’ll look into that,” I said, but I could feel myself tuning out.

Dr. Maya studied my face. I wondered if she could tell that I wasn't really listening.

"Gabby, this is important. Trauma recovery is challenging, and having a professional to help you navigate it can make a big difference. Please, don't ignore this step," she urged.

I sighed, my eyes drifting to the whiteboards and then to the open door. "Yeah, okay. I just...I don't know if I can handle more therapy right now. I need a break," I said, feeling overwhelmed.

In the background, I could hear other patients packing up and leaving. There was a murmur of conversations, the rustling of bags, and occasional laughter. It all felt so distant, yet so close.

"Taking a break is fine, but don't let it become avoidance. Healing takes time and support. Promise me you'll consider it seriously," Dr. Maya said softly, reaching out and touching my shoulder.

Reluctantly, I met her eyes. "I promise I'll think about it," I said, though most of me just wanted to get out of there.

"Happy to hear that." Dr. Maya smiled warmly. I nodded and forced a small smile in return.

As I headed west toward Los Angeles, my body vibrated with the tremors of the past week like the aftershocks of an earthquake. I reflected on the

various therapeutic techniques I had done with Dr. Maya and the five other women in my group, from holding our parents accountable to rescuing our inner child. Through tears and resistance, we had confronted our inner demons, gradually reclaiming our strength and agency. Dr. Maya had been a fierce and fearless guide, helping each of us to face our pasts with courage as we relived harrowing moments of abuse and neglect.

Since this had been the first time that I had voiced my trauma story out loud, my whole being felt cracked wide open. I wept for myself, for all the pain and regrets, for the little girl who'd lost her childhood in a situation she couldn't escape. For the secrets I had carried for so long, and for the damage they had caused to my mind and body. The grief turned to hot rage, which made me angrier than I had ever been.

I drove for hours on a sort of automatic pilot, accelerating, decelerating, and changing lanes like someone mindlessly watching TV. I felt disgusted with myself. *How did I get here?*

Two years earlier, I had been bursting with love. My mind drifted back to the night in the hot tub with Rick. We were drinking red wine as we floated in the steaming water. I threw my arms around his neck and smothered him with kisses. He professed his love to me, and I quickly immersed myself in the fabric of his life. For the next year, we had collaborated in an explosion of ideas, inspiration, and action. When we

weren't working, we traveled to exotic and romantic places. A Caribbean cruise. A conference in Italy. Skiing, wine tasting, and Broadway shows. Nothing had been unaffordable or unattainable. Every day, I had asked myself, *How did I get so lucky?*

Cracks slowly appeared in our relationship. Rick had cruel outbursts here and there. I blamed them on the pressure of being a single dad or diabetic, or on work stress. Little by little, though, as dishonesty overruled loyalty and exploitation replaced devotion, I began to see the relationship for what it was: a toxic trauma-bonding affair between two wounded people.

After about a year, I realized that I was attached to a man who was not only emotionally unavailable but also borderline abusive. Intellectually, I knew I needed to leave, but I felt powerless to go. I was so attached to Rick that I believed I wouldn't survive if I left him.

It took another year of denial and heartbreak before I extricated myself from Rick's grasp. One night, after an argument, Rick grabbed my arm and pushed me. That was a line I could not cross. I had watched my father beat the hell out of my mother for the first 10 years of my life. Physical violence was a deal-breaker.

Everything happened in slow motion when I broke up with Rick. I was jobless. Homeless. And I had lost the love of my life. I worried what

people would think. How would I explain this collapse to everyone who thought I was living the life of my dreams? With Rick gone, the pain that had been frozen inside of me melted. The trauma that had been blocked poured out. I burned as if kerosene was running through my veins and someone had lit a match to my nervous system. I must be dying, I thought. No one could survive this. The burning lasted for a few hours, and then a few days. Then I couldn't make it stop.

That was when I realized something was really wrong with me.

I had a reservoir of misery and pain buried inside of me from my abusive father and the many broken men that I had dated. I was terrified of being alone. I was so worried about what other people would think—I imagined them heckling me and calling me an old cat lady. I berated myself for failing at relationships, for failing at everything. The phantom limb of my old life lingered and ached. I felt worthless and suicidal.

What am I going to do? I had no idea where to turn for help.

Then I remembered my friend Michelle, who was a psychotherapist in Los Angeles. When I told her about the fallout with Rick, she listened compassionately and then spoke honestly.

“You should go to the Meadows’ Survivors Workshop in Arizona,” Michelle had said.

“Okay,” I said, desperate for relief.

“You might die,” she joked. “Seriously, it’s the hardest thing you’ll ever do in your life.”

If I had known just how brutal it would be, I probably would have driven in the opposite direction, but I felt like I had no choice. I had been living a false life for so long, obsessed with pleasing others, chasing happiness, desperate for distraction and escape. I sensed I needed to replace the lost parts of my identity and regenerate completely new ways of living, and the task seemed as daunting as climbing Mount Everest.

Luckily, the Survivors Workshop had given me some tools for rebuilding my life. *But will it be enough?* I wondered now that it was time to put them into action.

Gradually, the emptiness of desert roads turned into congested city streets. It was dark when I parked in front of the grungy Hollywood apartment building where my friend was letting me crash until I got back on my feet. I dragged myself inside and sat on the floppy bed. She was still at work on the set of a popular TV show. She would probably come home while I was asleep and leave before I woke up. Filming hours were too long, but the job paid better than most things, especially during overtime. I was too tired to change clothes, so I just lay down, covered myself with the blanket, and fell asleep.

I woke in a panic the next morning, gasping for breath like I had every morning since the breakup with Rick. My life was a continuous unraveling, my sense of self scattered around me like dirty laundry. I got in the shower and turned up the heat, hoping to burn the bad feelings off my skin. My guts rumbled and shook. A long heavy cry erupted, followed by full-body tremors. I hemorrhaged pain as emotion leaked out of me. *You'll never be happy again*, my inner bully tormented me. *You'll never get over this. Your life is over.*

Wave after vicious wave pummeled me. Anguish, fear, shame, humiliation, hopelessness, emptiness. Cycles of resisting and allowing, defending and surrendering, crashed in every cell of my body. I was no longer the person I had been. I felt miles away from the people I loved and the people who loved me.

I bargained with invisible guides. "I'll do whatever you want! Just give me my life back!"

But no matter how hard I tried, I could not block the grief, tame the pain, or pacify whatever wild thing had been unleashed in my psyche. My mind felt disconnected and directionless, like a compass needle detached from the Earth's magnetic field. The workshop had torn off my blind spots. I could see that I was a fractured person, but I had no idea how to make myself whole. I reflected on Dr. Maya's cautionary words: "It's crucial that

you have support when you go back.” I didn’t want to have to relive the whole trauma story over again with a new therapist, and Dr. Maya was hundreds of miles away and unavailable. I felt too paralyzed and overwhelmed to do anything but stand in the shower being pummeled by the hot water.

I struggled to remember what I had learned in the workshop: look for colors, breathe, don’t freeze, you have to feel it to heal it. I stepped out of the tub, dressed quickly in rumpled, unwashed clothes, and headed out for coffee. The caffeine would give me enough energy to get to the trailhead at Runyon Canyon Park, where I could walk and weep until my heart was depleted. Maybe then I could make a plan.

The sky outside was baby blue with few clouds. As I climbed the steep path, my chest throbbed and ached. I put one foot in front of the other on the dusty, winding trail while my mind meandered over fruitless territory. *What is my life really about? If all my efforts amounted to nothing but empty achievements, what’s the point? If the familiar paths are impassable, where am I going to go?*

I had been in back-to-back romantic relationships since the age of 14. I was a serial monogamist. *Do I even know how to be single?* I wondered. My thoughts repeatedly returned to the relationship with Rick in a perpetual

loop of agony and regret. I felt dumbfounded about how to leave the past behind and move forward emotionally. There was a feeling of drunkenness, like my body was secreting chemicals to sedate me. I welcomed the sensation. I'd rather feel drunk than lost in a storm of sorrow.

This was not the first time my life had imploded. I had repeated this chaotic pattern a few times. Usually, I landed on my feet like an agile cat and bounced forward to a new, exciting opportunity. Unlike my previous rebounds, however, this time, some supernatural power had seized me and would not let go. It was as if I was being forced into a void, stripped of all my crutches, made to confront my reality naked and afraid.

In times of major upheaval, I usually relied on my spiritual intuition to guide me toward the next open door. It had been my lifeline since I was a child. No matter what happened, I had an internal GPS to my next destination. However, my spiritual signal had also seemed to vanish along with my former life. All that remained was indecisiveness and insecurity. Without my spiritual resilience, I felt lost. Abandoned by Spirit as well as my boyfriend.

Did the Universe give up on me? Have I made so many mistakes that I exhausted her patience?

I looked out over the busy city. Los Angeles was a vista of urban accomplishment. Sprawling streets. Tall buildings. Dense energy and

urgency. I used to be a part of that. One busy bee in a hive of activity, laboring and producing money like my peers. It seemed unreal now, as if the lifeline between me and the world had been cut. I floated in exile, an astronaut drifting in space.

Just then, a shiny scarab beetle ambled across my trail. Its hard shell reminded me of an Egyptian amulet. While Western society regarded these insects as evil, they were considered sacred in ancient times. They symbolized birth, life, death, and resurrection.

The scarab passed, indifferent to my suffering. I clung to her spirit for dear life. *This must be my rebirth. I'm going to be a better, stronger version of myself when this is over.*

I didn't believe it, but I couldn't bear the idea that this was just a meaningless encounter with a big black bug. Please let this be a sign, I thought. I need something—anything—to believe in.

The scarab reminded me of an insect encounter 20 years earlier. When I was 21, at the time of my mother's death, the veil of reality had lifted just long enough for me to glimpse the world in a remarkable new way, as a multidimensional prism of light. I remember sitting graveside on a black folding chair, surrounded by headstones. I recall the warmth of the sun on my face. My mom's best friend read a poem, and everyone bawled. I stared at the grave as they lowered Mom's casket into the ground. I turned

to look at the bush next to me. There was a caterpillar on a leaf. I felt Mom looking at me through the eyes of the insect. I thought I was losing my mind.

Mom left the caterpillar like a wisp of smoke and swirled around the trees, the sky, the clouds, all the while telling me that the universe was made of energy, she was made of energy, everything was energy, and she was part of everything. I could no longer see the casket or the grave, the priest or the crying mourners, the headstones or the folding chairs. It was a mystical experience that became the driving force of the rest of my life in ways I didn't even realize then.

I had no context for the experience. Nothing in modern medicine or my dozen years of Catholic school validated it. Nothing in the Bible could back it up. During the next two decades, I explored a variety of spiritual paths—Buddhism, Hinduism, yoga, and pagan and Indigenous rituals—looking for answers. I was the embodiment of devotion with each of them. I learned new languages and practices, singing the chants and wearing the wardrobes of a good devotee. I built a solid self-image around seeking, accumulating certifications, spiritual activations, advanced degrees, and accolades. I fought hard to maintain my image as long as I could to avoid the reality that I was probably nothing more than a wisp of smoke, just like my mother.

I wanted others to validate my version of myself, and I felt offended, threatened, or hurt when they didn't. I tried to make the story of my life sound romantic and adventurous. I desperately wanted to achieve success and avoid failure. A perfectionist from a very young age, I was cruel toward myself when I made mistakes or believed I wasn't making enough effort. I thought I was to blame when things didn't work out. I believed everything bad that happened in my vicinity was my fault. It was so painful to live in the gulf between the life I had and the life I believed I was supposed to be living.

Even though I was spiritually connected, I was tormented by consumer culture. I don't know how you can be human and not be tortured by the barrage of messaging telling you that you need to be different than you are—namely more beautiful, fabulous, rich, and brilliant—so you can be worshipped by others. Maybe it's just the vanity in me, but I was especially susceptible to this propaganda.

It wasn't until the breakup with Rick and the Survivors Workshop, until my facade started to crumble, that I realized how much effort I had been making to participate in the nonsense and reinforce a bullshit version of myself. I thrashed and flailed, trying to prevent the collapse from happening.

Becoming the person who I was meant to be next was going to be a different kind of ascent, one with high altitude and low oxygen. An extreme adventure.

Chapter 2

January 2020

A few months of hiking and crying passed before I realized that I needed to take the integration process seriously. I called my friend Michelle, the same psychotherapist who had suggested that I attend the Survivors Workshop. She gave me the number of a therapist named Christine who did EMDR—Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing therapy—and I scheduled an appointment.

I was queasy and shaky when I arrived at the medical office building in West LA. It was a warm sunny day, but my insides were cold and my mind was cloudy. After I spent a brief time waiting in the windowless waiting room, Christine retrieved me and motioned for me to follow her to her office. She was blond and pretty in that daytime-TV kind of way. She looked wealthy, serene, and content. Her office was cozy, decorated with soft furniture and softer lighting. She smiled and asked how she could help. There was a diffuser blowing lavender mist in my direction.

The intimacy made me clammy and nervous. I pulled my arms and legs close to my body. My mind reeled with a story about how happy I had been a few months before, how everything had been perfect, how I had been the victim of cosmic misfortune, how this collapse was unfair and this pain should not be here. Some desperate part of me held firmly to the idea

that my current situation was a big mistake, that I just needed to rewind the tape, put things back together, and all would be well. How do I fix this? I ruminated. *I have to fix this.*

“Gabby, you seem...absent. What are you thinking about?” the therapist asked.

“Yeah, I’m not really in my body,” I responded.

Disassociation was a familiar and chronic state of being for me. I popped in and out of my body like someone changing clothes. It was a natural adaptive habit that had started when I was young. I thought everyone lived like that until it was pointed out to me by a therapist during my 20s. Now I could name it when someone noticed it.

“Okay, thanks for letting me know,” she said, “Let’s try something.”

Christine invited me to put my feet on the floor, rest a palm on each knee, and look around for details in the room. She invited me to tap on my legs in a one-two rhythm while naming things that made me feel safe and happy. We built a virtual world of people surrounding me, some real and others fictional. With each tap, I could feel myself regulating, calming, grounding, and coming back into my flesh. Christine looked relieved and self-assured with my change of state.

Before I knew it, an hour had passed and it was time to leave. We scheduled the next appointment, and I returned to the street from which I

had come. Within minutes, the imaginary support system that I had conjured in Christine's well-decorated office dissipated like the lavender mist. Visualizations were not impenetrable—if anything, they were the opposite. This EMDR practice might give me some temporary relief, which was not a bad thing, but I was trying to rebuild a life. I was a refugee squatting among rubble in a war zone. One hour a week of fantasy was probably going to be as useful as blowing bubbles at a tank—or at least, that's how it felt.

Maybe if I add breathwork and acupuncture and meditation and medication to the treatment plan, I can accelerate my recovery. Obliterate the depression. Stomp out the grief. I had used those tools in the past during times of crisis. Each one of them had been a valuable resource to soothe or sedate me when the emotional storms threatened to destroy me. Maintaining a firm belief that my difficult feelings were a form of illness, I made it my mission to conquer, cure, and remove them. I got busy creating a self-care schedule of treatments and appointments. I dragged my aching, burning body from one place to the next, willing myself to restore the previous version of me—like someone trying to perform CPR on a dummy. If I just restart myself enough times, if I just repeat the actions that used to work, if I just find the right technician or apply the right techniques, I can solve this.

I went to a S.L.A.A. (Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous) meeting in Los Feliz. I watched women of different ages, races, and styles, some in long hippie skirts, others in ripped jeans and leather, admit they were powerless over sex and love and that their lives had become unmanageable. They told brief stories about things they had done that they regretted, or how long it had been since they'd abstained from doing regrettable things. The room was muted, and my body was numb. I felt suspended in a bardo state between lives, a detached, intermediate existence. Something seemed to be pulling me deeper down, further inside. It felt like I was on one of those Gravitron carnival rides—my mind was spinning in circles with the walls closing in around me, creating a vacuum that made it difficult to breathe. Part of me longed to find easy salvation in that recovery room, but there was no help for me there.

Breathwork sessions and acupuncture appointments offered the same mixed results. I felt temporary relief, then returned to panic once I left the comfortable bubble of safety.

A quick virtual call with a clinician got me prescriptions for a variety of medications. I happily filled them and ate those medications like candy every few hours. I knew the meds wouldn't solve my problems, but they gave me temporary relief, which was not a bad thing while I was trying to rebuild a life.

Woven in between the deep breathing and the pill popping were so many questions. *How did I end up here? Was this all my fault? Was there something deeply wrong with me? Was there something I could have done to prevent all this?* I vacillated between blaming myself and blaming others for my downfall.

A month passed. Then another. I moved from my friend's apartment to an Airbnb. I tried yoga and self-hypnosis and Lexapro and Bupropion. I applied for jobs. I had interviews, but no offers. I went to church in Beverly Hills. I cried so hard I had to go to the restroom six times to blow my nose and splash cold water on my face. I cried like every bone in my body was breaking. I cried like Mother Mary kneeling at the foot of the cross, trying to bring her dead son back to life.

"Why can't I fix this?" I howled.

One day, when Valentine hearts had been replaced by green shamrocks in store windows, I heard a calm, quiet voice in my head say, "The first time I felt the fire, I was three years old."

My stomach tightened. Tears rolled down my cheeks and collected in my palms as I covered my face with my hands. I knew exactly what the words meant. They hit me like the arrival of an old friend. I didn't want to hear them. I didn't want to acknowledge what they beckoned me to do. I pleaded with an invisible Higher Power: *Is there any other way?*

More words dropped in: “I was a tiny little thing who loved to wear Mickey Mouse ears and rhinestone tiaras.”

“Goddammit,” I spit.

I had been “hearing” my memoir narrated in my head for more than 12 years. There was a 2007 version, a 2013 version, and now, in 2020, I was hearing it for the third time. The narration changed slightly, but often the phrases were the same. On a few occasions, I transcribed the story as it came to me.

There were few things I wanted less than to tell my story. I was ashamed of the abuse I had experienced as a kid. I was embarrassed by the past and how it defined me.

I sat down.

I stood up.

I walked in circles around the room.

My nervous system burned.

I feared what might happen if I finished my memoir and published it. *What would people think?* I had catastrophic expectations of meteors hitting the Earth and tipping it on its axis. I was plagued with shame about the taboo topics—domestic violence, abuse, a suicide attempt—and fearful of the backlash I might receive from family and friends. *Will I be rejected and banished from society?* I worried people would love me less if I spoke my

truth. It never occurred to me that the opposite might be true—that the truth might set me free.

My book, which had a life of its own, did not give a fuck about my resistance, shame, fear, or paranoia. It kept pushing through to the surface of my consciousness, demanding to be told, like a poison trying to purge itself from the body. I tried bargaining with the energy of the memories. I demanded the gods reveal their scheme to me. I wondered if all the burning and suffering was a direct result of not telling the story. *Could it have that much power?* I wondered. *Is this crisis a catalyst to do the writing?* In some convoluted way, it all made sense. Only in the absence of everything was I willing to do the one thing I wanted to do most, that which I was most terrified to do.

After a long, hard fight in my mind, I surrendered. I sat down, cleared my head, and listened to the story coming through. I opened my laptop and began typing. The words flowed into my consciousness, just as they had in the past. I immersed myself in the writing process.

Dad was my hero, and Mom was my goddess. Like yin and yang, they existed in contrast and harmony with each other. Consumed with heavy books and hospital rounds, Dad was almost a doctor. His bedroom was a closed cave of silent concentrated energy. The sparkling glass center where

he worked was grand and mysterious to me. Dad was dark in complexion, of Italian descent. He walked with a swagger like a cowboy or movie star.

In contrast, Mom fluttered, butterfly-like, with gentle movements and kind hands. Her daily work was braiding my hair and pushing me on the swings. She was always warm and bright, and she lit up at the sight of Dad. Mom was pretty beyond comprehension. She was blue-eyed and blond, with hair that seemed to glow from the inside out. Sometimes she wore a red satin kimono jacket, a gift from our Japanese neighbor, and my heart beat faster just looking at her.

The tears stopped flowing temporarily, and the compression softened as I tapped on the keyboard. I forgot about my surroundings and my circumstances. A couple of hours passed before I realized that telling myself my story was giving me some relief. *Could writing be better medicine than drugs?* I listened and wrote, transcribing an invisible recording.

One day, I heard raised voices in the kitchen and moved closer to see what was happening. Mom and Dad were face to face, arguing about something. It was the first time I had seen them this way. Clueless and unafraid, I moved even closer. Heat rose in the room, like someone had turned up the furnace. With increasing intensity and fury, the voices rose, and the heat increased. Hands waved above my head. I tightened my legs, feet frozen to the ground. Then something ignited in my dad. He cocked his

thick arm back and punched my mom in the face. I heard the CRACK upon impact. I reached my small arms around my dad's leg, hoping to pull him away. He kicked me off, then reached for a fistful of Mom's hair.

I read and reread the passage. I could see that little girl who wanted nothing more than to be safe and loved. I felt her loss and her grief. I shed tears for her. I sat for a long moment, suspended between past and present, imagined and physical reality. A wave of foggy lethargy washed over me. The words subsided. My mind was silent. I waited and listened, but there was no more narration. Acknowledging the impasse, I turned to Netflix and white wine, knowing I would likely wake to the voice again the following day. The further I wandered from this story, the louder she called me back.

Sleep came and went like a fever, a hot descent into unconsciousness followed by a sweaty startled awareness of my surroundings. Before I could even finish my morning coffee, the voice was speaking again.

Some afternoons, Mom took me on carousel rides at Hershey Park, where she bought me silver-wrapped Kisses, spoiling me with sweetness. On rainy days, we snuggled up and watched movies about Africa. Mom loved Africa, even though she had never been there. She showed me films about gorillas and safaris, and she said that if she wasn't so afraid of flying, Africa would be the first place she'd go.

I was always putting on some kind of performance in the living room, usually in front of the TV. I had a crew of puppets and stuffed animals, and sometimes I would drag my baby brother into the scene as my sidekick or live audience member. Joy wrapped around me like a warm blanket. I knew nothing of winter, even when I was swaddled in puffy snowsuits, riding a toboggan down the icy hills of Hershey, Pennsylvania.

Resistance was futile. My inner narrator would not be happy until I transcribed every anecdote and insight. It didn't occur to me that writing was my integration. It would take years before I could see the intelligence that unfolded as I wrote, despite my kicking and screaming. I was unaware that my stories were part of my shadow. I didn't realize that by giving my inner girl a voice, I collected pieces of myself and released tension in the process. In that dark and lonely place, I was unconsciously doing the work I was meant to be doing—and moving toward wholeness.

Chapter 3

March 2020

For a few months, the voice continued speaking in my head. I stayed at my computer for hours and took down the narration. I felt a mixed sense of betrayal and being true to myself.

My intuition said this was an important story to tell.

My fears begged me to stop: *You don't have time for this. You should be job searching. Fixing your life. Getting your shit together. What are you doing?*

The story was louder than the fears. And the voice kept talking as if she was the only sound in my head.

Caffeine withdrawal beckoned me to hurry to Starbucks for my latte. I needed to fulfill this ritual; it was the only normal social interaction in my day. As trivial as it sounds, it felt like one of the few things keeping me tethered to the planet. I closed the laptop and walked briskly toward the nearby plaza.

“Fuck my life!” I screamed at no one as I stood in front of the closed café. The doors were locked, the interior dark, contradicting the hours printed on the glass window. There had been rumblings of a flu-like virus in the news, which I had mostly ignored, assuming it was just media fearmongering. Now I was coming face-to-face with the reality of a

pandemic lockdown. The entire city had been put on house arrest. In my wildest dreams, I never imagined a nightmare like this.

“What the hell am I going to do?” I trembled in frustration. Cortisol and adrenaline pumped through my veins, a total overreaction to the inconvenience of not getting my latte.

I scanned my environment for an instinctive feeling about where to go, but my intuition was offline, like a radio tuned to the wrong station. Luckily, there was a Denny’s diner open on Sunset Boulevard. I slid into a booth and looked around. There were only two other customers, aimless travelers like me.

After the masked waitress took my order, I doomscrolled social media. Social distancing. A man wearing a bra as a face mask. President Trump dismissing the virus. Empty shelves of toilet paper.

What the hell is going on? I wondered. Forget about job searching; thousands of businesses were shutting down. I might never work again. Oppressive emotion swelled inside me, stretching the limits of my resolve.

After eating some eggs and toast, I moved on automatic pilot to my car and drove a few blocks to the grocery store. It was a virtual reality version of real life. I had never seen streets so empty, green lights all the way, door to door. Inside, an eerie quiet and an ominous shadow followed close behind me. Customers looked mummified with their stiff, vacant

motions. I could feel my hands on the cart's handlebar, but I couldn't feel the rest of my body. I was sleepwalking in some freakish nightmare. Some well-meaning person had put stickers on the floor six feet apart so we knew how far away to stay from each other. Yellow arrows directed traffic in a one-way direction up and down aisles.

On my somber march, pacing slowly behind the other customers, I saw the merchandise through new eyes. *Why are the apples so waxy? Who puts wax on apples? Do we really need so many kinds of cereal? Why is the cereal wrapped in plastic, wrapped in cardboard? Why does everything look so artificial, like shelves of toys? What's going on?*

My existential analysis of every single item made it nearly impossible to buy anything. It felt like my mind was breaking, a foreign consciousness forcing its way into my head.

I gotta get outta here. I need to make better preparations before my next grocery expedition.. I can live on takeout until I figure this out. I left the store with a can of coffee, a bottle of wine, and very little else.

Back at my desk, I sipped lukewarm coffee and typed on the laptop. My left foot wagged furiously like a dog's tail. *Maybe if I use this quarantine to complete my manuscript. I can break free of the demons of the past. I can quench the burning, clear my consciousness.* I transcribed the

inner voice diligently, surprised at how much content came forth. The past and present unfolded simultaneously, different versions of myself scattered throughout time and space coalescing in words on the page. My fragmentation was visceral, and my spirit longed to reunite the pieces that had been disowned or lost. It was as if I was embodying memories and stories and present reality concurrently. I felt waves of emotion as physical sensations. I wrote what was happening in my body in between the lines of plot. It was multidimensional. It was all connected. As much as I hated to admit it, my dark night of the soul combined with forced lockdown was fertile ground for me to finally finish my book. I secretly hoped that when I typed that last line, I would finally be free from the tyranny of my childhood.

After about four hours, the ceaseless glow from the screen made my eyes ache and my head hurt. I slid on my sneakers and headed outside for a walk. The path was eerily quiet and calm. There were no children playing outside, no people coming in or out of their homes, no evidence of life behind closed doors. I walked past a massive cemetery and a film studio that used to bustle with celebrities. The glossy movie posters seemed surreal now, like evidence of a lost civilization. An hour passed, and then two. I discovered a park called Valleyheart Greenway with sculptures and gardens imagined by elementary school kids and designed by artists. A ginormous

snake carved from stone wrapped around the path, flanked with benches made of metallic butterfly wings.

I felt pulled in the direction of the river. I climbed down the hill on the side of the bridge and walked close to the water's edge. Unwavering in its flow, it glided effortlessly toward a curve in the distance. Watching the river was comforting. I observed for a long time as it rippled and reflected the light from above. I sensed a subtle flurry of activity to my right. I took a few steps toward a curious dirt mound. Hundreds of ants worked to build a glorious home with lots of soil and bits of plants. While much of my species was at a standstill, these tiny creatures carried on with business as usual. I smiled. I walked a little farther along the water's edge and felt drawn to look up at the trees. They were tall and dignified, like elders or tribe leaders. I looked around suspiciously. If I didn't know better, I would say they were having a discussion. If it didn't sound so crazy, I would say they were talking about me.

The solitude of the empty city evoked a hunger for companionship like a powerful drug. I missed Rick, even though I knew he was as toxic as the coronavirus.

Maybe I should call him, my inner addict nudged. Being single felt like its own kind of brokenness. Like I had failed at romance. Like God had

forgotten to make me a soulmate. It seemed more acceptable to be part of a couple, even a dysfunctional one, than it did to be single.

Don't do it! I scolded myself. I thought about my mother and all the men she had dated after my parents' divorce; how she never seemed satisfied, how she finally gave up when she turned 50 years old and then died alone at age 52. It felt tragic to me. But more than that, I was terrified I might end up like her. I might become the thing I feared most—an old, discarded, useless woman. Just the thought of it made me shudder.

To ease my loneliness, I texted some friends to see if anyone was available to chat. My friend Jon responded and said he was coming to LA. He asked if he could crash at my house for a few days.

“Sure,” I responded immediately. *What a relief!*

When Jon arrived a week or so later, the embrace of someone familiar felt like the safest refuge to me. He came bearing gifts: a pocket full of magic mushrooms. I had never taken psychedelics or hallucinogens before. The “war on drugs” had convinced me that one nibble of psilocybin would trigger a permanent acute psychotic state. Visions of thrashing women tied to hospital beds danced in my mind.

Jon laughed when I told him my reservations. His dad was a psychotherapist who led psychedelic therapy retreats in Jamaica. He fully believed in the medicinal power of psilocybin. “This is medicine. It’s a

helluva lot safer than alcohol or antidepressants. It's gonna be legal everywhere soon," he said. "Doctors are using it to treat depression, anxiety, addiction, and all kinds of things."

The notion of using drugs to help someone quit using drugs confounded me. I had heard rumors about this before: patients traveling to faraway places like Peru to drink a brew of "plant medicine" and spontaneously healing after one session. How the hell does that work? I wondered.

I listened to Jon reminisce about "tripping" on starry nights in the Yucatán, watching lines of light connecting the constellations into one massive web across the whole sky. It sounded spectacular—and a little hard to believe. Jon could see the skepticism on my face. He pushed one of the smallest caps into my palm. He smirked. "Just try it," he said. "This is a microdose. You'll hardly feel it."

Even the smallest cap, about the size of a dried blueberry, terrified me. I stared at it in my palm. It felt like it was buzzing, or maybe it was just my imagination.

"It can't hurt you," he said.

So many things had hurt me in the past. So many things were still hurting. The lingering effects of my last romantic relationship. The ghosts I was conjuring in my writing. The skeletons in my mental closet. I was far

from healed, far from being at home in myself. I wanted a clear head, a clean heart. I wanted to be unburdened, untied from the cords that bound me. I had opened every door, traveled down every promising path from acupuncture to yoga, desperately seeking salvation. I had acquired so many good tools, had so many emotional releases, but there was still more to unravel, more to put back together. The way Jon talked about the psilocybin, as if it was a divine pill, piqued my curiosity.

“Are you sure?” I sought his reassurance.

“I promise,” he said.

I summoned my courage. Took a deep inhale. Closed my eyes and popped the little guy in my mouth. I chewed it, feeling the spongy texture on my tongue. It reminded me of the wafer of my first holy communion. It wasn't bitter or sweet, just a dry, earthy flavor. I swallowed hard and waited for something to happen.

Dear God, please let this be pleasant, I begged. The last thing I need is a bad trip.

We continued our casual conversation for a while, and then I felt the impulse to retreat to my room. I put on my headphones, lay down, and listened to a guided meditation with ambient music and a gentle voice leading me down a flight of stairs, one slow number at a time. With each count, I sank deeper into the mattress, the weight of gravity growing until I

was so heavy I couldn't lift a finger. Ironically, I also felt an increasing sense of weightlessness, like I was disconnecting and floating into zero gravity inside myself. The sounds of the music and voice kept my mind at ease as I surrendered to the experience.

Gradually, as time progressed, tension and emotions moved through me effortlessly, like waves rolling by. I had the sense of processing and releasing unwanted energies. Sometimes my body twitched or trembled, but mostly, I was still. I was deeply and profoundly relaxed, more than I had been in months. I remained this way for several hours, sometimes falling into a light sleep, until I had a sudden urge to go outside.

I stood in front of the house, looking side to side. The neighborhood was dead quiet. Across the way was an extraordinary tree with a sliver of colorful light outlining every branch and leaf, creating a trippy glimmer, as if it was made of glow sticks. I stared at the colors, mesmerized and confused at the same time. *Are my eyes playing tricks on me?* I looked around and noticed that the concrete was its usual boring gray. The cars were the same metallic sheen. The tree, however, was luminescent. *How weird! I must be really tired.* I did not make the connection between the tiny cap I'd swallowed at 6 p.m. and the dancing tree I saw at 10 p.m. I walked back into the house and went to bed.

The next morning, Jon asked, "So? What did you think?"

“About what?” I said as I sipped my coffee.

“The mushroom,” he laughed. “Did you feel anything?”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” I said. “It just made me really tired.”

“Really?” he said. “Maybe you need a higher dose.”

“Okay,” I said, shrugging it off.

I had no plans to take more mushrooms. Why would I? They didn’t even work. But the mushrooms, now that they had their spores in me, had very different plans.

Jon departed shortly after my mushroom trip. I returned to my memoir. The writing came fast and hard. The seclusion, combined with my writing practice, stripped away my defenses and created a spontaneous outpouring of buried remains. It felt like a madness pushing through my psyche, demanding I see the truth of myself and tell myself my own story. I dove deeper into the past and unearthed more and more memories—the pain of my parents’ divorce, ping-ponging between two sick parents.

As the past flowed onto the page, I saw how I carried my childhood wounds with me, how they were still driving so many of my choices. I wrote about my life with brutal honesty. I acknowledged the many times I had traveled down the same unconscious roads, giving away my power and sacrificing my needs. Everything I attempted not to feel emerged. I

experienced anxiety, grief, shame, and other intense emotions. I wanted to expunge everything—shake it off, walk it off, sleep it off, or distract myself with anything to feel better. Sometimes, after hours of writing, I dropped to my knees, exhausted, and begged like a woman in labor, *Please God! Get this thing out of me!*

One day, in the midst of my misery, my friend Jade called. We dove deep into conversation, catching each other up on all the life events we had missed.

“Time goes by so fast!” she exclaimed.

“I can’t believe it’s been ten years,” I said.

We reminisced about graduate school and our academic work. We commiserated about the state of the world and how worried we were, not only about ourselves, but about the whole planet. I explained to her that I had the sense that an irrevocable change was happening inside of me and there was nothing I could do about it. I couldn’t envision my future. I had no idea what I wanted to do or be or have. I was stripped of self-confidence.

“Ya know what’s helped me,” she offered.

“Tell me!” I insisted.

“I’ve been working with this energy healer named Lindsey. It’s been a major excavation. I feel so much better. Much lighter,” she explained.

“Can I get her info?” I asked.

The following week, I met with Lindsey via Zoom. She had long brown wavy hair and wore a colorful blouse, dangling earrings, and a gold locket around her neck. She looked just like the photo on her website, where she stood next to a picturesque tree at sunset with a prayer to “the Ancestors, the Ancient Ones, and Mother Earth.”

After a quick greeting, Lindsey smiled and asked for permission to read my energy, to tap into our guides and see what needed to be healed. I gave her my full consent. Excited anticipation pulsed through me. I had read the description of her services, which included energetic cord-cutting, soul retrieval, and chakra balancing, but I didn’t know what to expect. The light behind my eyelids flickered and a warm stillness settled around me. Tingling sensations brushed the surface of my skin as a heaviness pulled me closer to the Earth.

We relaxed into the vibration together, closing the time-space gap between us. Lindsey shared images she saw and felt. She reassured me that my last romantic relationship was over but that Rick and I were still connected in an unhealthy way. We needed to cut the cords that bonded me to him.

Lindsey guided me on an inner journey. We walked in the spirit world and found a cave. In the innermost sanctum, an ornate mystical book sat on

an altar. Lindsey asked me to read it. I was surprised at how clearly it appeared in my mind, with leather binding and a golden clasp.

“It looks like a contract,” I said, “between me and him.”

“What are the terms of the contract?” she asked. “When does it expire?”

“It says, ‘For all lifetimes.’” Hot tears slid down my cheeks. I did not want to be bound to Rick for one lifetime, let alone all lifetimes.

“Oh, hell no,” Lindsey said. “We’re canceling that contract right now.”

Lindsey guided me through a series of moves to destroy the agreement. Then she asked me about my work life, what I did for a living. I told her about the strange void I was inhabiting and how work was elusive now.

“They are telling me that you are going to do humanitarian work,” she said.

“Me?” I asked. The proclamation seemed far-fetched.

“Yeah,” she said. “You’re going to be doing a lot of travel... international travel, they say.”

Given the pandemic, it seemed unlikely that I would be going anywhere.

“Let’s hang out here for a minute and see if your guides show up,” Lindsey said.

We rested in a dreamy meadow. I felt fully immersed in the non-ordinary reality. It was a peaceful reprieve from the unnerving state of things.

“Whoa!” I said with delight.

“What is it?” Lindsey asked.

“I can’t believe it!” I was too surprised to explain.

I watched in amazement as a coalition of cheetahs circled around me. Sleek and strong, they moved like warm knives through butter. Their bodies were a glistening rainbow of psychedelic colors, dreamlike and surreal. I could feel their aliveness and power.

“Is it an animal?” Lindsey asked.

“Cheetahs,” I said. “I’m surrounded by cheetahs.”

“How fortuitous.” Lindsey explained the many aspects of cheetah spirit guides, from their speed and grace to their divine guidance.

Lindsey’s voice faded into the background. I knew the cheetah. I had looked into her eyes at the wildlife sanctuary nearly 16 years earlier. I had stood near her enclosure, breathless, feeling her piercing gaze. I had communed with her. I had cried for days after we separated. I understood

what she meant to me and what she was asking me to do. It was time to return to the wild.

The next morning, the news headline read, “How George Floyd Was Killed in Police Custody.”

Oh shit! Videos of a white police officer pinning a Black man to the ground flooded my news feed. “Please, I can’t breathe. Please. Please. I can’t breathe, officer....I cannot breathe.” Social media showed hundreds of protesters flooding the streets. Demonstrators vandalized police cars, and some businesses were set on fire. A sickening feeling filled my stomach. Brigades of soldiers marched into the crowds with tear gas and fired rubber bullets. My body tensed with fear. Violence seemed imminent. If the reaction to George Floyd’s death was half as bad as the Rodney King riots, I was a sitting duck in a city that was about to implode.

I opened the door and listened intently, wondering when the protests would arrive in LA. That’s when I heard it—the sound of trouble. *Chuff chuff chuff chuff*, the juddering of police helicopters overhead. I quickly turned back to the news. Hundreds of protesters converged in downtown Los Angeles, a few miles away. A group of people broke off from the march and blocked the Route 101 freeway.

Oh, for fuck's sake. The last thing I wanted was to be trapped in a city on fire.

I felt the spirit of the cheetah activate inside me. She moved slowly and strategically, with a forward-focused gaze. She was nimble, resourceful, fearless, and fierce. She summoned me to align with her. I closed my eyes. Slowed my breathing. I felt her grace wrap around me like a protective coat. We were side by side in the high grass. I could feel the dry air in my throat. She crouched down. Every muscle of her lean frame was taut and alert. I grounded myself next to her. I could feel what was about to happen. She was the fastest land animal on the planet, going from 0 to 60 miles per hour in less than three seconds, and she was ready to run.

In a silent communication, she said, “We need to get out of here. Are you ready?”

Chills shot up my spine, and the hairs on my arm jumped to attention. I was infused with her courage.

I didn't hesitate. “Let's fucking go,” I responded.

Just like that, we leaped together like wild cats.

Chapter 4

June 2020

Driving from LA to Miami was a psychological thriller. Ghosts of semitrailer trucks and speeding automobiles lingered on the horizon of deserted highways. Beltways around major cities gaped and flowed as if all the commuters had gone extinct. Masked people materialized everywhere from gas stations to hotel desks. There were face shields and rubber gloves and the constant aroma of antibacterial gel at every stop. None of the roadside diners were open; all food was served takeaway. I focused on Miami with single-pointed concentration. *Just get me across the country in one piece*, I prayed.

I made it from deserts and red rocks to a Super 8 in Texas. I looked around the sterilized room, listened to the air conditioning engine growl on and off like an artificial animal. I was lightheaded, disoriented, and dehydrated. *This is so weird*. I searched inside myself for a clear picture, a story that made sense about what was happening in the world. My inner landscape was as empty as the parking lot outside the window. I turned on the TV for company. A death toll ticker ran across the bottom of the screen like the electric news sign in Times Square. Stories of protests and outrage flashed between episodes of reality TV and infomercials. Inside my body, there was a bombardment of frenetic turbulence, a feeling of being

unnerved and displaced. If only there were someone to hold me, I thought, to comfort me and tell me everything was going to be okay, then maybe I could endure this. I had no idea how to soothe myself.

I turned on the bath and let the water run hot enough to color my skin red. I hoped that the heat would pacify my emotions. I sat in the tub, staring at the small plastic bottles of shampoo until my skin withered. Suddenly my view began to warp, and the waxy bar of soap wrapped in thin shiny paper became an impetus for big, complicated, unanswerable questions like *Why do we have these ugly hotels with thousands or millions of tiny plastic bottles filling up landfills? Why do we pretend that we don't live in a finite world with limited resources?*

It was just like the grocery store thoughts that had filled me with existential angst. I couldn't understand where these thoughts were coming from. My existence was manicured, air-conditioned, and curated into a comfortable bubble. It was a badge of pride to live among the civilized, sophisticated people of the world, even if there was a constant buzz of traffic and appliances. Hotels had used to make me feel privileged, but this one was making me feel displaced.

Frustrated with my inquiring mind, I got out of the tub and into the bed. I doom-scrolled through social media again. Technology, like wine, had become a sorry substitute for the human connection that used to calm

me. My feed was a montage of postmodern absurdity. Black Lives Matter. Mass graves on Hart Island. *Pulp Fiction* memes. Harry and Meghan leaving the royal family. A baby koala in an Australian bushfire. Jeff Bezos going to space. The familiar burn of pain and panic returned to my system. I couldn't decide who was sicker, me or society.

Something gnawed at me, a knowing that had been dormant, uneasiness activated by crisis. *Had the world always been this bad, and I just wasn't paying attention?* The answer seemed to be yes and no. Collectively, we had probably been headed down a dark road for a long time. I vaguely recalled the warnings about greenhouse gasses and environmental pollution. I often changed the channel when the TV showed pictures of polar bears on melting ice caps or ducks covered in Exxon oil. *That is somebody else's problem*, I figured. Maybe the magnitude of the issues overwhelmed me, or maybe I was entitled and self-absorbed. Either way, I didn't feel accountability or responsibility for the planet, not in the way I cared about other things, like my career or my love life.

At the same time, shit was out of hand. There was more depression, more addiction, more suicide, and more isolation. Rising numbers of sick people matched the rising temperature of the ocean. School shootings seemed to multiply at the same frequency as extreme weather disasters. *When are we going to stop and listen? When are we going to do things*

differently? Even as the thoughts of catastrophe and critical change swirled in my mind, my body begged for sleep. Not just eight hours of sleep. I wanted to sleep until I forgot my thoughts and unfelt my feelings. I wanted to un-know, ignore, and neglect the awareness that was making me so uncomfortable. I was oblivious to my own expanding consciousness. I didn't realize that what was emerging was a powerful remembering that could guide me past domestication to a newfound freedom.

I set an alarm to be on the road again by 6 a.m. *Maybe if I keep moving. I can push past this.* I was hopeful Miami might bring some reprieve. The tropical city had been a home base for me on and off since 2002. It had first lured me there with its lavish lifestyle and gorgeous scenery. In 2012, it had sucked me back in with sailing boats and racing regattas. This third return was a reunion with old friends and familiar beaches, which would hopefully bring me back to my senses.

The anticipation of wrapping my arms around my friends motivated me to drive as fast as possible through Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and eventually Florida. While I had been typing away in LA, my bestie, Jaime, had homeschooled three frustrated kids and suffered through two rounds of COVID-19. Megan had compulsively scrolled through dating apps, fearful she wouldn't mate before the end of the world. Her sister, Hannah, had spent most of her time in the sea and was eventually recruited

to be a lifeguard, an endeavor she relished since she had been laid off from her office job. Laura had gained a lot of weight, while Maria had worked out compulsively to home fitness videos. From the intel I gathered on long-distance calls, nobody felt quite like themselves, and everyone wondered about our collective fate.

After a week of driving, I finally caught sight of the urban sprawl of Miami. It was less festive than usual, congested with a labyrinth of barricaded roads and mobs of protesters. My stomach clenched at the sight of armed forces. I desperately wanted to retreat into the familiar homes of friends and curl up in comfort, but I faced 14 days of quarantine, a mandatory caution in case I had caught the deadly virus on my cross-country trip. I opened the anonymous door of the residential house I'd reserved on Airbnb and dropped my bags in a white room filled with Ikea furniture. A roach scurried across the bathroom floor when I entered. My body burned like my nervous system was overheating. I took a cold shower, which didn't help, and then sat in dumbfounded silence for a while, wondering what to do next.

Maybe I can finish the book. I had 60,000 words so far. In Los Angeles, I had rewritten the entire manuscript except for the last chapter. I opened my laptop and stared at the blinking cursor on my screen. I waited for the narrator in my head to start talking, but she was absent. Unwanted

images flooded my mind. I flashed back to dinner with Rick, our last night, in an Italian restaurant.

He'd seemed detached, with a faraway, distracted look. I didn't know if he was unhappy or if his blood sugar was low. We finished the meal and went outside to the curb. Rick's monitor said his blood sugar was 50 mg/dL, dangerously low. I panicked. I texted his mom and his best friend. They both responded that this was an emergency. Rick was livid. He grabbed his things and tried to run. "Get away from me. I never want to see you again."

As the memory flashed through me, my whole body clamped up, like a giant invisible hand had wrapped around me. I shook my head hard. "*No! No! No!*" I yelled. I didn't want to think about Rick or the past or the pain or any of it. The uninhibited memoir voice that had filled my mind for many months seemed tied up, bound by some impenetrable force. I clenched my jaw and tried to force the writing to return, dredging up debris from the bottom of my psyche, but the exertion only provoked a panic response and disabling anxiety.

"Fuck this."

I fled from the house and headed toward the water. I meandered barefoot on the sand along the shore. I yelled aloud to the sky, "I need you to help me. I don't understand what's happening!" Only the crabs and the

wind witnessed my cries, but even if there were others, I hardly cared anymore. I was a madwoman, roaming in abandon, nothing left to lose.

“What’s going on? Why can’t I finish the book?” I hollered.

The silence mocked me.

“Answer me, goddammit!” Tears rolled down my cheeks. Anger tasted bitter on my tongue. “I can’t believe you did this to me! After how hard I tried to make everything work! To do everything right!” I burned with indignation and righteousness. I had devoted my life to being good and moral and respectable, and it had yielded nothing. None of it meant anything to me anymore.

My past was a series of horrible mistakes, and my future was a terrifying abyss. The present was a tightrope strung between two cliffs. I couldn’t go backward. I couldn’t go forward. The book was supposed to be my escape, my salvation, but now I didn’t even have that to cling to. The groundlessness of my experience was nauseating. Powerlessness pervaded every cell of my being.

I had no idea that the absence of everything was a womb-like fertility, a container for my own germination. It would be months before I realized that sometimes, when you’re in a dark place and you think you’ve been buried, you’ve actually been planted.

I lumbered home, embittered, with hunched shoulders and unanswered prayers. No one was coming to save me. I dragged my misery along like a shabby suitcase. I sensed the steady saunter of the cheetah nearby, an unconditional witness to my walk of shame.

Back in the hollow shell of my room, I googled African sanctuaries, searching for the habitat of the cat who had bewitched me. I indulged in one video after another of cheetahs being rehabilitated and reintroduced to the wild. These filled me with a flood of emotion. I tumbled onto stories of animal trackers and serendipitously landed on an audiobook by Boyd Varty called *The Lion Tracker's Guide to Life*. Within seconds of listening to his South African accent, I was immediately transported to the Mother Continent and the essence of wilderness. Line by line, Boyd reassured me that losing the track was part of tracking and that no movement or effort was wasted. When he said, "I don't know where we're going, but I know exactly how to get there," something shifted inside me. Hope and a subtle sense of optimism replaced fear. I repeated it over and over in my mind: *I don't know where I'm going, but I know exactly how to get there.*

I let out a sigh and closed my eyes. I fell into an African dream, a liminal space between the end of one day and the beginning of another.

For the next two weeks, I scrambled to follow the breadcrumbs that Boyd had highlighted. The first thing a tracker does is go into the unknown. When a lion roars in the jungle, you don't know exactly where he is or what he is doing. You start out on a journey with no idea where the destination is or if you will even make it. It's not about the destination. You're living in a constant state of discovery. Your actions are constantly affecting your next move, and every day requires full presence. You must tune your attention to the information that is directly in front of you. What seems like an empty space will be full of signs, like scat or scratches. Trackers watch and observe what is working and what isn't and adjust their path accordingly. Day by day, moment by moment, they remain alert to their surroundings. When they lose their track, they go back to the last clear track they had. Their process is one of continuously finding the path that is "not right" and staying on the path that feels "most right," based on their observations and their intuition.

Building a comfort level with not knowing was my first mission—a huge task, given my phobia of uncertainty. I focused on my breath, feeling the air travel up and down my torso. I knew how to stumble through the dark toward the light. I knew how to feel my way to pleasure, peace, and love. I had done it countless times before. If I knew how to get somewhere, even if the details of that place were obscured, then I was not helpless. I

was on the hunt. I was tracking my way back to purpose. I also knew that my self-pity and resentment were blocking the signs that were directly in front of me. I resolved to be more focused and less forlorn. I focused on things that felt good, and on following the resonance. I quickly made a list of things that I loved: friends, plants, the planet, cats, my car, and so on.

Staying alert and paying attention was my next commitment. What was I overlooking? What was I missing? I resolved to listen closely and observe the world around me. I would ignore all things that were irrelevant, unhelpful, or distracting. What Boyd discovered from his personal and professional experiences was that curiosity is a signpost leading toward what is essential. An abundance of curiosity brewed in me. Writing. Healing. Nature. Conservation. *Maybe I can follow the trail to a destiny beyond what I know.* Acknowledging that I was off track was important, but remembering what had mattered to me before my life had fallen apart was the only way back to my true path. Putting one foot in front of the other was essential, even when I was weary, bored, or both.

When was the last time I absolutely knew I was on track in my life? Why did I feel that way? Who was I with? What was I doing?

Immediately, I flashed back to my endless hours of research and writing in graduate school, from 2001 to 2006. Women healers was the topic of my dissertation and my obsession for a decade. I'd traveled to visit

sacred sites, engaged in far-out practices, learned Indigenous wisdom, transcended the mundane and profane. That had been the last time I had felt like I was on track. I knew who I was when I was doing my research.

What happened after that? I asked myself.

I saw a montage of graduation, getting hired as a professor, becoming a wellness expert, running a retreat center, standing on stage selling luxury services that few could afford, and then...the crash. Although the status and glamor of wealthier wellness was fun, it betrayed a lot of my intrinsic values of equity, inclusivity, and accessibility. I used to care more about mantras than money. I had once lived a simple, minimalist life. I had become someone I didn't recognize. My roots are deeper than this, I thought. I was much happier building a treehouse with my brother in middle school than I was living in a multimillion-dollar treehouse resort in California. I was waking from a dream of pretense and superficiality. Maybe I needed to rethink what wellness meant to me and who I actually wanted to be.

Two weeks later, with no sign of sickness, I ventured out to visit my friends. When my bestie Jaime greeted me at the door, she smiled at me as if I was the same familiar person, but it wasn't entirely true. I was an unformed seed sprouting something new. I noticed the house seemed

smaller, the colors faded. I watched in dazed detachment while she made us tea and happily gave me the gossip on everyone we knew. The rate at which she spoke was faster than I remembered, or maybe my solitude had created a delay in my brain. I tried to focus on her stories, but I was preoccupied with my situation, my emerging identity, and the tracking that was likely leading me very far away from Miami.

“What’s next?” she asked, sensing that I was not entirely present.

I laughed. “Africa, maybe?” I told her about Boyd Varty and the cheetahs that had recently visited me. I mentioned the energy healer and her prediction of international travel.

“That’s crazy, right?” I asked.

“It might sound crazy if it were someone other than you!” Jaime declared.

I rolled my eyes, amused at how my unpredictability was so predictable.

I had never intended to be a nomad. One visit to the Mona Lisa in Paris when I was in high school had turned into a lifetime of wandering and wondering what was around the next corner. While my peers married and settled down, I chased European sailboats and ancient ruins. While my sisters made burping babies and bought split-level houses, I shed my personal belongings and collected passport stamps.

The romanticized version of nomadic life is one of ultimate freedom and adventure. It's true. There is magic and serendipity if you surrender to it. But there's a lot sacrificed for the nomadic lifestyle. It causes unintended pain to the people who love you most and want you to stick around. My family had repeatedly asked me, "When are you going to stop running around? When are you going to settle down?" It hit me like a sucker punch every time. Did they think that I didn't want to have the same domestic desires as everyone else? Did they think that, given the choice, I would not have chosen "normal" desires like two and a half children and a white picket fence? I wasn't trying to be obstinate and weird. I just didn't want the things that they wanted. It burdened me that their questions were laced with guilt, heartache, and longing for me to be the sister/daughter/person I was "supposed" to be. Luckily, I never faced that kind of disapproval from Jaime or my other close friends. They knew I was a rolling stone, and they loved to watch me roll.

My next stop was the beachfront condo where Megan and Hannah were weathering the lockdown in grand Floridian style. The spacious rooms had mirrored walls and were filled with plump furniture in palm-leaf print. Since summer was off season, the happy sisters had secured cheap rent with scenic views. Their skin was deeply tanned and their hair white gold.

I experienced the same kind of disassociation listening to Megan recount her dating escapades as I had with Jaime's neighborhood updates. My mind kept trailing off to faraway places. I smiled and nodded and secretly wondered what was wrong with me.

Hannah bounced in her seat as she recapped her exchanges with lifeguard boys and drunken tourists passed out on the sand. She lamented that she'd had to quit traveling when they closed the borders, but she was excited to be leaving again at the end of the summer to build an Earthship in Puerto Rico.

The word *Earthship* shot through me like adrenaline.

"What's an Earthship?" I was greedy to know more.

"It's an eco-friendly house made from recycled materials like bottles and cans. They're totally off-grid, and they kinda look like big spaceship sculptures," Hannah explained.

My whole body tingled, and I felt a fluttering in my chest.

"How do you spell that?" I asked.

I typed the letters into my phone's browser. Within seconds, more than two million stories, images, and videos about these magical castles popped up. The photos depicted otherworldly abodes, all curves and colors with strange metallic panels, half-buried in the desert sand as if aliens had colonized our planet and no one had told me. Unfamiliar yet intriguing

descriptions jumped off the screen: *sustainable, autonomous, self-reliant, natural, Indigenous, and repurposed.*

I scrolled for a few minutes, mesmerized, and transfixed. My cheetah instincts perked. *I think I just found a track.* My body flushed with fresh energy, like a caffeine buzz. I felt a mixture of resonance, curiosity, and mystery—a roar in the unknown.

“Uh,” I stuttered with hesitation. “I want to go with you.”

Hannah tilted her head in confusion. “You want to come to Puerto Rico? To build an Earthship?”

Hannah only knew me as the PhD friend of her sister, Megan, who had met me on a consulting job in Tulum, Mexico. As far as Hannah could tell, I was a proper professor who did wealthy wellness stuff in “luxury” places. Earthship construction would be dirty, messy, mosquito-biting work in an impoverished village on a rural farm in a remote part of an island that had been repeatedly devastated by hurricanes. It hardly seemed like something meant for me.

“Yes,” I said. I was more certain than I’d felt about any decision recently. “I want to go with you.”

Chapter 5

August 2020

Puerto Rico is a Caribbean island with a landscape of mountains, waterfalls, and tropical rainforest. As you fly in, emerald hills surrounded by deep-blue ocean extend as far as the eye can see. The day I arrived, it was clear skies with wispy white clouds, no sign of rain. The heat and humidity enveloped me as I stepped off the plane and made my way through the snaking lines of COVID-19 checkpoints. Well-protected people in blue disposable coveralls that looked like inflatable body bags, paired with clear face shields and white masks, spoke in rapid Spanish that I assumed meant “Show me your documents.” The intense scrutiny added an additional layer of strain to my already fragile nerves. I complied with the foreign instructions as best I could, eager to get out of the airport.

I found a place to stand close enough to the exit to see Hannah’s arrival but far enough away to feel the sun on my face. I closed my eyes. Trepidation and excitement washed over me. I said a silent prayer to whatever benevolent beings might be looking out for me. *Please let me be safe in this place. Please let me find some healing, some relief, some clarity about my purpose.* Emotion hovered around my throat. I swallowed it down and focused on my breath, trying to keep the anxiety at bay. While I was eager for the adventure of building an Earthship, another part of me longed

for the monotony of my solitary routine. With all the uncertainty in my life, it was growing more difficult to be groundless and surrounded by strangers.

Will I ever find a place to just “be”? Will I ever find my home and forever place?

Hannah interrupted my worry when she came bouncing out the door wearing a T-shirt with a bright rainbow and the words *Do Shit You Love!* Her face mask was black-and-white cow print with big red lips pinned on the front. I matched her smile and shoved my unease to the side. I didn't want to burden Hannah with my emotional baggage; I wanted to match her light, positive energy so we could enjoy our three weeks together. After a big embrace, we headed to the car rental counter and collected our small red hatchback.

We cruised through bustling city streets out onto the highway, then wove our way through small local towns to our destination. Hannah and I laughed at the chaos of crazy driving while listening to her “quarantine playlist” on Spotify. The colorful buildings and the lush greenery were a delightful mosaic of vibrancy, capturing the essence of the country's charm. Salsa music boomed so loudly in surrounding cars that I felt the beat vibrating in my bones.

We were booked into Medusa's Hostel, a basic communal dwelling. I found it interesting that Medusa was a universal symbol used to ward off

negative energy. Her snake hair represents the natural cycle of birth, death, and rebirth—just like the scarab I had seen on the trail in Los Angeles. *Was this another meaningless encounter, or was there some sort of message being communicated?* I hoped for the latter.

Lauren, the owner and *madrina* of the hostel, gave us a tour of the modest rooms. A childlike collage of prints and colors covered every surface. The bedrooms and common areas were filled with mismatched furniture and contrasting linens. At the top of the stairs sat a fountain sculpture of raccoons playing on a riverbank that had eyes that followed you as you walked by. It was super weird but made me laugh every time I passed it.

I stepped out onto the balcony of the second floor and looked down onto the street below. The savory scent of roasted pork and plantains wafted through the air and mingled with the salty ocean breeze. A brown-skinned man rode a horse bareback down the road. Startled at the sight, I blinked a few times to make sure my eyes weren't playing tricks on me. *How could this kind of wildness exist amid the constraints of modern life?* Maybe the Puerto Rican people couldn't be tamed.

I wondered what Puerto Rico had been like before it was colonized. *It must have been intense.* I longed to step into the distant past and meet the Taíno people and learn about their culture and customs. I imagined them as

instinctive hunters and farmers who harnessed the beauty of the island for their survival.

Hannah and I headed out to explore. We walked along the coast for a couple hours, admiring the sea and the sky. COVID-19 had reduced tourism to a trickle; we had the beach to ourselves. We saw wildflowers wrapped around houses, algae-covered pylons and piers leading out to colorful fishing boats painted in yellows, oranges, reds, and blues. Broken brick walls of ruins framed the crystal-clear waters, popular for snorkeling and scuba diving. Locals told us this beach was the perfect spot to swim with sea turtles.

As the pink sunset descended on us, we realized how hungry we were and found a small restaurant serving mofongo and sangria. We ate heaping portions of the mashed plantains and drank cocktails until we were tipsy. The beauty of Puerto Rico and Hannah's company distracted me from my uncertainty and doubt. When we returned to the hostel, I listened to meditation music on my headphones and, for the first time in a long time, fell asleep peacefully, my head filled with visions of palm trees and horses running along the beach.

I was startled when I awoke the next morning. The familiar uneasiness had returned, and I worried that spending the next few weeks

surrounded by people 24/7 may have been a bit too ambitious given the fact that I had been mostly alone for a year. I also felt unprepared for Earthship building. We'd been encouraged to bring many tools, like trowels and utility knives, flashlights, first aid supplies, and face protection. In my distracted state, all I'd managed to pack were a pair of work gloves and plastic safety glasses. My emotional tool belt also felt empty of the necessary skills like self-confidence and resilience, which I would surely need to work successfully with the other volunteers. As I dressed, I pushed aside my self-doubt and added a mask of self-assurance, hoping that Hannah and the others would not see the vulnerability just beneath the surface. My true self was something I worked tirelessly to conceal, and this day was no different.

TainaSoy Apiario, the farm where we were building the Earthship, was a 20-minute drive south of our hostel, in the mountains of Naranjo Barrio. You best be looking at the kilometer markers to your right as you quickly go along or you'll miss marker km137, the entrance to the property. As we pulled into the driveway, we were met by Noemi Chaparro, beekeeper and owner of the apiary, along with her husband, Carlos, and their four children. I recognized them from their Facebook page, which described the "community center" as a place dedicated to saving the Puerto Rican bees while educating the community about nature conservancy and sustainability. Construction had begun three years earlier, after Hurricane

Maria devastated the island, killing about 3,000 people and destroying the family's home.

It was only 9 a.m. and the day was already sticky-hot. The half-built Earthship sat at the end of the driveway, hidden by a perimeter of lush trees. Catching a glimpse of the rolling domes ignited the same feelings I had felt when Hannah mentioned the structures to me for the first time. There was something bewitching about them. We climbed over large mounds of sand and approached the structure, which looked like five massive gray turtles sitting in a circle connected by walkways. Attached to the turtlebacks were large umbrella-like towers made from the hoods of cars. Goats and chickens foraged for food in the grass around the Earthship. I heard a cacophony of birds calling, bamboo canes clanking, and babbling water in the background. It was one of the most enchanting places I had ever seen.

Down the hill from the construction area was a makeshift kitchen, with tarps mounted on poles over tables, chairs, and appliances. The Earthship crew, a mixture of sexy shirtless guys and pretty young women, stood outside the kitchen. I scanned the volunteer group, looking for hints about who these people were, where they were from, and how I might or might not fit in. The volunteers were as odd as the surroundings. Skinny white girls with dreadlocks and tattoos. Tall European men with serious

faces. Black dudes in camouflage, and brown girls in booty shorts. The unusual mix of bodies and personas put me at ease.

The Earthship foreman, Phil, was a middle-aged white guy with a long ponytail. He explained the safety guidelines, schedule, and agenda. I listened intently, trying to process the information, but my brain struggled to keep up. These concepts and this environment were as foreign as an alien spaceship to me. Hannah, on the other hand, looked completely content. She smiled as she took a swig from her large purple water bottle. In her work as an industrial designer, Hannah had traveled to the places where products like water bottles were manufactured, looking for eco-friendly materials and scouting for “green” options. She was miles ahead of me on the work-away, sustainability, and volunteering path. I didn’t even own a water bottle! I had a lot to learn from her and the others.

Phil shared about how he had become an architect and left traditional design to work with Mike Reynolds, the Earthship inventor, in New Mexico. Over the last 20 years he had traveled to more than 40 countries—many in the most underdeveloped parts of the world—to share this technology with others.

“Humanitarian projects like this one mean the most to me,” he said. “They’re funded by small donations from thousands of people who recognize the need for unconventional solutions to modern problems.”

My body buzzed as Phil spoke. I flashed back to my Zoom call with Lindsey, the energy healer. *Humanitarian...hadn't Lindsey said something about that?*

“They are telling me that you are going to do humanitarian work....You’re going to be doing a lot of travel...international travel.”

Did I just walk directly into the future that Lindsey foretold?

I tried to shake off the shiver of superstition and focus on the task at hand.

After the introductions, we were divided into small groups and each group was assigned to a crew member to work on a specific area of the Earthship. Hannah and I followed Jim, a 20-something boy with a body like a male stripper, into one of the domes. As I understood it, we needed to add additional layers of plaster to the walls until we created a smooth surface that could be painted and decorated.

The first thing I noticed inside the dome was that it was at least 10 degrees cooler than outside. Apparently, this was part of the technology of Earthships—thick walls, cooling tubes, convection vents, and natural air conditioning.

Next, I noticed the arrangement of tires, aluminum cans, and glass bottles stacked in rows between cement patties. It was rugged and unfinished, but I could see the layers of work that had come before us.

No wonder it takes dozens of people and hundreds of hours to complete one of these.

This was not your average insta-house or manufactured home. This was an organic, handmade structure, rooted into the earth, customized to the land and use, constructed one scoop of cement at a time. The building was built like a tank. If another hurricane crossed Puerto Rico, it wouldn't harm *this* house.

Jim talked us through the consistency of good cement and the technique of slapping it on the walls while Hannah stared at his abs and drooled. The last thing on my mind was sex, though; I had defensive boundaries around me thicker than the Earthship walls. I was still feeling aftershocks from my breakup, and my desire for healing was much stronger than my appetite for men. Given the months of heartache, I wondered if I would ever want sex again.

Hannah and I got into the rhythm of making and applying the cement while the rest of the groups mixed, dug, sawed, sanded, and painted in different locations around the property. The repetitive movement and immersion in a meaningful activity consumed most of my attention and gave me temporary relief from my worry about what I was supposed to be doing with my life.

I relished the opportunity to focus on a simple hands-on task with tangible results. How many hours had I spent in the past 10 years working online, where I had nothing real to show for my efforts? I estimated maybe 15,000–20,000. I saw more progress happen in four hours on the farm than I had seen in a decade of my career. I felt the neurons of my brain shifting and rearranging around this insight, as if this situation were not only building something in the external world but also rewiring my brain into a new structure. It was confusing and disorienting and it gave me a headache, but it also felt oddly more beneficial than the prescriptions, 12-step meetings, or any of the other methods I had tried to integrate the lessons from the Survivors Workshop. These people were survivors of traumatic hurricanes that had destroyed their property more than once, but they were using their hands and hearts to rebuild their lives in a tangible way, in harmony and alignment with the principles of nature. It left me speechless.

When shouts of “Lunch!” came, I was glad for the break. The jungle kitchen had been transformed into a colorful buffet of salad, rice, beans, meat, juice, and more. All the ingredients had been collected locally, including ripe coconuts and bananas from the property. The first thought I had when the food touched my tongue was *This is what food is supposed to taste like*. It was rich and delicious, alive with vitality and love. It didn’t have any of the stickiness or emptiness of processed food. It didn’t have the

texture of being picked too soon, transported across borders, or smothered in waxy preservatives like the food sold in most U.S. grocery stores.

I watched as everyone devoured their meals with gratitude. I saw pride in the cooks' eyes and felt the bonds of reciprocity building among the community. This way of being was totally new to me and yet somehow familiar, as if part of me was remembering the past, the way things used to be before we made a mess of everything with too much industry and independence.

A rush of emotion flooded my body as an ache of love rushed into my fragmented heart. I had to run and hide until it passed, or else my unhealed wounds might be revealed. I quietly snuck down the hill to the river and walked through the shallow water until I was far from view. I sat on a rock and curled my arms around myself in a hug. Vibrations of memories and stories, some written and others unfinished, swirled around me like the mosquitoes. The past came rushing into the present, bringing with it waves of grief. I heard whispers of my inner bully: *You'll never be happy again.* My stomach tightened. Tears rolled down my cheeks. I felt a pervasive sense of duplicity: the "me" that I displayed to the world, and the girl who hid in the shadows. My book—if I ever finished it—would not only be a revelation of my true self. It would also annihilate the person most people

thought I was. I couldn't bear to think of what would come with that sort of exposure. I couldn't even reveal myself to those closest to me.

"You need to calm down," I told myself aloud. "This is not the time or place to lose your shit."

Determined to regulate myself, I tapped on my legs—*right, left, right, left*—like Christine the EMDR therapist had taught me. With each tap, my breath deepened. My body grew heavier. The cool water swirled around my ankles. I had the feeling that the river was comforting me, dissolving my fear and shame. She seemed to have nothing but appreciation for me, but I still doubted my worthiness. I wanted to feel good, I longed to be at ease, and yet I held myself separate from her, separate from everything, rejecting the invitation for total surrender. I ached to belong and avoided it in equal measure. I had no idea what that disconnection was costing me or how reconnection could be a crucial part of my restoration.

Reggae and ganja permeated the afternoon hours, which passed as quickly as an afternoon shower. Around 4 p.m., the locals brought out large coolers filled with Modelo, and we took our time cleaning trowels, buckets, sponges, and gloves. The spots on my limbs where cement had hardened turned to red brush burns that stung with the splash of vinegar we were encouraged to use to reduce skin damage. I felt the ache in my back from

the hours of plastering and the tenderness of too much sun on my skin. After two beers, my body felt cool and cozy. *This must be why construction workers drink so much.*

Hannah wanted to join the others for a celebratory welcome party. I sensed that the Earthship evenings were even dirtier than the days – in more ways than one - and I asked her to drop me back at the hostel so I could unwind and recover.

Curled up in a lounge chair on the Medusa balcony, overlooking *Calle Progreso* (Progress Street), I was a satisfied mess. I had survived my first day relatively unscathed. It was probably the most disorganized-organized experience of my life, a paradox of fantasy and engineering, executed by a group of vastly different beings in an innovative rural community. I thought about all the relationships among the group I had witnessed—friends, mentors, co-conspirators, lovers—and wondered why we assume romantic relationships are more valuable than other kinds of relationships. Why do I have to have one soulmate? I wondered. This group looked like a whole soul family to me.

As I settled into my bed, I felt like I was becoming more present, living in discovery with this new trail. Taking my life one track at a time, like Boyd had suggested. I was somewhere between my old self and my

new self, clinging to his words of wisdom: “You don’t need to see the whole picture; you only need to see where to take the next step.”

We returned to the Earthship build the next day and the day after that, getting sorer and more sunburned with each visit. Hannah created sculptures around the light fixtures while I worked steadfastly on plastering. Phil, the foreman, made rounds around the property like a doctor checking on patients, adjusting our techniques or giving us tips. The tools were so foreign to me. I had only ever lifted a hammer to hang a picture or used a screwdriver to assemble IKEA furniture. Phil showed me how to hold two trowels, one in each hand, and apply cement like a pro.

“You’re really good at this,” he said.

I shrugged him off, embarrassed. It had been such a long time since I had received positive attention and affirmation. It touched a fragile place in my chest and ignited a hopefulness that maybe things could be better again.

Phil recruited me to work on the roof of the hut, smoothing the topmost layer with wet sponges to create a slick surface. It felt like a test to see how versatile I could be, and I welcomed the challenge.

When we returned to the site the following week, Phil pulled me aside. He had a special assignment for me. “We’re going to build a bridge,” he said.

“Like the Golden Gate?” I asked.

He laughed. “Well, not quite, but it does have to be strong enough to hold the weight of people crossing over.”

I was surprised he had selected me. This was a significant upgrade from plastering, and a lot of other volunteers were stronger or better equipped for the job.

Phil guided me to the rebar area, where long steel rods rested in a pile. He showed me how to bend them, shape them, and cut them with a grinder, warning me that one rogue spark in my eye could deflate my eyeball, which sounded positively gruesome. Then we created a curved frame and used wire ties to mount the pieces into place.

In a matter of hours, it actually looked like a bridge. *I am doing masonry! How is this even possible?* I wondered. Members of the crew passed by occasionally and admired the project, infusing me with more pride. Little by little, I recognized how satisfying it felt to do construction work and how it had never even been on my radar. While boys of my generation had been encouraged to assemble and construct things, I had been groomed to be a beauty queen. I had absorbed a lot of bullshit brainwashing about “men’s work” versus “women’s work.” The simple act of building a bridge had radically altered my perspective.

Halfway through the bridge project, Phil said, “You should do the Earthship Academy in Taos.” The program, a four-week training, taught the theory, philosophy, and methodology behind Earthship construction.

“What’s Taos?” I said.

He laughed. “It’s a town in New Mexico. You should go and study there. The next class begins on September 7.”

I scrunched my forehead and scanned my mind for the current date. “Ugh...” I stumbled. “Isn’t that two weeks from now?”

“Exactly,” he said.

“You want me to move to New Mexico in two weeks?”

“Sure, why not?” he said.

Well, fuck me. He had a good point. It’s not like I had any other pressing plans for the foreseeable future. *Why not go to Taos?*

I immediately ran to find Hannah.

“Phil says I should do the academy in Taos,” I said. “What do you think?”

She looked as shocked as I felt. “You’re going to the academy?”

I laughed. “I don’t know. I mean, maybe...I guess I could go. What do you think?”

“Well, yeah,” she said. “If you want to go, you should go.”

“I kinda like this stuff,” I said. “I’d love to learn more.”

We both laughed.

“Right on!” she said. “You gotta do shit you love!”

Chapter 6

September 2020

Less than three months after I had driven across the country, I returned via the same route. A large part of the emptiness I had felt in June was replaced by the lingering laughter of new friends, the delicious bounty of the farm, the vitamin D in my veins, and the renewed strength in my tissues. The fear of something being deeply wrong with me was closer to resolution. I loved having a sense of direction and purpose. The academy program would provide structure and definition. Boundaries of schedule and assignments would keep my emotions contained for a while. I had something to look forward to, even if I had no idea what to expect.

As I drove cross-country, I listened to *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* by Robin Wall Kimmerer. She narrated the story of Skywoman, who fell to Earth and formed our home, Turtle Island, with the help of the animal kingdom. Robin invited me to think of myself as part of a communal ecosystem with plants, animals, and the land itself.

Imagine what it was like when there were only Indigenous people here. I daydreamed as I drove past the changing landscape surrounding the highway. When massive herds of bison roamed freely, when Apache, Cherokee, Hopi, Navajo, and other tribes wove a tapestry of crops and

community with spiritual ties to their ancestral lands. It must have been spectacular.

Robin reminded me that because the Earth is so generous, providing everything I could ever need, I carry a responsibility to give back and to pass on my gifts, to contribute to the web of reciprocity that is essential for a healthy community.

What gift can I give back to the Mother who has everything? I wondered. Could it be an Earthship? Could it be my writing? Is gratitude enough?

Robin talked about restoring her Potawatomi roots. She reminisced about her grandfather, who was taken to Carlisle Indian Industrial School and, like thousands of other Indigenous children, stripped of his culture through years of abuse and indoctrination. My stomach clenched. I couldn't comprehend it. It was just like the cheetah and the poachers.

Why do we do this? How can we hurt these people? Why do we destroy the most beautiful things on the planet?

I thought about the women healers I had researched for my dissertation. They entered a trancelike state and communicated with the spirits, seeking guidance or answers to important questions throughout time and culture. They believed that body, mind, and spirit were intertwined with nature and that nature was fundamental to healing. Unfortunately, these

same healers were tortured and burned by the hundreds and thousands for practicing healing arts during the Middle Ages, as medicine became progressively secularized and religion was displaced by science. The concentrated effort to remove the spiritual components of health and eradicate the magic of plant medicine was a tragedy that still casts a shadow over us today.

The history of the genocide of native people and women healers played out in my mind. I felt grief, longing, rage, and provocation. A desire to return to ancient times and an eagerness to forge ahead. A hunger for something lost, and an appetite for rebellion.

Finally, Robin contrasted the living and artificial world, something I had been thinking about for months. She reflected on the plastic-wrapped leeks that lay lifeless in the produce section of her grocery store. She compared the cold and detached existence of the leeks with the vibrant, reciprocal experience of harvesting wild leeks from the woods near her home. For her, grocery store leeks felt cheap and dead, a small piece of the plastic-wrapped market that we were so steeped in, while wild leeks were rich and alive within an interconnected ecosystem.

I was more accustomed to the dead world than the living world, to artificial stimulation than genuine connection. I was more familiar with

plastic than with soil. This awareness made me stop and ask, *Is this how I really want to live?*

The answer was a resounding *NO!*

I realized that my relationship with nature was just that—a relationship. It was a relationship in which I took more than I gave. It was a relationship that I mostly ignored because I was consumed with the scarcity of time and money, the urgency and speed of modern life, the rapid gratification of digital consumption. I needed less screen time, less shoulder tension, less sedentary activity, less artificial light, less synthetic heat, less manufactured cool. I needed more space, more air, more sun and shade, more plants and flowers, more animals, more insects.

I am only just beginning to find my way back to my wild self and the native world. I am only just beginning to mend my relationship to the wind, water, sun, moon, and earth. I am only just beginning to renew my reverence for a world where everything is alive.

This notion invigorated me and deepened my desire to explore as much of the natural world as possible.

I sat with two dozen strangers in reclaimed church pews framed by an arched wall made of colorful glass bottles. A 70-something-year-old man with a white beard and cowboy hat sat at a wooden desk in front of the

room. Michael Reynolds, the legendary Earthship architect! The room buzzed with palpable anticipation as we eagerly awaited our first lesson. The Greater World Earthship Community sprawled around us, strange and radical buildings scattered across hundreds of acres like alien castles. Unlike the round botanical structures I had worked on in Puerto Rico, these dwellings were futuristic mansions stacked with massive windows and solar panels, geometric columns, and rock gardens. The Earthship Hive, where I was living with eight other people, had a pyramid mounted on the third floor and large windows that showed sweeping sunset vistas of the mesa.

“People thought I was crazy!” Michael launched into the tumultuous history of his work with a twanging accent. “Forty-five years ago, I saw dark clouds on the horizon...you just had to look, to pay attention. They thought I was a fool for scouring the dump for plastic bottles and aluminum cans. They thought I was a fool for recycling garbage before recycling existed.”

Michael took us on a quick and dirty ride through his decades-long career, the apathy and ignorance of most people he encountered, the psychedelic spiritual downloads that led to his visions of biotecture, the state of the planet, and the need for change. He unleashed a lifetime of knowledge about thermal mass, energy infrastructure, sustainable design,

and so on. He not only showed us new mechanisms for eco-construction, but he also taught us how to see the world through new eyes.

“We have a tremendous amount to learn and unlearn,” he said.

My heart pounded as I listened. Michael spoke to my suffering. He gave voice to the strange new story that had been emerging in my consciousness for a while.

“We need to live in an entirely different way,” he said.

I agreed wholeheartedly. Rather than remain part of the problem, I wanted to contribute to the solution.

While Michael spoke, I studied the drawings in our textbook. I admired how water collected from the roof was used four times in the house before it made its way to the septic system. How the greenhouse in the front of the Earthship not only kept the building warm as a passive solar home but also helped to grow food. How all these factors worked in tandem toward achieving the goals of net-zero carbon architecture, taking care of all our human needs, reducing our environmental footprint, and cutting back our participation in the consumerist economy. It was mind-blowing.

I looked around at my classmates. They were all mesmerized too. The group ranged in age from 18 to 72, mostly white middle-class folks who had somehow heard the same siren song and followed it to Taos. Robert had sold his house, moved into a custom-built van, and was eager to find land

where he could build. Jen had been waiting tables and saving money to create an Earthship-inspired restaurant. Sam was an electrician, bored with the meaningless jobs of traditional construction. He wanted a full-time gig on the crew. We all had individual reasons to be there, and we had much more in common than I had expected.

After the lecture, we toured the community and visited the homesite where we would build a two-bedroom Earthship as part of our training. As we walked, we passed by extraordinary buildings from the '90s through the 2020s, like the Phoenix, a work of sustainable art with towering banana trees, grapevines, birds, turtles, and a fishpond with a fountain. Our designated plot held nothing but piles of dirt and stacks of old tires. I could barely imagine how we would transform this trash into a livable home, but I was excited to find out.

Around 4 p.m., we returned to the Hive. My new roommates got busy making a family-style meal in the kitchen. I retreated to my room and my laptop with a sandwich. I had a long list of words to define, concepts to explore, and films to watch—starting with *Garbage Warrior*, a popular documentary about Michael's legislative battle to pass the Sustainable Development Testing Site Act. The efforts lasted three years and cost millions of dollars.

The more I explored, the more groundbreaking ideas and inspiring stories I discovered, like the couple in *The Biggest Little Farm* who developed a sustainable farm on 200 acres outside of Los Angeles, and the world's most imaginative dwellings from Bali to Maine in the Apple docuseries *Home*. With each new feature, my list of terms lengthened: *biomimicry*, *biosphere consciousness*, *circular economy*, *ecopsychology*, *permaculture*, *regenerative agriculture*, and so on. The knowledge was a feast for my hungry soul, and I wondered how I had been so oblivious for so long.

I drifted to sleep with one hand on the keyboard, dreaming of butterfly wings and fabulous Fibonacci art. A floating voice hummed from somewhere in the ether: *The path isn't a straight line. It's a spiral.*

The next morning, I was relieved to find Phil, the foreman from Puerto Rico, in the teacher's chair. Something about his laid-back demeanor and sense of humor put me at ease. He sprinkled his lessons with spicy stories about escapades in other countries that usually involved many margaritas, inclement weather, and petty theft. As I listened, I felt like I could follow Phil anywhere, building Earthships in the most remote parts of the world. It was such a departure from my "real life," a road less traveled that I had never considered but that somehow seemed plausible given the

distress in the world. While we were living and learning in a secluded bubble, the rest of humanity still faced a pandemic with no clear end, increasing anxiety about a worsening climate, a housing shortage, and rising costs of food and gas. Earthships seemed like a lifeline, a timely off-grid solution for anyone who wanted to survive the future.

After class, Johnny, one of the students who had also been in Puerto Rico, invited me to join him and his friend Gabe on a hike to the local hot springs. Feeling uplifted from the day's discussion, I joined them. We drove 20 minutes along dusty dirt roads to the cliffside of the Rio Grande river, parked a few hundred feet above the water, and made a diagonal descent into the deep canyon. Stunning mountain views and vast, colorful sky surrounded us as we moved toward a cluster of pools at the bottom of the gorge. With each downward step, I felt more energized and alive. The closer I got to the artery of the Earth, the more enchanted I grew with its natural beauty. Ruins of an old bathhouse and traces of stagecoach roads added a mysterious history to an otherwise unspoiled treasure. A few people soaked in little lagoons of hot water tucked away between rocks. I slid out of my clothes and into the bath, grinning from ear to ear, radiating geothermal joy.

A quiet reverie came over me as I soaked. I put my hands on a heart-shaped stone and felt my spirit offering the Hawaiian Ho'oponopono prayer for healing: *I love you. I'm sorry. Please forgive me. Thank you.*

I repeated it silently like a mantra, reaching out for reconciliation and reconnection with Gaia, mother of all life. Salty tears melted in the sulfur waters as I waited for a response from the rock. The fact that the sun warmed me, the moon awakened me, and the stars inspired me, the fact that everything I need is given to me as a gift, without debt—these were miracles.

As my thoughts of nature amplified, I felt an outpouring of love from the rock into my palm. My tears stopped flowing and my connectedness strengthened. She was telling me *YES, this is where you belong*, bewitching me the same way that the cheetah had done many years ago. It resonated with the part of me that had wanted to give up everything and stay in South Africa. Maybe I had made the wrong decision all those years ago. Maybe now I had a chance to make things right.

As we climbed out of the canyon, the rock formations seemed to morph into the shapes of faces. Stars formed a halo across the sky. The supernatural beauty was breathtaking. In my altered state, I didn't feel the need to be guarded. I laughed and sang with the boys on the way back to campus. Gnarl Barkley chanted, "I remember when, I remember, I remember when I lost my mind." We echoed back in unison, "Does that make me crazy?" The boys felt less like strangers and more like friends. Although nothing specific had changed, somehow, everything was different.

If I could have seen the road ahead, known the dark, murky places I would visit and the purging that would follow, I might have turned back in that moment and soaked forever in the warm comfort of the eternal springs. But that's the thing about traveling somewhere you've never been before. It's all promises and no heartbreak. You trust the unknown with your life, let go of the familiar in exchange for the possibility of transcendence. I wanted an experience beyond the mainstream normal. That's exactly what the Universe had in store for me.

After my visit to the hot springs, Taos opened up to me. It was as if I had turned a magic key and entered a hidden realm veiled from the mortal world. On the mesa, I was surrounded by fantastical creatures, like wild tarantulas and dust devils that could tear a roof off a house. Bighorn sheep with majestic horns gazed intensely into my eyes like they were staring into my soul. The Sangre de Cristo Mountains sang songs of pink and purple light at twilight. And when it drizzled, double rainbows appeared from one side of the range to the other. Each day, I felt more seduced and hypnotized by the enchanted land.

The Earthship Academy classes unlocked powers within me I hadn't known I had—from carpentry to plumbing to construction planning. I formed deep friendships with my classmates and contributed my famous

Italian garlic bread to the evening meals instead of hiding alone in my room. I shed my digital devices, happily ignoring my phone and computer. There was a rhythm to the days and nights, a flow of interactions and conversations as natural as breathing. I was invited to attend a yoga class, only to discover the teacher had been my instructor at Kundalini yoga teacher training fifteen years before. Sitting cross-legged in her class was so mind-bending that I repeatedly questioned if it was truly happening.

Learning extended far beyond the classroom. Each moment was an opportunity to do something differently. I had been a teacher for most of my adult life, and returning to the role of student was both refreshing and challenging. I had so many questions.

Why are there no paper towels?

We have reusable rags to cut down on waste.

Why can't I use my shampoo?

It will hurt the plants in the botanical beds.

What is this kitchen bucket for?

We compost organic material and put essential nutrients back into the soil.

Holy shit! This is not just air conditioning or plastic bags; this is a thousand different choices a day. If I didn't want so badly to be in right relationship with the Earth, it might have seemed trivial. But given my

budding romance with nature, these gestures acted like a love language that was critical to the courtship.

In the final week of class, the pressure of what to do next descended on me like a dark cloud, disrupting my otherwise steady reverie. *Should I stay and continue working on the Earthship? Should I return home and resume my job search? Should I try to finish my book?*

Anxiety wove a tight web around me. It seemed like there were many paths forward but, like Goldilocks trying the bowls of porridge, I needed one that was “just right” for me. I wasn’t ready to give up this learning journey, but I had no scent of the next track—that is, until I met Daniel Dynan, author of *Holistic Indoor Gardening: A Panoptic View Through the Lens of Earthship Greenhouse Management*.

Monday morning, I woke to a white wonderland outside my window. I hadn’t even known it was snowing during the night because Earthships remain the same 70 degrees no matter how the temperature fluctuates outdoors. After putting on all the clothes in my suitcase, I walked to the classroom and discovered a new instructor, one I hadn’t met before. Dan was a modest guy, about my age, in a big sweatshirt, baseball hat, and polarized sunglasses. By his side sat a massive YETI water bottle adorned with trippy stickers. It turned out he was the resident gardener in the Earthship community.

Dan began by introducing the foundational principles of permaculture. He spoke about the importance of designing regenerative systems that work in harmony with nature, emphasizing the need to mimic the diversity and resilience found in natural ecosystems. Gesturing toward the garden beds in the back of the room, he pointed out the carefully planned interplay of plants, highlighting their mutually beneficial relationships. His voice carried excitement as he explained the role of insects like ants and bees and described how they support the growth of trees, flowers, and other plants.

The word *permaculture* vibrated in me like the reverberations of a drum. It seemed central to the relationship between people and the planet. Dan added descriptions like *holistic* and *symbiotic*, music to my ears. I was eager to know more.

Dan invited us to follow him out to the compost area near the curb. I adjusted my gloves and positioned myself beside the bin made from recycled materials. Dan explained the importance of composting and its role in building healthy soil. He spoke of the value of diverting organic waste from landfills, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and creating a valuable resource that would nourish the garden.

Beside the compost bin, a collection of vegetable peels, twigs, and coffee grounds awaited their transformation. As the students gathered

around, Dan jabbed a pitchfork into the pile on the left, which had a long-stem thermometer that read 160 degrees Fahrenheit. As he turned over the dark brown, crumbly earth, a steamy white mist rose from the rotting organic matter. It was astonishing.

Dan's voice grew animated as he explained the concept of thermophilic composting, a process in which heat is generated within the pile. He described how the heat produced by beneficial microorganisms breaks down the matter, effectively killing pathogens and weed seeds. He was showcasing how waste could be repurposed into nourishment for the earth.

I couldn't keep up with Dan's explanation because I was mesmerized by the steam. It was hotter than a jacuzzi in that pile of dirt! *How is that possible?* Transfixed by this unbelievable revelation, I forgot about the snow, the cold, the other students.

The rest of the day was a blur as I accepted the fact that this was going to be my next track. Somehow, I needed to get my hands dirty—literally. I googled “permaculture design” and fell down another rabbit hole of information, including courses and certifications. I didn't want to hang out in a classroom—online or otherwise. I wanted something raw and experiential.

That's when I discovered an organization called Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF), which enables people to volunteer on properties in more than 100 countries. In exchange for four to six hours of labor a day, the host provides food and accommodations.

"If you want to live and learn on organic farms, WWOOF might be for you," read the website.

That's exactly what I want!

I scrolled through the host directory. The selections included orchards, nurseries, homesteads, and community farms. There were photos of pigs and goats and tractors and barns. Smiling, happy people held up flowers and fresh honey in their profiles. It was a portal to a dream. How could I choose one? I didn't want to rush the decision, so I rented a room in Taos for a month to consider my options.

My last campfire with classmates and crew was bittersweet. We sat around the fire drinking beer and smoking various things. Someone sang a song with an acoustic guitar. Someone else told a story so funny I fell down laughing. I'd been in constant companionship with strangers who now felt like family. We had built things together, made meals together, played together, listened to music together, gotten high together, laughed until we cried together. I had learned about myself in every conversation, in every

connection, in every mirror reflection between me and these remarkable humans. I was breaking open to more love—different kinds of love—seeing the ways I blocked love with my self-limiting beliefs. I was seeing myself through the eyes of others who valued me more than I valued myself sometimes.

In the four short weeks I had spent at the academy, a new version of me had started to take shape. New Mexico and my new friends had replaced much of my heartbreak with golden seams, like mending the cracks of broken pottery in the Japanese art of kintsugi. I had the unusual feeling that reconnecting myself to people and the planet was revealing a deeper theory of wellness that was less self-centered and more biocentric, but I couldn't quite grasp the whole vision yet. It had something to do with replacing the trauma of separation, hyperindividualism, compulsory coupledness, and excessive consumerism with a cooperative community focused on preserving and conserving our shared resources. It would be many more months before I could make sense of my sensations and find the words for my experience.

Chapter 7

October 2020

When I checked into my small, cozy room in the eight-room ranch house on Perry Lane, I carried with me the lingering warmth of our last fire. I had a half dozen new roommates, several of whom were 70+ years old and happily enjoying retirement by taking long walks and even longer meals in the communal dining room.

On my first morning, I woke to Albert, a former university professor, diligently practicing his flute in the backyard. The delicate notes fluttered like butterflies on the breeze.

It was easy to be cheerful when the pace of life was slow, the number of responsibilities minimal, and the surrounding environment serene. I was so content. I half considered my own retirement. My rent was only \$400/month. I could manage that indefinitely without much effort. But I didn't have the right car or clothing to survive the winter in Taos. More importantly, the call of the wild was still echoing in my ears. I had been hearing the roars but hadn't found the lion yet. There were more tracks to follow.

I opened my laptop and scanned the WWOOF directory, narrowing my search to warm weather places in California and Florida. After reading each listing carefully, I sent messages to a dozen farms to request a stay. My

top two choices were Long Look Ranch in Santa Clarita, California, and Sunny Acres Farms in Homestead, Florida. Long Look Ranch had three dozen llamas on the property—white ones, brown ones, even fluffy black baby ones. Just looking at their photos made me giddy. Sunny Acres Farms was enticing because of their community-supported agriculture (CSA) program and the variety of veggies and fruits they produced. I would learn valuable skills if I volunteered there.

While I waited for a response, I planned an overnight trip to Everland, an art park and eco-retreat center located on 145 acres of forested landscape southwest of Denver, Colorado. One of the Earthship volunteers had recommended that I visit—he had said it was a stunning property with an outdoor museum and all kinds of interesting wellness programming. After browsing the website photos, I was curious to see it for myself.

I drove about five hours north into dense evergreen terrain. The first thing I noticed when I stepped inside the retreat center was a two-story wooden mandala sculpture adorning the entrance wall. It looked like an explosive sun disk. The space was decorated with Persian rugs, climbing houseplants, and cozy furniture.

Sophie introduced herself as cofounder and community director. She wore vintage clothes and a flower crown. As she gave me a tour of the yoga studio, assembly hall, and other meeting rooms, she explained the principles

of the intentional community. These included co-creation, positive impact, regeneration, childlike play, and honoring the land. Young, attractive people with tribal tattoos and dreadlocks lounged on furniture or did chores as we passed through each space. Most looked like they had just returned from Burning Man, the famous bohemian desert festival. Some residents lived at Everland full time, and others were just volunteering for a few days. These new age hipsters were different from the Earthshippers, who embodied anarchy and rebellion. Everland seemed less survivalist and more socialist. I enjoyed the ethos, but also wondered how it worked. *Who is making decisions? Who is paying for things?*

In the workshop area, Sophie introduced me to her partner, Jonny Jenkins. The “visionary leader” of Everland resembled a real-life Jesus with his shoulder-length brown hair and radiant smile. He and Sophie had created a “sovereign spiritual ministry” called the Sanctuary of the Inner Compass, devoted to “enhancing individual and collective access to innate creative wisdom.” The ministry facilitated various retreats, including breathwork and meditation retreats. As I stared at a half-made sculpture of a giant wicker bird, my mind was a flight of ideas. *I barely know what any of this means. Is it a commune? An ashram?* I wanted practical answers but felt weird about interrogating Sophie and Jonny.

Once we finished the indoor tour, we set off down a dusty path toward the art installations. The overhead sun cast beams of light so thick through the pines I could almost touch them. Everywhere I looked, there were surprising discoveries, renovations, and creative projects underway. I climbed on an aerial hammock suspended between trees like a giant spider web. I helped some of the volunteers disassemble a large tent near the lake. Everyone seemed thrilled to be there, which infused even the most mundane tasks with a stronger sense of meaning.

In the late afternoon, after a shared meal with the group, I settled onto a yoga mat in the assembly hall and covered myself with a blanket. A white guy in a Mexican poncho played a Native American flute, then a pretty girl in a flowy dress struck a gong. Visions of communities, communes, eco-villages, and Earthships danced in my head, different configurations of human occupancy, breaking out of the box of single-family homes and cul-de-sac neighborhoods—social experiments with utopian ideals.

Is this a better way of living? I wondered. *With so much loneliness and isolation, isn't this the logical solution?* It wouldn't be long until I found answers, but for the time being, I had to sit with the questions.

When I got home, I was delighted to discover that I had been accepted to both Long Look Ranch and Sunny Acres Farms. I would spend

November in California, then head to Florida over the holidays. I had also received an unexpected offer for a digital health coaching job that I had forgotten about because, after two rounds of interviews, they had told me that the position was on hold. Now they said I could start right away. Since I had been draining my savings for the better part of a year, I desperately wanted the extra cash, and the remote work afforded me the perfect situation to study on farms and talk to clients in my downtime. At \$25/hour, it was a significant downgrade from my previous six-figure salary, but it was better than nothing.

I immediately trained online to learn the systems and tools, including the “virtual care platform.” When I completed my courses, I was assigned 20 clients with health problems ranging from diabetes to panic attacks. I was given access to a library of resources, including recipes and sample exercises to send to clients.

I was also given communication scripts: “This is Gabby from Vital Health. I am your new health coach, and I am calling to set up our initial session for the weight loss program. Our first session will be an hour. Is there a good time this week we can connect?”

I cringed at the language and formality of the prescribed interactions. It was my nature to communicate intuitively and to improvise. I closed my

eyes, took a deep breath, hit “send,” then logged my time, down to the minute, in the HR software.

Within a few days, I had a dozen consultations on my calendar. Ashley, Baily, Tim, Chad. Humans scattered across the country in Kansas City, Des Moines, El Paso, and Atlanta.

I repeated the script: “What kind of food do you eat? How much caffeine do you drink? How many times a week do you exercise?”

Together, clients and I filled out intake forms and recorded data about their stress, sleep, diet, and lifestyle. To my dismay, the first thing I noticed was how medicated they all were. Meds for migraines and cholesterol, blood pressure and thyroid, anxiety and allergies. Xanax. Prozac. Zoloft. Hydroxyzine. Losartan. Lipitor. It hurt my head just to think about it. Then we discussed health goals and set a S.M.A.R.T. (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) plan to follow. Meditate for 15 minutes in the morning. Take a daily walk. Turn off your phone 30 minutes before bed. My clients seemed optimistic and grateful to have support and accountability.

However, when I called the clients back the following week, half of them didn’t answer. The other half hadn’t tried the new habits at all. I quickly realized that, although they recognized they had problems, they weren’t necessarily ready for change.

What am I gonna do now? I didn't have to think much because there was a script for it.

"Ashley, how would you like your life to be different after coaching with me?"

"Baily, where do you sabotage yourself regularly?"

"Tim, can you visualize or imagine the benefits of these goals?"

"Chad, what's the one thing you're going to do for yourself this week?"

It was nauseating to send those messages, mostly because I felt that if I were the one receiving them, I would have been annoyed. I respond much better to no-bullshit "real talk," but Vital Health did not want my rogue ideas or my swear words—they only wanted obedience and conformity—so I bit my tongue. I could feel there was an expiration date on this job; it was not something I wanted to do long-term, but I'd endure it as long as I could.

At the end of the week, I was drained and overwhelmed. I made a quick trip to the Earthship community to meet the new academy cohort, and I was immediately uplifted by the students' high energy and excitement. A group of vivacious girls—Erin, Leah, and Cheryl—danced around the fire with LED light-up wings and colorful hula hoops. There was a palpable sense of joy as they took turns performing and provoking more cheer. I immediately joined them in their antics, kindred sisters in the high desert.

The following day, they invited me to the hot springs, so I joined them for a long hike and a longer soak. We shared different versions of the same story—feeling called to Taos, disillusioned with modern society, longing for change. I was stunned at how so many people from all walks of life were drawn to such a unique destination outside the cultural mainstream.

It was also startling to observe the differences between my health coaching clients—with their agoraphobia and polypharmacy—and the Earthship students, who were putting blood, sweat, and tears into building their futures. That felt like another essential piece of the wellness puzzle—like maybe, when we'd opted out of manual labor, we had unwittingly opened the door for physical and mental illness to take up residence. How much was a sedentary lifestyle to blame for my clients' complaints? Would they still be suffering so much if they were dancing around a fire or singing in the hot springs? I didn't think so. My own symptoms of panic and grief were significantly reduced when I left my self-obsessed bubble and reengaged with the world. The wilder I became, the better I felt.

I shared some of my half-baked ideas with Leah, who had recently completed a master's degree in psychology and was passionate about eco-art therapy. She resonated with my theory and explained that she used similar ideas in her work with her clients. By combining art-making

processes with the natural environment, she explained, we experience a deeper connection with ourselves, others, and the world around us, leading to personal growth and improved well-being. Being in natural environments promotes relaxation, reduces stress, and increases feelings of calm and connectedness. Making art gives us a powerful mode of self-expression and a unique and multisensory experience.

Leah's insights, combined with my own creative thinking, were configuring my mind in a new way, expanding my understanding of a discipline I had been practicing for two decades, infusing it with a fresh perspective, making it richer and more nuanced. The trip to Everland, the calls with clients, my personal transformation—I was connecting the dots between seemingly disparate concepts like architecture, nature, manual labor, and mental health, and feeling reinvigorated in the process. Slowly but surely, I was constructing myself, just like I had raised the bridge between domes in Puerto Rico.

They say, "Love is blind," and that was true for me during that autumn in Taos. Something lurked just out of sight, in the shadows of community living and alternative lifestyles—a darkness in the hearts of people who live

in elevated empathy and self-exile. But I was under the spell of the land of enchantment, unable to see what was right in front of me.

The night was in full swing as a vibrant Halloween party filled the spacious, dimly lit loft of the Hive Earthship. The air thrummed with excitement, and conversations mingled with the thumping beats of the music reverberating through the house. The kitchen table had been transformed into a beer pong game, where a mermaid and a bumblebee competed against Catwoman and a large banana, while someone's dog ran laps around the room. Some of the Earthshippers danced with exaggerated enthusiasm, their limbs flailing with abandon. Others swayed to the rhythm, drinks in hands, stumbling occasionally and dissolving into laughter.

I was surprised to find my former home transformed into a nightclub, especially since all our previous gatherings had taken place under the stars. I arrived in jeans and a T-shirt, but that outfit didn't last long, as Leah dragged me into her room and dressed me like a sexy devil. Even in a tight black miniskirt, I struggled to catch the Halloween spirit. I had been absent from this kind of scene for quite some time. It had been more than a year since I had worn makeup or flirted with a boy or cut loose on the dance floor. I was still ambivalent about dating, about letting anyone touch the fragile new growth of my inner garden. I feared being trampled or injured before I had the chance to experience my full wholeness. It was a

protectiveness that was both necessary and novel, since I had always given myself away to the first guy who showed me any attention.

“Bohemian Rhapsody” blared through the speakers, and a collective uproar of voices belted out the lyrics. Everyone sang and clapped and cheered each other on to greater heights of performance. The alcohol added to the carefree atmosphere of uninhibited behavior.

After the song, Leah and I wandered into the fireplace room, where Erin had installed her stripper pole and was giving Darin, an Earthship crew member, a salacious dance. As Leah and Erin locked eyes, I sensed a rivalry and thinly veiled jealousy.

Leah pulled me into her room. In heated whispers, she divulged a complicated story of a love-triangle that had developed over the past few weeks, something involving polyamory, chlamydia, and all hell breaking loose. Apparently, whatever had happened, the friendship between Leah and Erin had imploded. In my tipsy state, I could barely keep up with the drama as Leah spilled more gossip about sexual misconduct and the dysfunctional relationships that were lingering behind the masked faces at the party. Being single has its benefits, I thought. At least I wasn't a victim of deceit or conflict.

I shuffled back into the kitchen. Beer pong had been abandoned. Red plastic cups lay strewn on the table and floor. The room was dark except for

rainbow streaks of light emanating from a disco ball. As the night went on, the Earthshippers, their inhibitions drowned in a sea of intoxication, unleashed a wildness that bordered on madness. The evening took on a haunting quality. A heated argument erupted between two guys in one corner of the room. Their voices rose with anger and hostility. They circled each other like predators stalking their prey. The crowd around them parted, creating an unsettling space for the confrontation.

Desperate pleas for calm echoed, a futile attempt to defuse the volatile situation. Suddenly, one of the guys punched the other in the face. The victim's nose shattered, spewing blood everywhere. Instead of fighting back, the broken-faced guy fell to the ground, where he endured a vicious beating from his friend. Sick to my stomach, I retreated to the bathroom, changed my clothes, and fled for the door. The vision of the confrontation chased me home.

A wave of realization washed over me, like a sobering gust of wind piercing through the haze of illusion. Taos was not all rainbows and unicorns. Even amid so much innovation and passion, there were still underlying wounds calling for healing. The Earthship community, once a haven for escapism and revelry, had become a stark reminder of the shadows that dwell within us all.

Maybe this is what happens when you stay in the land of enchantment for too long. There was more to this lifestyle than met the eye. I'd been naive to think that so many rebellious and emotional people could live unchecked by societal norms without some breakdown of morality and decency. I felt grateful I was leaving the next day. *Just in the nick of time.*

Chapter 8

November 2020

My car rumbled down the dusty road, kicking up small clouds of golden powder in its wake. I had traveled for two days, my ease increasing with each passing mile. I was looking forward to staying at Long Look Ranch so I could learn more about permaculture, spend more time in nature, and recover from the construction work of the past few months.

Finally, I reached my destination, the llama farm where I would spend the next month volunteering and living with a kind-hearted family. Weathered foothills stretched as far as the eye could see, dotted with short grasses, juniper trees, and other California shrubs. It looked like a scene out of an old Western movie from the 1950s—because that’s exactly what it was. Agua Dulce, Spanish for *sweet water*, was a local community area that had long been used as a popular filming location by the movie industry.

As I parked my car, I noticed Leah’s SUV in the driveway. Rattled by everything that had happened at the academy and intrigued by my WWOOFing assignment, Leah had asked if she could join me. A quick call to the host had revealed that there was plenty of room in the RV accommodations and that Leah was welcome to tag along.

I made my way to the front porch, which was decorated with a mix of wagon wheels, rustic furniture, ceramic figurines, and other things you’d

find in a country store. Four small fluffy white dogs ambushed me at the door. A middle-aged woman with a warm smile stepped forward. She extended one hand and swatted the dogs away with the other.

“They’re harmless. I promise,” she said. “I’m Sheila. You must be Gabby.”

I smiled as I tripped over paws and tails as I made my way to the wooden benches in the kitchen. Dried herbs hung upside down on an exposed beam overhead, and the faint scent of lavender wafted through the air.

“This is my husband, John, and our children, Emma and Ethan,” Sheila said. As I exchanged handshakes and hugs with the rest of the family, a sense of comfort enveloped me. These folks made me feel like an old friend rather than a stranger. It was such an unexpected gift, another small miracle on my journey.

“Are you hungry?” Sheila asked. “We’ve got dinner for you!”

Leah grinned at me. I could see from the sparkle in her eye that she was feeling the same spirit of gratitude that I was.

We sat around a large wooden table and engaged in lively conversation. Laughter filled the room as John shared stories about llamas and their antics. “Did you know they have three stomachs? And one of them

is just for throwing up on you!” he said. Apparently, if they are provoked, and you don’t get the hint to back off, the llama will spit gastric goo on you.

After dinner, Sheila led us outside to the llama pastures. I couldn’t wait to meet the cute, furry creatures; I was as eager as a kid visiting a zoo for the first time. The llamas galloped over to us. Their long necks and thick eyelashes made us giggle. We fed them carrots through the gate as they wrestled to get closer. Sheila knew each one by name and could rattle off their genealogy. I quickly realized that these llamas were more than just pets; they were members of the family.

Sheila gave us a tour of our temporary home—a 26-foot Gulf Stream camper. Leah settled into the back room, and I set up a cozy bed on the pull-out couch near the door. The small cupboards and refrigerator were overflowing with more food than the two of us could possibly eat.

When Sheila departed, wishing us a good night, a wave of bittersweet emotion squeezed my heart. Here I was again, lost and found, falling and caught in the generous arms of the unknown. Each small step was both a risk and reassurance I would be okay. *Can I trust the path?* Remnants of loss and fear still lingered inside me. I was not yet completely comfortable in my skin. I forced myself to visualize llamas and lavender and all the good times that hopefully awaited me. *I don’t know where I’m going, but I know exactly how to get there.* I clung to the mantra as I drifted to sleep.

The farm chores were easy and only took a couple of hours to complete each morning. Water the garden beds. Plant some lavender. Layer the cardboard in the compost area. Now and then, Sheila recruited us for a creative project like making homemade sugar scrubs, simple syrup, or scented sachets. It was harmonious work that felt aligned with my values and the natural environment.

The afternoons when I did my health coaching calls were a much heavier load. Patients confided about their divorces, diseases, and feelings of worthlessness. They tried to practice new habits but were also resistant to change. I listened with compassion, making the recommended suggestions offered through the program, but I couldn't shake the nagging feeling that I was doing more harm than good.

One afternoon, I had a consult with a patient named Peter. I dialed him through the online conference service. When he answered, I said, "Hello, Peter. It's Gabby. How are you doing today?" My cursor hovered over the intake form, ready to capture all his medical information.

Peter's voice quivered with vulnerability and sadness. "Hi, Gabby. I'm not doing well."

There was a brief pause as I absorbed his words. I debated whether to stick to the plan or let him unload his feelings. I understood the significance

of ignoring his pain, but I had just 30 minutes to capture the required facts.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said. “I am here to support you. Together, we can make a plan to help you feel better.” It felt inauthentic and frustrating to respond that way.

“Okay,” he mumbled.

“Tell me about your stress. On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate your daily stress?” I asked.

“Seven,” he said. “I’m stressed about everything.”

Again, I felt tempted to unpack the discomfort, but I forced myself to stay the course.

“I see,” I said. “Do you have any stress-related symptoms?”

Peter experienced sweaty restless nights with itchy legs and feet. He said that maybe it was stress, or perhaps his diabetes. He explained that he used an insulin pump and that he was a bad eater. He binged on candy several times a day. My concern grew with each comment. I clenched my jaw to hold in the tension. As the call progressed, Peter described a difficult living situation with his brother, as well as a dead-end job.

His voice trembled as he spoke again. “I don’t want to die yet.”

His words stopped me cold. This guy was terrified.

I wanted to shout at him: “Blow up your life! Only do what feels good and fuck the rest!” I wanted to rant about the hypocrisy of the

healthcare industry and how everything from our food systems to big pharma was making us sick. I wanted to tell him about the llamas and how funny they were, and how he should go outside and stay out there all day and all night. I wanted to send him poetry, like the Maria Sabina quote:

Heal yourself with the light of the sun and the rays of the moon. With the sound of the river and the waterfall. With the swaying of the sea and the fluttering of birds. Heal yourself with mint, neem, and eucalyptus. Sweeten with lavender, rosemary, and chamomile. Hug yourself with cocoa bean and a hint of cinnamon. Put love in tea instead of sugar and drink it looking at the stars. Heal yourself with the kisses the wind gives you and the hugs of the rain. Stand strong with your bare feet on the ground and with everything that comes from it. Be smarter every day by listening to your intuition, looking at the world with your forehead. Jump, dance, sing, so that you live happier. Heal yourself, with beautiful love and always remember... You are the medicine.

I did none of those things.

I took a deep breath and said, “I understand that this is a difficult time for you, Peter. Let’s focus on coping strategies and help you manage your symptoms.”

The intake form was complete when I hung up. I had accomplished my mission. But the next two times I tried to reach Peter, he didn't answer my calls. I never spoke to him again.

For the remainder of the week, I was quiet and distracted during farm chores. Headphones snug to my ears, I disappeared into Jane Fonda's book *What Can I Do? My Path from Climate Despair to Action*, hoping that her courage was contagious. The most admirable thing about Jane was her endless activism—from the Vietnam War to feminism to Native American land rights. She seemed fearless and unstoppable. I wished I could be like that. There were so many things I still feared—from speaking my truth to writing my book to pursuing an unconventional lifestyle. If there was a voice inside of me that had half as much power as Jane, I wanted to express it. *But how?*

I turned over these questions in my mind as I tilled soil and pressed little perennials into their beds. I could feel the enormous threat of climate change as I held each lavender plant in my palms. They were so small and vulnerable, and yet they were astonishing in their resilience. Each one would grow into her authentic self—she couldn't grow to be a carrot or a pine tree. She could only be a purple herb, a home for bees, an oil for medicine.

I wondered what my essence was. *Is there a divine intelligence in me? Will I develop into the being I was meant to be, like the lavender?*

It felt like I had spent so much of my life pre-pandemic trying to become a version of a woman cobbled together from concepts I collected from school, society, and social media. I wanted to be prettier than a supermodel, more successful than a self-made mogul. Now all of that craving tasted saccharine on my tongue, artificial and toxic. I remembered some women—like Jane Goodall or Greta Thunberg—who I had noticed in passing and dismissed as noble but unappealing. So ingrained were my ideas about beauty, power, and value that I was unaware of how profoundly they colored my reality. When my life broke, so did the lens through which I saw the world.

I wanted my destiny to be a matter of choice, not chance. I wanted to deliberately design my life with a clear perspective. I wanted to care less about how I was perceived and more about how my perceptions influenced my beliefs, actions, behaviors, and habits. After so much time away from my “real life” and the career path that had occupied my 20s and 30s, I reflected on the kind of woman I wanted to be. I wanted to be a badass like Jane Fonda. I heard her say in an interview, “You don’t learn from successes; you don’t learn from awards; you only learn from wounds and

scars and mistakes and failures.” I made mistakes in spades, so I guessed I was on the right track.

Leah was so patient with me as I wandered around the property in a daze. Sometimes she asked me to hula-hoop with her or play cards. I tried to enjoy those activities, but I was preoccupied. My unfolding life and all the complicated decisions that needed to be made were a constant obsession.

One night, Leah prepared a lovely dinner of grilled veggies and rice for us. I admired her domestic skills, something I hadn’t yet mastered. As we sat at the small dinette in the camper, she watched me. I could feel her curiosity like a current in the room. She wanted to know what was bugging me, but she didn’t want to ask.

“How’s it going with work?” she asked.

“Meh,” I said. “I don’t think I’m cut out to be a health coach.” I stared at the sweet potato; my appetite nonexistent.

“No? Why not?” she asked, ignoring my evasiveness.

“The people...I don’t know...I don’t think I can help them,” I mumbled. It was too hard to explain how useless I felt.

There was an awkward silence, then Leah tried again. “How’s the book you’re listening to?” she said.

With that question, I perked up a bit. “It’s good! I’m learning a lot.”

“Like what?” she asked.

Leah had opened a door I was willing to enter. Books were one of my favorite topics. Soon I was giving Leah the whole story of Jane Fonda’s life and the lives of all the people who had recently inspired me, including Boyd Varty, the author of *The Lion Tracker’s Guide to Life*.

“You really love books,” Leah said. “You should write one.”

“I sort of did write one, but I’m too nervous to finish it,” I said.

“Why?” She seemed genuinely surprised.

“Putting myself out there...it just feels so...naked.”

“But isn’t that what you like about the books you read? The vulnerability?”

I furrowed my brow. Leah was right. I shrugged.

“Seems hypocritical to not publish yours,” she said, almost under her breath.

Ugh. I despised the word *hypocrite*. The last time someone had said it to me, it had propelled me into the Survivors Workshop, which had started this whole existential unraveling. Now it was reminding me that there was more work to be done. I had been avoiding my writing for so long, distracting myself with busywork. *I needed to finish the book.*

As the lovely llama month neared its end, there was one more surprise in store for us before we departed. Leah and I had been visiting the llamas daily, trying to befriend them. We offered them carrots and other snacks to win their favor. They greedily ate the offerings and then darted away. Whenever I reached out a hand to stroke their fur, they dodged my touch or spat at me.

One day, Leah and I were in the pen when a mischievous llama named Pablo sauntered over, eyeing us curiously. With a sly grin, he stretched out his long neck and nibbled on my shirt collar. Leah burst into laughter. While I struggled to keep my clothes on, another friendly llama named Latte decided to join in the fun. She swiftly plucked the hat right off my head, then playfully pranced around, kicking up her hooves as if performing an impromptu llama dance routine. We giggled so hard we nearly toppled over.

During the llama antics, I noticed that Coco, a very pregnant mama llama, was suspiciously far from the herd, lying in a corner by herself. Sheila and John had explained how important family is to the herds—they form strong bonds and stick together for life. Momma llamas are total pros at raising their little ones, called crias. They teach the babies everything they need to know, from nursing to munching on grass to how to behave in

llama society. When it comes to family life, llamas are all about love and support. I wondered why Coco was isolating. Was something wrong?

A few hours later, just after sunset, we heard a commotion in the pen. We hurried out to see John and Sheila shining flashlights in the dark. We rushed to the gate in worry.

“What’s going on?” we shouted.

“It’s Coco!” they said.

“Is she okay?” we yelled.

“She just had her baby!”

To our surprise and delight, Coco had delivered a beautiful black llama. We jumped into the pen and gave hugs and kisses to the furry baby. There was no dodging or spitting, just ecstatic cuddling with this newborn creature. I felt embraced in a circle of resurgent life and love. This little llama, wobbly on her feet, was ready to become something new and brave.

This is all I need. I don't want to carry the weight of people's problems, or the planet's. I want to reside in lightness and spontaneous joy and feel good in love. I want expansion, expression, and inspiration that moves across the world like a ripple effect, opening one heart after another.

Long Look Ranch showed me that beautiful, unexpected bounty can spring from the smallest seed. The best moments are the unexpected ones.

And new beginnings are starting all the time—like the following morning, when I left for Sunny Acres Farms.

Chapter 9

January 2021

During the first week of 2021, I dragged my bright pink suitcase across the gravel driveway of the serene 17-acre retreat in Homestead. The weather was a crisp 70 degrees, and the air was rich with an earthy, tropical fragrance. I was four months deep into dirty boots and ecological politics, but I still didn't have a clear vision of how it was all going to turn out.

Will I find my purpose as an activist farmer, like the California urbanites in Occupy the Farm? Is there a co-living community in my future, like the experimental town of Arcosanti, where I stopped for a quiet night during my drive across Arizona? Maybe I will build my own utopian commune and convince all my family and friends to join me. Anything was possible, but was it realistic?

Filled with doubt, I ran endless scenarios through my mind, searching for the one that seemed to fit me best, given my history and personality. I wanted to be close enough to a city to find sustainable work if I needed it, but far enough away to enjoy dark-sky, unpolluted by human-made light. I longed for a home that felt both private and communal, so I could be independent but not have to weather social isolation scenarios alone. I wanted people to live with, build with, and play with who shared my egalitarian values while recognizing we were not going to escape the

bondage of industrial society anytime soon. We needed to pay for things, obviously, but I didn't want money to be the center of our universe. I wanted our lives to revolve around the land and each other.

If this is such a good idea, I wondered, *is anyone doing it?* I hoped that was what life would be like at Sunny Acres Farms.

John and his wife, Angela, the farm managers, met me near the gate with a fresh set of bedsheets. John was tall with a wide-brimmed straw hat and a big smile. Angela was petite with sun-kissed skin and a baby on her hip. In their deep green overalls and "plant love" T-shirts, they looked like cover models for a gardening magazine. They took turns pointing at structures as we walked the meandering paths through the property. We were surrounded by a lush edible landscape and endless rows of fruit trees. There was a screened-in kitchen, a large pergola, and several small cabins around the perimeter of the flower beds and natural spring pools.

A colorful sign next to the entrance read *Welcome—Please, no meat or cigarettes*. I felt a mixture of joy and trepidation when we arrived at my accommodations, a small wooden structure with a bed and dresser and a humble porch with an outdoor table and chairs.

Angela pointed toward a building in the distance. "The full bathroom is over there," she said. "There's also a compost toilet above the community kitchen." Traveling across a field to use a shower or toilet was a first for

me, but I was ready for the challenge. It was one more layer of deconditioning on my transformative journey from city girl to rewild woman.

I listened to the sound of the nearby waterfall as I hung my clothes and made the bed. The air smelled like pine and fresh-cut grass. Curious little lizards peeked at me through the large windows. Eager to meet the other volunteers, I wandered in the direction of the common area and found Keith, a recent college grad with sandy brown hair and blue-framed glasses. He carried an extension pole fitted with a small red basket on the end to capture fruit from the towering trees. Piled around his feet were avocados, coconuts, papayas, and starfruit. He was as giddy as a kid in a candy store. After quick introductions, he darted in the direction of the avocado grove, beckoning me to follow. He grabbed fistfuls of greens and flowers, chomping on them as we walked. Every now and then he picked up a frog or a handful of fish and carried them from one watering hole to another. Keith concluded our tour at the firepit near his cabin. He tossed in a few dead palm fronds and lit a match. He loved the fire almost as much as he loved eating every edible thing in sight. “Do you know that if you stare at the fire, it gives you night vision?” he said.

I had no idea whether that was true, but his conviction was convincing. I sat on a wooden stump and watched the dancing flames cast

shadows across the ground. The smoky air and sizzling embers took me back to my Earthship evenings in New Mexico. I felt a surprising nostalgia and longing. *How strange.* Was it the spirit of the enchanted land? The sense of camaraderie and connection with the crew? Why did I ache to return to Taos? I wondered.

Memories of the Rio Grande, the healing properties of the hot springs, the rugged cliffs and mesas, moved through my mind with the ebb and flow of the fire. I smiled as I recalled laughter that had lasted for hours under the high desert sky. New Mexico had been my sanctuary, a backdrop to my mending and growth. A subtle whisper informed me there were still lessons to be learned, discoveries to be made. A flurry of emotions churned within me—anticipation, uncertainty, and a sense of unfinished business. I tried to dismiss it, but it tugged at my senses. I knew deep down that eventually I would heed the call to return.

At 7 a.m. the following day, I joined John, Keith, and three young women in the community kitchen for my first day of labor. I was outfitted in floral print rubber boots and matching garden gloves. There were several round tables with plastic chairs and a whiteboard propped on an easel. With a blue erasable marker, John wrote the names and amounts of produce we needed to harvest to fulfill the CSA order for the week. Forty bunches of

carrots. A hundred and fifty starfruit. Two hundred cherry tomatoes. Numbers for kale, green onions, peppers, and so on filled the white space. John wrote our names next to assigned chores, including seeding the trays in the greenhouse and planting new crops in the field. I listened intently to the instructions, eager to start the harvest. I sensed there was a lot to learn. When John handed me my very own utility knife with a curved blade and smooth wooden handle, it felt like a talisman of regeneration. I was joining a lineage of people who built their lives around the land, enhancing and strengthening the health of the planet.

I walked toward the starfruit grove with a cardboard box under my arm. The morning air was cool against my cheek, and a mystical mist parted beneath my feet. Sunbeams created a flurry of light through the branches as I passed by endless rows of neatly planted trees. I reached for one of the golden fruits and felt the dew on my fingers. I took a slow, deliberate bite and tasted the juice bursting in my mouth. I flushed with pure, spontaneous pleasure. Then the whole of existence seemed to evaporate. There was no field, no tree, no fruit, no sun, no me—there was only pure, direct joy. Everything else was inconsequential. I had entered a state of aesthetic arrest, where the awe-inspiring beauty elevated me to a transcendent place.

Whoa! This is extraordinary. I stood in a daze for a while until I remembered why I was there—to fill the box with fruit. *I should probably*

do that.

I collected about 50 or so star-shaped fruits and showed them to Keith, who was collecting his own bounty a few rows away.

“Nope,” he said, tossing one of them on the ground. “Not this one, either.” After a few seconds, he had discarded more than half of my collection.

I was startled and offended. “What’s wrong with them?” I asked.

“They can’t have blemishes, or ant bites, or brown edges, stuff like that. You’ll get the hang of it.”

He showed me a few of his perfectly selected fruits. I was amazed. Each one looked like it had been plucked from a still-life painting. I returned to the trees with a more discerning eye, while also wondering how we had become so spoiled and indulgent in our produce demands. I picked and tossed and gathered and collected for about two hours until I had completed my task. By that time, the sun was over the canopy, and I was sweating. *Well, shit, this is hard work.* I removed my light sweater. *And I’m not even halfway through my shift!* I returned my box to the nearby washing station and ventured to the field of veggies with another empty container.

Armed with a trusty pair of shears and a worn straw hat shielding his face from the sun, John carefully moved through the rows of vibrant green plants. He surveyed the field, assessing each vegetable’s readiness for

harvest. With practiced hands, he plucked ripe tomatoes, crisp lettuce heads, and colorful carrots from the soil, then gently placed them into a large basket. He demonstrated the precise technique of cutting, explaining the importance of careful handling to prevent bruising or damage. I watched intently, observing the angle of the cut, the deftness of the hands, and the tender touch. He made it look easy. My thighs burned and my back ached as I crouched near him and mimicked his movements. I distracted myself with an audiobook, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* by Barbara Kingsolver. It detailed her family's attempts to eat only locally grown food for an entire year. The magnitude of Barbara's efforts was not lost on me as I tried, for the first time in my life, to "produce" the food I was eating. *If she can do it, I can do it.* I invoked the farmer within.

With our baskets filled to the brim, we made our way to a nearby sorting and grading area. A metal table stood ready. We carefully unloaded the vegetables one by one and began sorting them. John inspected each vegetable, removing any damaged or unripe ones, ensuring only the best made it through. We sprayed the vegetables with a hose, cleansing them of dirt and impurities. Using his hands, John carefully scrubbed away any remaining debris. Once the vegetables had been cleansed, we gently spread them across the mesh racks to air dry naturally. After a sufficient drying period, we gathered the produce and moved inside the cool storage room.

We carefully arranged it in clean plastic bags and labeled boxes, ensuring its protection and pristine condition.

At noon, when John closed the cooler door and dismissed us, I felt a strong sense of accomplishment. The culmination of my efforts, from the early morning bliss to the meticulous picking, sorting, cleaning, and packing, ensured that the fruits of my labor would nourish others. With a satisfied smile, I peeled off my sticky clothes and submerged myself in the spring pool near my cabin. A congregation of egrets pranced around the perimeter of the water. Shiny minnows darted around my legs. Everything was so abundant, so refreshing, so beautiful. It was hard to believe that all this existed in a world with a global pandemic and political unrest outside our gate.

I could feel the past version of me—who I had been before Puerto Rico, Taos, Long Look Ranch, and Sunny Acres Farms—slipping away and new energy coming in. I used to think gardening was mundane and farming was primitive. Now I knew gardeners were gangsters and farmers were rebels. I used to think success was having more than you need, more than everybody else. Now I believed the less we took, the more extraordinary we were. I used to think God lived in churches and food came from grocery stores. Now I understood the Earth was the truest source of physical, medicinal, and spiritual nourishment. My identity and beliefs were shedding

like snakeskin. My outer reclamation was also an inner renovation, like an energetic makeover.

I thought about my incomplete manuscript. I worried that the stories and memories and feelings of the past would fade completely as I transformed. I was concerned that in their dissolution, my Self would be lost. *I must finish that book.* Even if the “me” who experienced the memoir disappeared, at least she would exist in the writing. I resolved to attempt the final chapter again, but when I opened my laptop, the inner voice was still muted. I scanned my mind for the conclusion. *How does my story end?* I wondered. Anxiety gripped me. I trembled as I thought about it. I was still recovering from my emotional injuries. It had been a year since I’d left the Survivors Workshop in Arizona, and I still needed to integrate the pieces of my life.

I pushed the panic aside and refocused on the environment around me. *Just breathe,* I told myself. *Don’t freak out about this. You will finish the book when the time is right.*

After a few weeks of manual labor on the farm, I was wilting like the dehydrated vegetables. Blisters swelled against the inside of my boots, and a sharp pain pressed between my shoulder blades. I picked at the dirt under my fingernails. There were so many things that were broken or dirty on the

farm—like the kitchen and the bathrooms. No matter how we tried to maintain them, they always returned to a slovenly state. One morning, feeling grumpy and exhausted, I dressed for work and joined the others in the community area. I watched as John wrote the harvest numbers on the whiteboard: Eighty bunches of carrots. Three hundred starfruit. Four hundred cherry tomatoes.

The numbers were twice as big as numbers had been the week before.

“Our CSA boxes are growing in popularity,” he said enthusiastically. “We’ve got a lot of work to do!”

The humidity closed in around me, draining my energy and making me bitter.

“Let’s go, team!” John was in a hurry for us to get started.

“What about the bathroom?” I interrupted.

“Umm, working on it,” he mumbled.

The only indoor bathroom, which was shared by all farm staff, was filthy. The shower was covered in black mold. I had bleached and scrubbed it repeatedly, but it continued to fill up with mud and shit daily. No one seemed to care.

“And the compost toilet?” Keith asked.

“Don’t use that one,” John responded. “We’re getting it fixed.”

The compost toilet above the kitchen was leaking feces into the walls and floors, but it didn't seem as urgent to John as collecting 80 bunches of kale.

"The Wi-Fi signal isn't strong enough for me to do my online classes," one of the new college volunteers complained.

"The boosters are coming soon." John was getting visibly annoyed with the delay.

He ushered us into the greenhouse and distributed organic pesticides and fertilizers, which we wore like jetpacks on our backs and sprayed onto the beds. The leaky hose coupled with a light breeze meant that I was wearing as much of the fish-scented fluid as the veggies were. *I don't want to do this anymore.*

At noon, John materialized with a concerned look and told us we would be having a meeting that evening. My brow furrowed and my jaw clenched as I anticipated the discomfort of the impending conversation.

When I returned to my cabin, I logged on to the WWOOF website to find my next assignment. I was halfway through my two-month stay at Sunny Acres Farms. I wanted to escape to somewhere distant and exotic. I wanted to recharge and realign with the path that had led me here in the first place. I scrolled through images of sunflowers and coconuts and adorable baby goats on dozens of properties from Iowa to Hawaii. Each one looked

appealing in its own way, but I couldn't shake the lure of New Mexico. Mystic mountains and sulfur waters called to me. I sensed there were still secrets to be discovered in that enchanted land. Maybe I had veered off the trail. *Maybe I need to go back to the last clear track.*

I browsed listings near Taos. The one that excited me most was Sagebrush Sanctuary in Arroyo Seco. The website showed photos of an old woman in an Aztec-print dress wearing a flower crown, and young women tying bundles of herbs with twine. I was mesmerized.

I sent a visit request and was surprised when Luna, the property owner, responded with a phone number and asked me to call immediately. Within minutes, I was on a video call, staring into the eyes of an ancient woman. She wore a cotton nightgown with a colorful woven shawl around her shoulders. Her thin gray hair was braided. Decorative beaded barrettes held flyaway pieces in place. As she wandered around her adobe home, I noticed the Native American art decorating the walls. A Kokopelli deity danced over her left shoulder, while beaded feather bundles and sand paintings appeared on her right.

She inquired about me, my background, my passions. Our conversation flowed easily, like a meandering stream, through interconnected topics of medicine, massage, herbs, farming, and more. During her 50-year career, she had studied herbalism, Vedic astrology,

acupuncture, Native American feather healing, and more. When she named all her certificates and the countless treatments she had served, I was awestruck. Going to live with Luna was kismet.

“I’ll be there the first week of March,” I told her. We both hung up, grinning.

I wondered how much of our collective sickness was caused by the extraction of spirituality from society and the rejection of the wild remedies that were guiding my journey. My dirty boots and disheveled hair were unfit for a “health” clinic, yet they grounded me in a deeper kind of well-being. I was entranced by the idea that nature could be the medicine that we needed.

Maybe real healing would come when we returned to a more primal state, connected with our truest selves and our roots in the natural world. Maybe we just needed to tap into the creativity, healing, and wisdom within us—something that most of us have forgotten.

A few hours later, I dragged myself to the community kitchen for the mandatory meeting. The screaming cicadas, once a pleasant farm soundtrack, now irritated my frayed nerves. John invited us to express our concerns. This invitation prompted Keith to unload months’ worth of withheld grievances. He rambled and cried as I rested a gentle hand on his

shoulder. John listened closely. Each volunteer took turns venting and expressing the need for something other than picking, cleaning, and packing produce. John heard our concerns but seemed shocked at our “high expectations” for a clean bathroom and working appliances.

“You would not believe some of the situations I had to endure during my ten years of volunteering. You guys have it great!” he exclaimed, as if that somehow justified our circumstances.

It was obvious to me that there was a serious disconnect between those of us who had shown up with idealistic ideas and the people who were running the operation. Maybe this was the shadow side of WWOOFing, or maybe this was evidence of Florida’s legacy of poor treatment toward domestic workers, or maybe it was just this specific property which was dysfunctional. Regardless, the working conditions were driving us crazy. Despite the promises John made to create a forum for our opinions, it was clear our feedback was unwelcome and unhelpful. Productivity was the priority. Our dissent was just a wrench in the works.

I am going back to New Mexico to study with a medicine woman, I told myself as I took long, deep breaths under the moonlight. This feels like the most unfamiliar territory, and yet I have the sense that I have been here many times before.

Night shadows danced around me as the evening grew serenely still. There was a fullness in the absence of everything I used to be. Little by little, I was learning more about my preferences, my passion, and my purpose, and I was meeting the most imperfectly perfect people along the way. Each step forward was an awakening adventure, a surrender experiment, an intimate initiation, bringing me both forward and back in time and history.

Maybe my journey isn't so much about becoming "someone." Maybe it was about unbecoming everything that wasn't really me, so I could be who I was meant to be in the first place.

Chapter 10

March 2021

As I approached the village of Arroyo Seco, halfway up a dead-end highway, I felt a sense of hopeful homecoming. The town wasn't much more than an intersection with a 200-year-old church and a handful of quaint shops, but a profound energy stretched to the top of the tallest trees and beyond to the glowing mountains. It enveloped and absorbed me like the arms of an old grandmother. They say that Taos decides whether you are welcome. She can bring you into her fold, or she can just as easily spit you out.

I was a little wobbly on my feet when I stepped onto the Sagebrush Sanctuary property. My departure from Sunny Acres Farms had been bumpy. Keith had left abruptly after the farm meeting, much to my dismay. I had spent my remaining few weeks feeling a mixture of melancholy and determination, and then the long days of driving across the country again had made me dehydrated and disoriented. I surveyed my surroundings. Nearby hunched a mix of dilapidated sheds, RVs, and greenhouses that had endured decades of the fierce desert sun. The main house, its adobe walls worn by the elements, exuded a rustic charm that harkened back to a simpler era. A colorful mural decorated the outdoor wall of the communal kitchen, and a gathering of old furniture snuggled under a wooden canopy.

Despite the weathered appearance of the structures, the homestead exuded a sense of character and history. It felt as if the very essence of those who lived and toiled here lingered in the wind that swept across the land.

I followed a well-worn path toward Luna's door and discovered a few women gathered in the kitchen, preparing various brews and tinctures like a coven of beautiful witches. I looked around at the shelves of mason jars, cooking instruments, fruit peels, and stock pots filled with boiling purple cabbage. I inhaled the mixed menagerie of smells—cedar, cinnamon, citrus, salmon—a virtual attack on the senses.

One of the women explained that Luna was in the back of the house, preparing an herbal formula for a patient. She pointed in the direction of a hallway that was obscured by door curtains decorated with Tibetan holy images. I crept toward the doorway and parted the curtain. To my delight, Luna's home had eight rooms jam-packed with medicine, books, and healing instruments. Every adobe wall was covered with art and native decor. There was a pantry flanked by shelves filled with dozens—maybe hundreds—of dried flowers, leaves, seeds, tinctures, elixirs, oils, and balms. I walked past the shelves in a sort of trance and found a cozy treatment room with two massage tables and floor-to-ceiling shelves with hundreds of manuals about healing, next to a bathroom that had been converted into a spa room.

I turned left, past hanging laundry and baskets of clothes, large coolers, and boxes of veggies, and eventually, I ended up in a wide room of wonder—a hidden apothecary of medicinal abundance. Sacks of plants and baskets of flowers overflowed from floor to ceiling. A very small woman in a burgundy dress floated in the center of it all. When she looked up at me, I thought I might levitate.

“Hi Luna,” I said timidly. “I’m Gabby.”

She tilted her head, and her blue eyes scanned me like a laser. In contrast to the easy greeting we’d had on the FaceTime video, Luna seemed suspicious of my arrival.

“Alfalfa,” she said, pointing at a jar behind me. I reached for it and handed it to her. She scooped out a handful and added it to the salt in the ceramic bowl.

“Mugwort.” She pointed to the muslin bag over my head. I gingerly retrieved the sack and held it open for her. Another handful dropped into the herbal formula.

Frankincense, sage, motherwort, raspberry, lavender—the commands continued. When she was satisfied with the ingredients, she shuffled the bowl, mixing them all together. Then she reached for smaller cotton bags and stuffed them with the confidence of a woman who had done this thousands of times before. I watched in awe.

“Here,” she said as she pressed one of the bags into my palm. “Take a bath with this. It will help you recover from your trip.” She wandered off into another room.

Susan, the nice lady from the kitchen, helped me settle into my cabin and find some clean sheets and towels in the storage closet. She was dressed like a mature hippie in a tie-dye sweatshirt and work boots. Her words flowed steadily as she moved, mixing threads of her personal story with the logistics of where to cook or shower with instructions on how to do chores like gathering the eggs from the chicken coop or stacking the logs against the back of the fireplace so the wind flow would carry the smoke up the chimney. I learned that Susan lived in California, she had been friends with Luna for decades, and she returned every year to help with the spring gardening. She expressed reverence toward the land, the property, and especially Luna, whom she referred to as a “treasure.”

I wondered how long it would take for Luna to warm up to me. *What will I have to do to prove my sincerity?*

As if reading my mind, Susan said, “Just show up and do what she asks, and you’ll be fine.”

“Thanks,” I responded, relishing her kindness.

As I unpacked a few belongings in my room, I was overwhelmed with an unfamiliar feeling, an intensifying force or mounting tension. A jumble of vulnerability and anticipation, a sense of something significant about to happen. *It's probably just the elevation.* I sat on the bed and closed my eyes. Visions of Luna, Susan, and the other women in the kitchen illuminated my mind. It was both startling and satisfying to witness such ancient practices performed in 2021. It felt like a sort of time capsule that had preserved the traditions of the past. I wondered why I wasn't prescribed this kind of medicine when I departed from the Survivors Workshop. *Isn't this a valid prescription for integration? Do the doctors and therapists even know this is an option?*

I imagined my deceased father furrowing his brow and wrinkling his nose at me when I told him that I had forgone psychotherapy for alfalfa and mugwort. When I had told him about the non-Western treatments I was researching in graduate school, Dad had called them “made up medicine” and “pseudoscience.” Alternative medicine was practically sacrilegious in my strictly Catholic community as well—reckless pursuits for misguided fools. *What the hell?* I had wondered. *How did natural medicine become so stigmatized? And why is a man in a white lab coat dispensing chemical tablets revered as a scientist, someone admired for his knowledge, respected*

for his profession, while plant medicine is feared as witchcraft? I was falling down a rabbit hole of unanswerable questions, and it annoyed me.

My phone pinged—a text message from Hannah, my companion from the Earthship project in Puerto Rico. “Meet me in Guatemala?”

“LOL. I just got back to NM.”

“Not now, in June. Sending you the link.”

A logo of a green goddess appeared in the chat. I clicked on it and found myself transported to a webpage reading “Ecology Academy.” Images of an outdoor garden school with smiling people holding plants and mushrooms flooded the screen. *Now this is my kind of clinic!*

“Amazing,” I responded with a heart emoji.

I reached for the herb bundle that Luna had made for me, pressed it against my face, and inhaled the aroma. The scent moved through me, inviting me to decompress.

A grumbling in my stomach motivated me to go in search of food. As I walked across the lawn toward the communal kitchen, Luna called out, “You hungry? Come and eat.”

I turned around to find her disappearing through a small door like the white rabbit in Alice in Wonderland. I hurried in her direction, filled with curiosity, and found a feast waiting inside. Rice and fish and mushrooms

and greens, bowls of seasonings and spices, pitchers of herbal tea and honey.

“Wow,” I muttered as I took a plate from the stack on the counter. Susan was already enjoying her meal at the small table near the fireplace. Luna returned to her seat and motioned for me to join them.

“What’s your birth date?” Luna said. Small talk was not her forte.

“August 1, 1974,” I said.

She did a calculation in her head and then announced, “Very nice. Creative and intuitive. You are a good person.”

Susan winked at me. I smiled awkwardly.

“But you think too much,” she continued. “Always in your head.” She tapped her temple.

I nodded in agreement.

“Give me your palm,” she said.

I offered her my left hand. She ran a finger along the heart line, a deep groove curving horizontally from the edge of my palm on the pinkie side to just underneath my index finger.

“Your love and affection are strong. You are very loyal, but this split...” she pointed to a small offshoot branch, “a recent relationship ended badly.” *That’s an understatement.*

Luna dropped her finger a bit lower and traced the arc around my thumb.

“It’s broken.” She pointed to a fracture in my life line in the middle of my palm. “Completely severed.”

My stomach tightened. I didn’t want to think about it.

She looked at me curiously. “Your life ended. What happened to you...maybe two years ago?”

The accuracy of her reading startled me. Images of Rick flooded my memory. *How could Luna see all this in the wrinkles on my hand?*

I shivered and said, “It’s a long story...”

I felt embarrassed and exposed. Aware of my discomfort, Susan chimed in to change the subject. “Gabby offered to paint the cabins.” It was true. I had offered when Susan gave me the tour.

“You can paint?” Luna asked.

“Yes,” I said.

She nodded in approval.

Susan and Luna continued to talk about what chores needed to be done, which plants had to be ordered from the catalog, and so on. I listened earnestly, hoping to make myself useful.

After the plates were empty and the dishes cleared, I assumed it was time to leave. The twilight sky was giving way to full moonrise. I eased my

way toward the door, but Luna stopped me.

“This way,” she said as she disappeared behind a red curtain. Luna exuded an aura of invitation I couldn’t resist. My heart fluttered as I pushed aside the thick fabric. The interior room was dimly lit by the soft glow of flickering candles. Shelves upon shelves lined the walls, stacked with old books, colorful jars, and strange trinkets.

Luna knelt next to a bulky sheet, bundled like a dumpling. I took a cautious step forward, my eyes fixed on the floor. Slowly and deliberately, she peeled back the corners of the wrap to reveal a heap of delicate green cacti with tufts of short pink hair. She picked one up and held it to her forehead. A knowing smile played on her lips. It was like watching an intimate communion between old friends.

Luna handed one of the cacti buttons to me and told me to press it against my forehead and then to my heart. She told me to feel into it. “Notice how it moves the chi and the blood even when all you do is hold it,” she said. A tingling sensation spread from my fingertips to the core of my body.

“This is sacred peyote.” Luna’s eyes held a distant gaze, as if she were peering into another dimension.

My breath caught in my throat. *Peyote? Like The Teachings of Don Juan peyote? Like divination-with-lizards-and-turning-into-a-blackbird*

peyote? Astonishment, curiosity, and a touch of fear surged within me.

Luna peeled the skin off her button and slipped it inside her cheek. It made her face look like a puffy fish. Then she peeled my cactus and motioned for me to slip it into my own cheek. The air in the room felt charged with an otherworldly energy. Ingesting the peyote would take me a step further into a world I had only just begun to comprehend. My hands trembled as I raised the fleshy plant to my lips. The weight of the decision pressed upon me. It seemed like a medicine path was presenting itself to me. *Do I have the courage to follow it? Where will it lead?*

Luna's gaze was firm and unwavering. I closed my eyes and inhaled like a diver about to plunge. Time slowed to a crawl, and motion suspended itself in the air. A warm stillness spread through my chest. My skin quivered with aliveness. My senses were magnified, forced into the here and now. I sent a silent call out to the Universe. Should I do this?

Like a big cat's roar, a wild yowl returned the answer to me: *Hell yeah.*

The expectant tension shattered. A wide smile spread across my face. I slipped the button into my mouth, and down the rabbit hole I went.

After ingesting the mescal buttons with Luna, I walked back to my room with my feet barely touching the sandy ground. The Earth, which used

to be steady and firm, undulated slightly. I found this amusing. I collapsed onto my bed and felt myself floating down a gentle river. The sensation was delightful. I stared in the direction of the white wall, but it melted like snow. The Milky Way, which stretched across the heavens like a river of stardust, entered the room. Each luminous point of light was incandescent and kind. A feeling of benevolence floated between me and the stars. My breath was steady and smooth. Deep relaxation pressed upon me. My mind emptied. Fully immersed in the present moment, I was completely at peace.

I woke the next day astonished at the perfection of the previous evening. As I looked around the room and registered my surroundings, all the bits of my brain that contained my insecurities and worries, complaints, and anxieties, began sliding into their familiar grooves, like keys in a lock. I mumbled to myself, “No, no, no, no.” I wanted to stay in peyote bliss, reside forever in the place where there was nothing to prove, nothing to fix, where the world was not a problem to be solved, only a wonder to behold. As I bundled up and headed out to the communal bathroom, I ruminated on all the ways I felt broken and afraid. *This sucks!* I had glimpsed a small window of freedom, a brief refuge from the “me” that was so annoying, and now it was twice as hard to be in my own head.

“*Ugh!*” I let out an audible grunt.

Although I had come a long way from the panic of the previous year, my mind was no haven of contentment. The sense of being scattered persisted, and my healing could not happen fast enough. I determined that I would learn as much as possible from Luna about herbal medicine and other remedies so I could self-heal from my afflictions. Surely there were some magic formulas in her old adobe house that could cure me, or at least get me one step closer to wholeness.

During the next few days, Luna assigned a plethora of chores that were the perfect antidote to my perpetual self-absorption: Ordering fruit trees from the nursery catalog. Digging irrigation ditches in the field. Assembling a greenhouse with PVC pipe and repurposed wood. The manual labor exhausted me so much that I slept deeply each night. While we worked, we sucked on peyote buttons or drank peyote tea. They were microdoses, but they were large enough for me to feel the constant presence of the spirit of the plant moving through my system. My senses were both heightened and softened so that I felt more connected to everything around me without feeling frazzled by the stimulation. It helped me stay calm and present.

Luna moved gracefully with this medicine, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. She told me that the natives who had given her

the cactus had been using it this way for centuries. “To make them happy while they worked,” she explained.

In the evenings, I sat with Luna at the same table where I shared dinner with her and Susan. We slowly peeled the bark off the buttons, washed them in a glass bowl of cool water, sliced them, and placed them on a baking sheet for dehydration in preparation for the spring equinox ceremonies. While we worked, Luna spoke about the constellations and transits of the stars.

One night, she whispered, “Are you ready for some movement and expansion and a new beginning?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Jupiter is moving into Aries,” she said. “There is a door between these two places that’s creating breakthroughs and new discoveries for you.” Her words stirred something in me. “Be open to the truth,” she said. “It can come through the cracks in mysterious ways.”

Luna explained how the positions of celestial bodies overhead were writing a story in the sky about healing for humanity and a sense of getting our power back. She emphasized the importance of listening and questioning belief systems.

As I held the fragile, moist cactus in my hands and listened to her talk about the stars, I sensed I was like a lightning rod between heaven and

Earth. My heart was vibrating. My body was electric. The safety of the adobe house and Susan and Luna's presence steadied me and helped me open to the feelings.

A gentle rain fell on the roof, creating a sacred drumming sound. Luna shared ceremony stories. As she described local gatherings on the bank of the Rio Grande River, I felt the powerful repetition of ritual passed down through generations. The more she described the festivities, the more the past came to life, as if we were resurrecting the dead. The room seemed to lose its sharpness, like an old photograph fading at the edges. The colors around me took on a dreamlike quality, vibrant yet distant, as if I was viewing them through a haze. I saw people, adorned in intricate garments woven from leather and beads, performing a mesmerizing dance around a blazing pyre. Their voices rose and fell in a hypnotic rhythm of ancient incantations that seemed to echo through the ages. The bonfire cast a warm glow over their faces. My body felt both heavy and weightless. The veil between worlds dissipated, adding to my sense of dissociation.

Suddenly, something sharp and precise dropped into my awareness: certainty that this narrative was not just a story. It was my history. The rituals were real, actual events, not some fairy-tale legend. I was a direct descendant of these magical, primitive people. They were my ancestors, my human family. Their blood and energy were part of my current reality. Their

legacy lived in my DNA. I felt a tug at my heart and a long, golden thread between the past and present activated. However produced and artificial my life may have seemed, however alien and homeless I felt wandering around the planet, there was a much deeper truth pushing its way to the surface. I was not separate from the people and practices that came before me. *How could I have not seen this before?*

Emotions ebbed and flowed like ocean tides as I walked back to my cabin. Boundaries between the physical and the spiritual realms blurred. The majesty of the cool rain eclipsed my thoughts, and the here and now rushed in to greet me. The intoxicating scent of burning wood and the haunting melodies of flutes followed me into my bed and lulled me to sleep.

Something spoke to me in my dreams. This rewilding. This unwinding. This unlearning, relearning, and regeneration. No longer separate. One unbroken feeling of connectedness and resonating response. One drop of water returning, merging into her sea.

I felt a delicious sense of vertigo the next day, along with an acute awareness that, since I had arrived at Sagebrush Sanctuary, I had been more present than I had ever been in my life. This newfound presence was a miraculous antidote to my anxiety and rumination. Delighted and curious about the role that peyote was playing, I looked for a book that might help me better understand what was going on. I quickly stumbled across *How to*

Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence by Michael Pollan.

Within minutes of listening to the author's neighborly voice on Audible, I felt a cognitive framework assembling around my experience, grounding me, and giving me comfort. According to the book, peyote was likely the first psychedelic ever used. It was also the first to be banned in the Americas. In 1620, Spain banned the use of peyote to subjugate the native populations because it offered a direct line to the divine with no need for a middleman. The Spanish called it the "diabolical root."

As I mixed lime, compost, perlite, and other ingredients into homemade potting soil for the garden, I listened to Michael weave the politics of psychedelics together with the neuroscience of tripping and add accounts of his own spiritual excursions. As he questioned "normal consciousness" and explored the boundless and transcendent realities of altered states, I felt a flood of excitement. I loved the topic of altered states—I had been exploring them since my mystical experience at my mother's funeral in the mid-1990s. But I believed that using drugs to access these states was a precarious path. As the adult child of an alcoholic and drug addict, I feared that substances that made you "altered" also made you violent and crazy. Michael and mescal were offering me a different

perspective: psychedelics were a viable solution to addiction, depression, anxiety, and more.

I teared up at the accounts of Michael's personal journeys with plant medicine. I reached into the archives of my mind and remembered how frequently plants had appeared in the autobiographies of women healers and the lives of the participants in my research during graduate school. They connected to the energy of trees and animals and appreciated nature as the ultimate teacher and a framework for understanding the healing process—an earth-based approach that focused on the interconnectedness of life. I thought about the stack of books that had surrounded me on my small desk in 2005. I recalled reading so many stories about the sacred and intelligent power of nature—how the world was alive, awake, and aware and each ecology had its own psyche. Within every ecology, each thing had its own unique mind or imagination and an active agency and power.

Maybe I was mistaken all along. Maybe this is the medicine we've been waiting for.

Chapter 11

May 2021

When I typed the text to Hannah—“I signed up for Ecology Academy. See you in Guatemala!” —I felt a surge of intensity. Then I burst out laughing.

For a couple of weeks, I had been visiting the website I had received from Hannah in March. I had read the description of “Permaculture for the Herbalist’s Path,” the 200-hour course at Lake Atitlán, and studied the images of Mayan women growing food and herbs alongside clinical herbalists integrating science and psychology. I longed to understand the philosophy and pharmacology behind these medicinal plants. I had felt subtle shifts in my physical and mental well-being, and I was convinced that there were more benefits awaiting me.

As I scrolled through pictures of plant walks and design projects, a bigger vision of my future formed in my mind, a weaving of ancient wisdom and modern technology, blending humanitarian, healing, and sacred elements—a calling to master a way of being that was both Indigenous and innovative. I felt the internal shift like a change in atmospheric pressure. I was embracing things I’d once rejected, like living an unplanned life. I was letting go of stigmas and social norms and feeling a whole lot more resilient and empowered in the process.

Each step forward was totally absurd *and* entirely logical. I grew giddy with anticipation as I thought about traveling to Guatemala and letting go of conditioning about the “perfect life” constructed by American media. For the second time in less than a year, I’d be leaping into the unknown with my friend. What a long, strange trip this was turning out to be.

Determined to finish at least one of the many projects at Sagebrush Sanctuary before my departure, I doubled down on my efforts to complete the large greenhouse behind Luna’s home. I worked alongside Luna’s son Andrew and another volunteer, Hunter. We measured, cut, and assembled the PVC pipes into the arched framework, ensuring it would be sturdy enough to withstand the desert winds. Hunter crafted the wooden supports and secured them in place. I added the hinges and installed the reclaimed doors. While we labored, the ground thawed, and the daylight hours gradually increased. Andrew shoveled the garden soil into lush piles on the ground inside and added the small green sprouts we had been nurturing for weeks.

One Saturday morning, I went back to my cabin to get my water bottle. I hummed a song as I took off my windbreaker, warm from the morning labor.

Suddenly, my mother's presence swept through the room and deposited a message in my head: "My brother is coming to stay with me in two months," she said. An image of my Uncle Bill on his deathbed flashed. I froze. Knifelike alertness cut through my reverie. I held my breath for a second to see what would happen next. *Whoosh*. Mom vanished. The image of Bill disappeared with her. It was a warning, a premonition. Every cell of my being knew that Bill was going to die.

I stood motionless for some time, feeling the aftershocks of the visitation and bewilderment about what to do with the information. *Should I tell my family? Will they believe me?* I had never told anyone about the contact I had with my mother after she passed. I figured it would make me seem too unhinged. My free-spirited lifestyle already scared my relatives.

I listened to my body for some emotional reaction. *Am I sad? Scared?* There was a quiet calm, no alarms, and then a surge of grief rushed to the surface. I ran outside as fast as I could, squatted with my hands on the ground, and took long, deep breaths as tears rolled down my cheeks.

"I'm so sorry, Bill," I whispered out loud. "I'm so sorry."

I felt the trees lean toward me and the ground come up to meet me. There was support in the dirt, in the Earth, in the eternal abundance of life. I was learning to trust her, to have faith in her, to let her help me when I needed it most.

When my body and breath returned to balance, I went back inside, sat down on my bed, and scrolled through my contacts. There was one person I should tell. Aunt Judy, my mom and Bill's younger sister, would likely be distraught when he died. She had lost her parents and her sister. Now her brother would be leaving too. I wanted to give her some time to prepare. But what to say, I wondered. I decided to keep it casual.

I just got the weirdest feeling about Bill—have you talked to him lately? I wrote to her.

No. No messages or calls, she responded.

The seed was planted. I would wait to see what happened.

As we constructed the greenhouse, day by day, Luna circled us like a happy puppy, encouraging us to listen to our impulses for food, water, rest, and so on. She said that when we attended to our inner impulses, we were in sync with the laws of the universe. When we ignored or pushed or procrastinated, we were going against the stream. The more we ignored the body, the louder the alarm, and the less attuned we were to what we needed. Learning to be healthy was unlearning the denial of the body.

Boy, could I relate to that. So many of my needs had been ignored or denied when I was young. My parents were loud and demanding, so I

learned to be quiet and deprived. My Catholic school teachers valued discipline and morality, so I learned to be the perfectly behaved student.

Luna offered me a new path forward, one that put me back in natural flow, listening to my body, listening to the wind and the water and the plants. Through listening, maybe I would hear the guidance I needed to find refuge in myself.

On my last evening at Sagebrush Sanctuary, Andrew, Luna, Hunter, and I gathered around a crackling campfire that sent spirals of smoke and sparks up into a star-studded sky. The night was clear. Andrew strummed the guitar as Hunter and I drank shots of tequila from funny little teacups. The ache of separation would come with the sunrise, but as the flames danced and the stars shimmered, my heart fluttered with joy. I couldn't help but smile as Luna shared stories and memories, some funny and others heartwarming. Every anecdote added to the mosaic of our shared experiences, reinforcing the bond that distance could never break. I felt the thrill of new experiences waiting to be had, and the satisfaction of knowing that I was following the path that felt right to me. It was a reminder that goodbyes, while difficult, were also the start of exciting new chapters, which was something I would need to keep in mind in the future.

On June 10, I headed south on Route 68, my Mustang overflowing with mementos and memories. I was going to leave my car with my friend in New York while I was in Guatemala. As the road stretched out before me, I received a call from Judy.

“Bill has cancer,” she said.

I paused, not sure what to say. It had been a few weeks since our last text exchange, which meant Bill only had a short time left. I mustered my courage and said, “Remember when I contacted you last month? I got a premonition...actually, Mom came to me and said Bill had two months to live. I don’t want to alarm you, but I think he’ll pass soon. I’m so sorry.” I held my breath. It was the bravest thing I had said in...well, forever.

“Yes, I think so too,” Judy said. “And that would be a blessing.”

I let out a sigh as the pain settled around me.

As I drove, surrounded by breathtaking beauty, misty volcanic mountains on the horizon, and the high desert in the rearview mirror, life seemed surreal, unexplainable. My emotions were a mix of awe and sorrow, heartbreak and hope. *In the short time we are here in this blip on the cosmic timeline, what can we do that matters*, I wondered. I needed to find answers. But the existential crisis would have to wait. My herbalism course started in a few days. I had a plane to catch.

Three things were true for me when I arrived in Guatemala in June 2021: I had come a long way from the Trauma Survivors Workshop, I was still carrying too much emotional baggage, and I was moving forward, sometimes in spite of myself. Something extraordinary was unfolding in my life, guided by a divine hand or destiny. I was finding kinship with ancient places and a spiritual ground within myself. I was learning new skills and connecting with new communities. The insecurities and anxieties that had dominated my life the previous year were still present, but it felt as if the volume had been turned way down. I felt lighter and more laid-back with each passing day.

“You look amazing!” Hannah said when we embraced at the La Aurora International Airport. She looked great herself in a yellow floral dress, sporting a backpack the size of a tiger on her shoulders.

“Thanks,” I smiled. “Did you pack enough for the trip?” I teased her.

“Yeah, yeah, very funny.” She adjusted the backpack on her shoulders. “Tell me about New Mexico. I want to hear everything!” she exclaimed.

Hannah asked endless questions about Luna and Sagebrush Sanctuary. I relayed the events of the previous months as we traveled by

taxi over bumpy cobblestone roads to our adorable hostel in the center of town.

In the months we had been apart, Hannah had adventured through Mexico and the Caribbean in search of her own exotic experiences. She was about to buy land in the Dominican Republic and build the eco retreat of her dreams. I felt a pang of envy as I listened to her describe the rolling hills near a pristine surfing beach. She was finding clarity and planting roots, while I was still adrift in a sea of uncertainty.

Our conversation continued along the narrow Guatemalan streets through the colorful, chaotic *mercado*. We wandered past pink bougainvillea spilling over mossy stone walls into the quaint cafés and textile museums. We were surrounded by a plethora of vibrant paintings, wooden masks, beaded everything. Among the treasures, I suddenly stopped in front of a magnificent carving of a goddess with a serpent headdress, sitting on the moon with her pot of herbs and water.

Squinting to read the inscription, I said, “Ix Chel. Who is she?”

“Ix Chel”—she pronounced it *ee-shell*—“is the queen of all the goddesses who watch over healers and help them,” the attendant explained. “She is the guardian of the natural world and makes the medicine plants grow.”

As I took in the stunning craftsmanship, the presence of something profound sent a rush of truth and wonder through my being. Hannah and I exchanged excited glances. This was more than just a casual encounter with art. The attendant noticed our fascination and shared the significance of the Rainbow Goddess's symbols: the transformative power of the snake, the lunar cycles of change, the abundance and fertility of the harvest. It was the perfect embodiment of our journey, an uncanny encounter that startled me.

Once we arrived at Lake Atitlán, we traveled by ferry across the deep volcanic waters to Tzununá, the lakeside town whose name means “Hummingbird of the Water.” We were surrounded by misty mountains, and each breath felt like a cool drink of air, as pure as it gets. We continued our journey in a colorful tuk-tuk, a small three-wheeled taxi that is a common mode of transport in Guatemala. The tuk-tuk took us up a towering road to the Bambu Guest House, a stunning, naturally built retreat center surrounded by lush green landscape. Stepping onto the open-ai red platform with breathtaking views of the lake was like walking onto the altar of the world. I could hardly believe this would be our classroom for the next 30 days.

There was a buzz of activity as we checked in. We chatted with young women from Costa Rica, England, New Zealand, and other destinations.

The guesthouse's dorm-style accommodations were spacious and well-lit, with bunk beds neatly arranged to maximize space. Conversations in English and Spanish filled the air as we shared our travel stories and expectations for the course. Backpacks and lots of gear lay scattered around the space, adding to the feeling of a shared adventure.

As the sun set, we gathered on the deck for the opening circle. Yoga mats, bolsters, and blankets awaited on the hardwood floor. A small stack of books about healing and nature sat in the corner. In the center of the room sat a table of tonics and an altar with feathers, crystals, and tarot cards. Prayer flags and string lights hung overhead.

Our course instructor, Sarah, set the stage for a new moon ritual. She lit fragrant incense and candles on the altar. In a calm, deliberate manner, she explained the significance of the new moon in various cultures, emphasizing its association with new beginnings, intention-setting, and a fresh start. She also highlighted how the moon's cycles were interconnected with permaculture practices and herbalism, emphasizing the importance of aligning with nature's rhythms.

This new moon was especially auspicious because it coincided with a solar eclipse. A solar eclipse occurs when the moon blocks the light of the sun, casting a shadow over Earth. Both a new moon and a solar eclipse are fertile ground for introspection, breakthroughs, and setting off in a new

direction. They help us get in touch with our emotions and open a portal between the known and unknown.

I wanted this time in Guatemala to be a turning point for me. I wanted to let go of my lingering insecurities and anxieties. I wanted more clarity about my path and purpose. I wanted to feel connected to something larger than myself, while at the same time closing the gap between who I was and who I wanted to become.

Sarah guided us through a series of meditation and grounding exercises, encouraging us to connect with our aspirations for the upcoming month. Then she picked up a handmade drum and began a rhythmic thumping that sounded like a heartbeat. A pitcher of hot tea made its way around the circle. It was warm and soothing when it touched my lips.

The combination of herbal scents, lunar energy, and communal synchrony put me in a blissful trance. The drumbeat pulsed through the room, creating a sense of tranquility within the circle. I felt like I was in an exquisite, protected bubble. All my worries and problems drifted away. The stresses, responsibilities, and existential concerns that weighed on me were temporarily absent.

As the new moon materialized, Sarah led a meditation, solidifying the feeling of unity among the group. I floated in and out of consciousness, and I could've sworn I saw Ix Chel standing guard outside our circle with her

royal staff raised in respect to the night sky. I was keenly aware that, even with so much uncertainty and tragedy, there was something miraculous about the orchestration of my life.

The morning after the celestial ritual, I woke up refreshed and eager to learn. I gathered with the other young women on the deck, which had been transformed from an ethereal space to an academic classroom. A standing whiteboard concealed the altar and sacred objects from view. Large bound textbooks were distributed with the daily schedule, lesson plans, and homework assignments. Sarah, our instructor, delved into the complex and practical aspects of permaculture principles, medicinal herbs, and sustainable farming practices. The room filled with the sounds of pencils scribbling, questions being asked, and the rustling of notebook pages. I was reminded that my time in Guatemala was not just about experiencing moments of transcendence but also about applying practical knowledge to make a positive impact on the environment and the local people.

My interest was piqued when Sarah announced our fieldwork projects. Hannah and I were assigned to a local nonprofit organization called WellKind, which addressed ecological and economic challenges of the local communities via artisan cooperatives. I was mesmerized by the

Guatemalan textiles, vibrant patterns woven into skirts, tops, and other accessories. I envisioned an empowering collaboration where we provided resources and support to the Mayan women that could “sow the seeds of change” and evoke grateful smiles like the ones on the WellKind website. I was not expecting the encounters with village women to break my heart and humble me in gratitude instead.

During the first organized meeting with the WellKind group, we met with the local staff. They had been given a two-acre parcel of land near Lake Atitlán to develop into a community center. Two young men who managed the operations described their vision for the property. Their top priorities were offices for themselves, systems for waste and water, a greenhouse, a place for animals, and a cafeteria for families to gather and eat. We recorded their ideas in our notebooks, making a note to visit and survey the land as soon as possible.

We turned to Lucrecia and Cruz, two young women who did administrative work and community management, and asked if they wanted the same things. They were quiet and reserved, looking at each other repeatedly before answering any of our questions.

“The women are not safe,” one of them finally said. “The men beat the women. The men do not let the women leave the house. Many of the

women are not allowed to work outside the home.”

My jaw tightened. My body became hot. I could feel the fury rising. The two young men sat silently with their eyes cast downward.

A quick Google search confirmed the women’s story: Guatemala is one of the most dangerous places on Earth to be a woman. More than one woman per day is murdered by her husband or a family member. Nearly all crimes against women in Guatemala go unpunished, and few facilities are available for women to get help.

The atmosphere shifted from welcoming to somber. There was an air of camaraderie and trust in the room, but there was also a palpable sense of concern. Lucrecia’s voice trembled with emotion as she recounted the struggles she had faced. My mind flashed back to violent scenes from my childhood and the trauma that still lingered in my psyche. I listened intently, my heart heavy with empathy, nodding in recognition of this universal issue. Even though there was a vast gap in culture and geography between Lucrecia and me, we were sisters in powerlessness and pain. Hannah and I expressed our support and willingness to learn more about the issue, as well as a desire to contribute to initiatives that would protect the women and families.

As soon as we dispersed, I put in my earbuds, turned up the volume as high as possible, and ran down the steep hill of Tzununá toward the big blue lake. I was surrounded by breathtaking beauty, but it hardly registered. I was angry. I ran fast and hard. Stray dogs darted out of the way as they saw me coming. The afternoon heat was thick and steady. Flashbacks raced through my mind. I practiced my deep breathing. I clenched and unclenched my fists. I named the colors of things that whisked by. *Red wrapper. Yellow sign. Blue bottle cap.* The running felt good. I liked the way my lungs burned and my legs ached. I liked that the music was so loud it was hard to hear my thoughts. I felt confident I had gotten out ahead of the emotion, that I could outrun it if I kept pushing forward.

As I approached the top of the hill and stopped to look at the majestic view, bittersweet tears rolled down my cheeks. Love and loss and reverence and frustration were all mashed into one messy emotion. *I am here for a reason.* It seemed more than coincidental that I had ended up in this country, assigned to this project that so clearly reflected the healing I still needed in my own life. I decided that as soon as the permaculture course ended, I would return home and finish the book I carried inside me like an overdue baby. I needed to express my truth, with all its challenges, mistakes, failures, pain, and setbacks, as well as its joys, successes, and

victories. Writing my story would be a testament to what I had survived and a powerful declaration that we are more than the events that happen to us.

Chapter 12

June 2021

Over the next few weeks, we visited various towns around the perimeter of the lake to meet the midwives, traditional healers, and shamans who practiced Indigenous rituals that were thousands of years old. We saw the way they were protecting the identity and traditions of their people in the face of modernization. We heard about the ways that they were integrating with modern medicine in some places and circumventing it in others, choosing instead to use sacred plants, such as ayahuasca or mushrooms, to induce altered states of consciousness for healing and insight.

During one trip, we visited San Juan La Laguna on the southwest shore of the lake. We followed Leila, one of our local teaching assistants, along winding dirt paths into the interior of the village. The air was damp, and a fine drizzle fell steadily, shrouding the landscape in a gentle, persistent mist. We arrived at a thatched-roof shack, about the size of a small bedroom. I squeezed into the corner of the space, surrounded by my two dozen classmates. A flickering fire dominated the center of the room, which was decorated with stones, candles, and flowers. The heat inside the shack was nearly suffocating. The scent of copal hung around us. Sweat poured from my pores, and my clothes clung to me like a second skin.

A weathered medicine man, his skin etched with the lines of time, waved sacred herbs as he chanted to the fire in an ancient Mayan language. He asked permission for us to be there and offered our sincere gratitude.

As the ceremony wore on, my senses were overwhelmed. I saw dancing figures in the flames. My breath came in quick, shallow gasps as I surrendered to the powerful emotions swelling within me.

The room morphed into a whirlwind of sensations, a cacophony of heat, sweat, and smoke that enveloped me in an almost hallucinatory dream. The flames of the fire grew so intense they seemed to lick at the very edges of reality. The shaman summoned each of us to him one by one and waved the burning plants, smoke swirling and obscuring our faces.

When the medicine man called me forward and blew smoke into my forehead, I felt a portal open to my deepest feelings. There were fireworks in my gut, in my nerves, in my soul. It was as if the fire itself had penetrated me. His female apprentice said, "The fire approves of you. The fire knows you are here to do good things. The fire says you have gifts to share." My heart softened, shedding condemnation, flooding with worthiness. Simultaneously lost in the moment and hyper aware of every nuance, I felt my perception heighten to an almost painful degree. I started to sob.

I dashed out of the room and crouched down in the alley near the door. Tears streamed down my face. Thermal energy pulsed through every fiber of my being. In that sweltering, transcendent moment, I realized the burning was familiar. It was the hot rage of my unhealed wounds. The white heat of my previous lives. The mythical ash from which I was rising.

When we returned to the classroom the following day, I was still fragile from the ceremony. Guatemala was amplifying everything inside of me. I longed for some ease in riding the emotional waves instead of being pummeled by them. I added drops of herbal tinctures to my morning tea and took long deep breaths of the tropical air.

I was close to finding some relief when my phone pinged with a message from my brother Joseph. Uncle Bill was very close to the end and wanted to say goodbye on a group call. My stomach plummeted, and my shoulders pressed into my ears as I recoiled in anguish at the idea. I had to speak with Bill. It was the right thing to do. I prayed to Mayan gods to give me strength and inner power.

“Where are you?” Bill grumbled over the phone in a raspy voice.

“Guatemala,” I said for the second time since the call began. “It’s in Central America, below Mexico.”

“Oh, well, when are ya coming home?” he said, unimpressed with my nomadic lifestyle.

I tried to change the subject. “How are you doing?”

“Ya know, ya gotta settle down sometime.” Bill ignored my question. “Stop all this running around.”

I laughed through my tears. The sound of Bill’s voice was the closest thing to “home” I had heard in a long time. I was transported back to his living room—beer, cigarettes, loud TV, and all. He was still living in the same Pennsylvania house where I had spent Thanksgivings as a kid, and he was still bossing me around like I was seven years old.

My Aunt Sue, Joseph, and I took turns reminiscing and catching up on current events. Bill was impressed that Joseph had finally gotten married “to a foxy lady.” Maybe there was some hope for us after all.

“I love ya, kid,” Bill said to me before we ended the call.

“I love you too,” I said.

I stood on the small veranda overlooking the lush landscape. I felt a vacuum of emptiness as I realized that that was the last time I would ever hear Bill’s voice. No more snarky comments. No more inappropriate jokes. No more “I love you’s. I felt a rip down the center of my being. A tidal wave of grief poured forth with fierce pain.

I instinctively sought out Hannah, wrapped my arms around her, and cried like a baby. The floodgates were open. I couldn't have held back my emotion if I tried.

Sarah, our instructor, saw my despair and asked if she could do anything to help. I didn't want the attention. I didn't want to open my Pandora's box and expose my guts to these strangers, even if they were genuinely interested in assisting me.

I scurried back to my room and buried myself in bed, resolving to regain my composure. For the next few days, I binge-watched documentary stories like *The Me You Can't See*, with Oprah and Prince Harry, and *The Wisdom of Trauma* series with Dr. Gabor Maté.

It was strangely satisfying to listen to the stories of others. It made me feel less alone, less crazy. Like Harry and the other brave souls in the interviews, I tried to cope with tragedy by avoiding the subject entirely. I was willing to do things to avoid my feelings—yoga, or exercise, or even constant traveling. But despite my best efforts at running away, a shadow of emotional distress followed me everywhere. *Is there hope for me? What will help me heal this, once and for all?*

Serendipitously, Prince Harry and Gabor Maté both revealed that plant-based psychedelic medicine like psilocybin and ayahuasca offered a wide range of healing benefits, especially when dealing with grief.

Gabor said:

We get to see both what we've been running from and trying to cope with, and trying to manipulate, but we also get to see that true connection, that true love, that true beauty, that true vision, that pure insight, that pure strength, that pure compassion. And when we do that, we realize we don't have to cope anymore. We don't have to run anymore. We can just be right where we are.

That sounded amazing! Being content in my own skin felt like a faraway dream, accessible only in my imagination. I knew it was possible; I had tasted it with the peyote in New Mexico. I'd felt the purity Gabor described. Could that state be sustained? How would I do that? My curiosity was strong enough to catapult me from despondence to optimism. It motivated me to return to class and find some herbal answers, once and for all.

The morning sun streamed through the window of the cozy rustic community kitchen at Casa Curativa, the herbal education center tucked in between the market and the river in Tzununá. A long wooden table was covered with a colorful array of fresh jars and bottles. The aroma of herbs and spices filled the air. We gathered with our notebooks around Julia, a vibrant herbalist and doula from Nashville, who was holding a glass jar and

a sprig of rosemary. She announced enthusiastically that we were going to learn how to make oxymel.

“It’s a wonderful herbal preparation that combines the sweetness of honey with the tang of vinegar. It’s a fantastic remedy for colds and coughs, and it’s a general immune booster,” she explained.

As she chopped fragrant leaves of thyme, rosemary, and sage, Julia told us how she had used to struggle with eczema and psoriasis. She’d visited doctors and tried countless ointments and medications, but nothing had seemed to work. The constant itching and discomfort were unbearable. She stumbled upon herbal medicine, started experimenting with different remedies, and slowly began to see improvement. Julia was confident that the answers to our health issues could be found in nature if we were willing to listen to our bodies.

The oxymel melted on my tongue in a sweet-savory tang of flavor. I was inspired by Julia’s journey and the possibilities herbalism offered. It was so simple and yet so profound. These plants were at our disposal, allies and infinite resources for healing. I felt grateful to be learning another tool of self-reliance: making my own medicine.

Julia gave us woven baskets and sent us into the gardens to collect more plants for her. I clipped pieces of yarrow, lemongrass, and hibiscus. I admired baby reishi mushrooms growing on a moist stump. I felt a simple

joy that was so new and yet so familiar, as if I had been foraging for many lifetimes. Casa Curativa was an idyllic oasis. There were several cabins on the property, an apothecary, a natural pool, and a temescal (sweat lodge). The trees and shrubs surrounding the grounds created a sense of sanctuary, and the overflowing gardens inspired a feeling of abundance.

I stopped and dangled my feet into the natural pond, feeling the cold move up my legs and into my spine. It was refreshing and grounding. I let my mind drift the distance between Guatemala and New York, where I had come from a few weeks earlier, where I would be returning to soon. The contrast between the urban jungle and the real jungle was astonishing, like moving from a dystopian film to a mythological novel, both surreal in their own ways. It seemed like I had always been traveling between worlds, meeting many characters, and having many adventures.

“Hey, you good?” Julia interrupted my reverie.

“Oh, hi,” I said. “Yes, I’m just wondering how you managed to create all this.”

Julia laughed. She was the epitome of a successful and grounded female healer and entrepreneur, the kind of person who makes business look effortless and healing seem simple.

“Little by little,” she said. “One step at a time.”

I felt a nagging impulse to tell her about the recent emotions that had swept through me, rocking my inner world like a violent storm. I wondered if maybe she knew an herbal remedy that could cure me like the plants that had cured her skin condition. I hesitated, fearing she might judge me. I was still not totally comfortable with my mental and emotional instabilities.

She must have sensed my hesitation because she asked again, “You’re sure you’re good?”

“Well, there is this thing I could use some help with, I guess,” I admitted.

After I explained all my feelings from the WellKind meeting with the local women and Uncle Bill’s death and shared a brief history of my chronic anxiety and panic attacks, Julia said, “Oh, you poor thing. I’ll make a formula for you.”

Relieved and embarrassed, I followed her to her apothecary. Stepping into Julia’s laboratory felt like walking backward in time. Glass jars held tinctures and potions. There was a tall distillation apparatus with bubbling water and oozing oil. Shelves were filled with extractions, lotions, teas, and capsules made from dried leaves, flowers, berries, and mushrooms. The labels were handwritten in black ink that smeared when I touched them with wet fingers.

After mixing a blend of flowers like holy basil and lavender, she pulled a small brown box down from the shelf and showed me some capsules that looked like they had been stuffed with brown powder. “And these...” she said. “I think you should be microdosing with psilocybin.”

Look who’s back!

After Jon had given me the little caps last year, I had had no plans of taking them again. Why would I? They didn’t even work—or so I thought. But the mushrooms were back, via someone I respected. I held the cardboard package in my palm. A tingling sensation spread from my fingertips to the core of my body, just like when I’d held the peyote at Luna’s.

Maybe I wasn’t quite ready before. Maybe I’m ready now.

Julia explained the potential benefits, including improved mood and reduced anxiety. I was eager for change and better mental health. My desire for relief strongly outweighed any reservations I had about possible risks. If Indigenous peoples all over the world had used mushrooms for their medicinal and spiritual properties for thousands of years, that was enough evidence for me.

Julia and I exchanged a warm, meaningful hug. As I stepped out of the apothecary, my heart filled with a profound sense of gratitude and anticipation. I clutched my bundle of herbs, mushrooms, and medicinal

creations tightly, feeling the excitement of uncharted territory and the allure of unexplored adventures.

Before I could graduate from the Ecology Academy and depart Guatemala, Hannah and I needed to present our permaculture plan for the WellKind group. We wanted to create a wake-up call for our audience of peers, to remind them of the fragile and sacred ground where we resided. We wanted to honor Lucrecia and Cruz and emphasize the healing that needed to happen in the community.

“Please take a moment of silence for the people of Guatemala who have been affected by violence, poverty and war,” I said at the opening of the talk. The room was so quiet I could hear my heart beating.

After a minute or two passed, I said, “Most people live below the poverty line here. Two women are killed every day for being female, and Guatemala is one of the most dangerous places on Earth to be a woman.”

Grief filled the faces in front of me. I was steady and calm.

Hannah and I took the audience through a journey of 60 slides that explained the challenges local women were facing and our solutions to support them. These included everything from artisan partnerships to safe shelters for women who had domestic violence crises. The WellKind staff

saw a dream of sanctuary, security, and sovereignty unfolding before their eyes. Lucrecia beamed with gratitude and appreciation.

After the presentation, I walked down the cobblestone hill, past stray dogs and discarded candy wrappers, toward the edge of Lake Atitlán, just like I had on my first run through the streets of Tzununá. The smoky mist settled on the glassy lake as the sun started to set. The shops were closed. The houses were quiet. I felt a lightness in my step and a momentum of contentment. A hummingbird with iridescent feathers hovered nearby, reminding me of my first ceremony in Guatemala and what the shaman had told us about this totem:

The hummingbird moves her wings in a figure-eight pattern, a symbol for infinity. She teaches us to go beyond time and to see that what happened in the past and what may happen in the future is not nearly as important as what is occurring now. Remember to hover in the moment and to appreciate its sweetness. Drink deeply of the nectar of life.

Hummingbird medicine resonated with me. I was traveling with less ambition, agenda, and urgency than ever. I appreciated each moment with a bittersweet awareness that life was precious and impermanent.

Standing at the water's edge, I could feel the embrace of the three volcanoes around me, powerful symbols that beautiful outcomes like a lush lake could be formed in the aftermath of unexpected eruptions. *This is the divine feminine. Wild, earthy, sensual, metamorphic.* I could feel her power and her majesty. I had been running from her for so long, running from her realness, her messiness, her pain, and her darkness because I was afraid to face the destruction and crumbling of who I pretended to be. I was too scared to look at all the parts of myself I was hiding or denying. I was terrified of my own story and my deep inner desires.

Guatemala had shifted something inside me. I had begun my journey in Tzununá with a desire to let go of the insecurities and anxieties, to gain more clarity about my path and purpose and to close the gap between who I was and who I wanted to become. In just two short months, I had found the guidance and inspiration I was looking for. I was no longer afraid of my reflection. I was ready to show my true self to the world. I attributed this mostly to nature, to the plants that had become my allies and partners in the process of restoration, and to the mentorship of Sarah, Julia, and the other powerful healers I had encountered. If they could own their wisdom, in all its paradoxical glory, then I could, too.

Chapter 13

July 2021

After I returned from Guatemala, the next stop on my WWOOFing journey was Sisters of St Joseph, an organic farm and congregation of retired nuns. The photos of the 212 acres of lush landscape, old brick cathedrals, walking trails, and campus ministry seduced me with a sense of serenity and community. It seemed like the perfect bridge between the untamed lands of my previous stays and the wildness of the civilized world, an ideal place to reintegrate into society and finally finish writing my book.

I was also attracted to this assignment because of its proximity to my family. It had been nearly a year since I had seen my brothers Joseph and Alfredo. We were long overdue for a visit.

Nestled behind a wall of evergreen trees in Brentwood, New Jersey, the Sisters of St. Joseph property unfolded like a beautiful Victorian resort. I could almost see horse-drawn carriages meandering down the paths with upper-class women in their big skirts and bonnets. Standing in front of the stone archway of my dorm building, I strained my neck to look up at the towering facade and weathered copper steeples. As I walked through the marble entrance hall, the air carried a faint scent of polished wood and aged books. It was eerie in its abandonment, and I wondered if I was in the right place. I double-checked the instructions on my phone before ascending the

grand staircase. I climbed two dozen wide steps with ornate banisters to the dormitory's upper floors. When I pushed open the large, creaky door at the top of the stairs, I thought I might be sharing the space with a few ghosts of the past.

A hand thrust out in my direction. I jumped back.

"You must be Gabrielle," a chipper young woman said.

"Ha! You startled me," I said.

"Oh, sorry!" she laughed. "I'm Heather, the farm manager. I was just checking to make sure your room was ready."

I followed Heather past the kitchen and down a narrow hallway toward a row of doors. She stopped in front of door number 3 and pointed inside to a modest space with a single bed, desk, and dresser. Sage-colored curtains hung over the large window. Framed photos of plants graced two of the four walls. I couldn't believe how lucky I was to have the room all to myself. After weeks of sharing accommodations with eight girls, a room of my own felt like a precious gift. I looked forward to unwinding and recharging without the constant presence of others.

When Heather left, I unpacked the few things from my carry-on bag and then sat on the edge of my bed, savoring the quiet. After a few minutes, curiosity got the better of me. I had to see the rest of the building.

Even though I was alone and it would be a few hours until my dormmates returned from the field, I tiptoed down the hallway like a cat on the prowl. My eyes darted around, absorbing the details of the hidden spaces that had likely witnessed decades of visitors. The occasional creak of the floorboards beneath my feet was the only sound other than my breathing. I passed a large common area with cozy couches and chairs. I exited through a door and found another hallway of classrooms with abandoned desks and schoolbooks. I trotted down a few flights of stairs to an underground labyrinth of metal-caged doors. It was as if the building itself was taunting me to uncover its secrets.

Spooking myself out at the end of a long dark passageway, I quickly retraced my steps back to door number 3, following the mental map I had sketched in my head. Just before I arrived at my room, I noticed one large unopened door. It beckoned me, evoking a mixture of urgency and hesitation. *Should I open it? What if there's something I'm not meant to see?*

My hand hovered over the doorknob, the cool metal sending a shiver up my spine. This particular door seemed to carry an air of mystery that set it apart from the rest. Intrigued, I gently pushed it open, revealing a space that seemed to defy the confines of the dormitory.

How is this even here? I wondered.

The cathedral's vast interior stretched out before me, illuminated by the soft glow of sunlight streaming through stained glass windows. The architecture was astonishing, with arches that seemed to touch the heavens and intricate details etched into every corner. Dust particles danced in the rays of light, adding a mystical quality to the atmosphere.

"This is incredible," I whispered. The air was filled with a sacred silence. I couldn't help feeling reverence for the unexpected sanctuary I had stumbled upon. As I sat down in the balcony pew, I was swept up in a moment of pure awe. Time seemed to stand still. The overwhelming beauty of the surroundings brought tears to my eyes. From the portal of the fire ceremony to the hallowed halls of a gothic church, it seemed like the divine was following me everywhere.

I remembered the shamanic prophecy: "The fire knows you are here to do good things. The fire says you have gifts to share."

It felt achingly clear that my gift was on the other side of my pain. I sent a silent prayer up through the rafters. *Please tell the narrator to return. I'm ready to finish my story.* I would have to enter the wounds of my past and cross the hot coals of my fear to get to my truth. There was a deep knowing that retrieving my stories would also be a reclamation of power and would change my life in ways I couldn't imagine. Just like the door to the cathedral had hidden depths waiting to be discovered, so did my

narrative and my life. It was time to show up, drop the armor, be daring, and get it done. Whatever shadows needed to be confronted or shame needed to be shed, I was done kicking and screaming about it. I was ready to do the work that was meant to be done.

With a determined stride, I returned to my room and set up my laptop and journal on my desk. I closed my eyes. A tingling heat swirled inside of me like a small hurricane. I felt a pressure in my forehead as my heart picked up the pace. I inhaled the inspiration of brave authors who had come before me and inspired me—Mary Karr, Elizabeth Gilbert, Cheryl Strayed, Boyd Varty, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Barbara Kingsolver, Michael Pollan. I drew strength from the raw honesty and wisdom of their words. More than anything, I wanted to be part of their group—not for fame or fortune, but to belong to the ranks of fearless writers who dared to put pen to paper and share the depths of their souls with the world.

I navigated the labyrinth of my memories, exposing the raw edges of my experiences. As I imagined inviting readers into the intimate spaces of my life, a heavy cloud of insecurity loomed over me. The vulnerability of exposing my innermost thoughts to the world and the fear of rejection sparked a battle within.

What if they don't understand? What if I'm not strong enough?

Doubt crept into the corners of my mind and lingered like a shadow. Resolve and determination coursed through my veins, pushing me to confront the feelings that came with baring my soul. As I wrestled with my emotions, the trembling in my belly was a tangible manifestation of my internal conflict. Courage over comfort. *It's time to embrace it.*

The trembling intensified as I envisioned the possible repercussions of unveiling my unfiltered truth. The potential cost to my relationships was a silent adversary, threatening to undermine the courage it took to share my story. *Will they still love me if they know the real me?*

A quiet strength stepped forward to challenge the fear. *This is my truth. It's a risk I must take.* Feeling the weight of effort and struggle, I searched for a way to bolster my confidence. In a moment of daring spontaneity, I reached into the small pouch from Casa Curativa and retrieved a mushroom capsule. *Here's to growing a little taller and stronger.*

With a mix of hope and trepidation, I swallowed the pill. Almost instantly, a soft, comforting glow surrounded me. Newfound energy infused every fiber of my being. As if under the influence of Wonderland's whimsical magic, I experienced a subtle transformation. The trembling in my belly subsided, replaced by a sense of empowerment and assurance. My posture straightened, and my gaze became more resolute.

I can do this. My story deserves to be told. The emotional storm that had once clouded my mind began to dissipate. As I embraced the power within me to share my story unapologetically, I typed with new determination.

No more hiding. It's time to let the light of my truth shine.

The next morning, I popped out of bed at 6 a.m. to get ready for my first day of farm work. I savored my good fortune as I stood in front of the window, watching the sunrise illuminate the sprawling landscape. I took a full belly breath, and my chest softened in places I didn't even realize were holding tight. There was cool air conditioning, hot shower water, a fridge full of food, and a brand-new coffee maker brewing a morning cup of joe. After a year of RV beds, hostel dorm rooms, farm sheds, and other austere accommodations, I was relieved to be in a clean, comfortable place.

I felt as if I had been living in exile since the summer of 2019, when I'd felt so lost in Los Angeles as I tried to integrate after the Survivors Workshop. I reflected on the person I had been then—a woman grappling with a crushed heart and the collapse of her career. My despair had been so severe I hadn't thought I could survive it. I had been lost, hurt, and terrified of my own awakening. I marveled at how the powerless void had slowly but surely filled in with one blessing after another. I recalled the steps I had

taken to heal, learn, and ultimately rediscover the core of my being, from the feverish writing during quarantine to the raising of a bridge in Puerto Rico, from the baby llama birth in Santa Clarita to the plant medicine journeys of New Mexico and Guatemala. The journey had been arduous, marked by uncertainty, surrender, and an astonishing emergence of the wild essence within.

I couldn't believe how far I had come. It was nothing short of a miracle.

As I slid into my boots and bounced down the stairs toward the gardens, I felt flooded with gratitude and readiness for whatever was coming next. Unlike the pervasive anxiety that had accompanied me on other assignments, the future finally held promise and possibility.

I pedaled a borrowed bike swiftly down the gravel road toward the red and white barn, smiling at the reassuring rhythmic whir of the tires and the wind in my face. Religious statues emerged like silent guardians around the fields, and a few stray cats watched me with curious eyes. The atmosphere was hushed, as if nature itself was holding its breath in quiet anticipation of the day ahead.

As I approached the "Honey House" barn, a delightful scene unfolded. There were big wagon wheels and hanging flower planters on the porch. Gardens of wildflowers, bunny hutches, chicken coops, and funny

goats with long ears surrounded the building. Nearby, there were rows of strawberries, cucumbers, and other produce with a hand-painted sign that said “God’s Good Earth.” Towering shade trees covered weathered picnic tables and a swinging bench. A kaleidoscope of butterflies and colonies of bees buzzed around the herbal plants and medicinal weeds. The air seemed to vibrate with kindness. It was the sweetest, most precious place I had ever seen.

When I entered the front door, Heather was gathering pruning shears, gloves, bowls, and other supplies.

“Welcome to the farm!” she said. “Today we’ve got a bit of everything on the agenda.”

“I’m ready for it!”

She led me to the chicken coop, where a chorus of clucks greeted us and a mean-looking rooster puffed his chest in my direction.

Seeing my trepidation, Heather said, “Don’t worry about him. He’s just stressed because he had to fight a fox last week.”

“Jeez Louise.” I laughed.

“He fended off the fox, but he’s been keeping a close eye on the hens ever since,” Heather said.

We gathered warm eggs with a careful touch, and then we refilled the food and water bowls. The chickens fluttered their black-and-white feathers

excitedly as they pecked at the grains. Heather told me the name of each bird, but I quickly lost track as they danced around my feet.

“Next, we’re off to the garden for some harvesting,” Heather said.

We moved to the vibrant rows of zucchini, squash, carrots, and other crops. I felt the satisfying snap of green beans and the plump juiciness of ripe berries in my hands. Unable to resist the allure of the fresh fruit, I popped a few in my mouth and relished the explosion of flavor. It was pure joy.

While we worked, Heather told me stories about her life. She had joined the convent as a young nun but, after six years, she had fallen in love with another farmer and left the sisterhood for him. It was scandalous gossip, but she made it sound so romantic. I wondered what it would be like to join a tight-knit community like this and live in a sanctuary surrounded by nature. It stirred a yearning within me. I envisioned the possibility of purchasing a piece of land and creating a haven for those seeking retreat and connection with nature. The idea of having my own piece of paradise excited me. *Maybe one day I’ll have a place like this!*

A few hours later, after walking the goats and washing the veggies, I returned to the dorm for an afternoon of writing. My dormmates, a diverse group of young adults, were gathered in the kitchen preparing lunch. They

were elated when I added some leafy greens, tomatoes, and fresh herbs to the pile. Kai, an Asian vegan who loved skateboarding and video games, offered me a place at the table next to him.

“I appreciate the offer, but I’ve got a deadline,” I said. Unlike in the other places I had volunteered, I wasn’t interested in immersing myself in communal living or bonding with my neighbors. My singular focus for my free time was to finish the book. I needed to maintain a polite distance to achieve my goal, and my dormmates respected my desire for creative solitude.

Before I sat down in front of my laptop, I swallowed one of the mushroom pills from Casa Curativa. To my right, a simple altar decorated the surface of my dresser with some prayer beads and a few dried flowers. Trancelike instrumental music played in the background, while the faint scent of a candle inscribed with the word “love” served as a silent reminder of invisible support. I figured I needed all the help I could get to face the formidable challenge of staring down my demons, conquering my inner critic, and transmuting my pain into art.

As I dropped into the depths of writing, the room became a sort of cocoon, protecting me and digesting my unresolved energies. With the rapid transmission of memories to stories, a metamorphosis took place in my being. Hours passed. The clock on the wall marked the passage of time with

steadfast determination. The occasional murmur of my dormmates in the shared spaces barely registered as I dove deeper into the narrative unfolding before me. As the words flowed from my mind to the screen, I experienced a whirlwind of emotions. At times, I laughed out loud. Tears occasionally fell onto the front of my ragged shirt. My concentration didn't waver. By the time I looked up from my desk, the sky was dark, and my shoulders were sore. I counted the words on the page—about 1,200. *Not bad. If I can do this every day for the next 60 days, I'll have enough pages to submit to publishers.*

I closed the computer and stretched my arms overhead. In search of my next meal, I returned to the common area and overheard a conversation between Natalie, a passionate Black art student, and Sister Clara, a mischievous nun in street clothes.

"They left the church to take mushrooms?" Natalie asked as she gazed at the screen of the nun's smartphone.

"Spirituality comes in many forms," Sister Clara said.

Astonished, I stopped in my tracks. *Did I hear that correctly?*

"There's wisdom in exploring different realms of consciousness," Sister Clara added.

I moved nearer and caught a glimpse of the screen, which read "Mormons on Mushrooms." I was taken aback, both surprised and

impressed by Sister Clara's interest in such a controversial topic.

"You listen to podcasts about psychedelics?" I asked.

"It's fascinating, don't you think?" she said with a smile.

What the hell is happening?

"Well, yeah," I mumbled. "I just never expected this from a nun."

"Oh, I'm full of surprises." She giggled.

OMG. Is she tripping right now?

Natalie and Sister Clara returned to their conversation as I warmed up some food in the kitchen. If it didn't sound so crazy, I would say the mushrooms were trying to tell me something—but I wasn't clever enough to figure it out.

The following day when I returned to the barn, Heather had a surprise for me.

"Today we're harvesting the honey!" she declared. She was kneeling on the ground in a full bodysuit of protective gear, stuffing a handful of crumpled hay into a steel canister that was burning wisps of sweet-smelling smoke into the air.

"What's the smoke for?" I asked.

"When the bees smell the smoke, they think the hive is on fire, so they eat as much honey as they can in case they have to flee. It makes them

more full, and that makes them calmer toward us,” she said.

“So the smoke makes them binge eat the honey and get relaxed?” I laughed.

“Yeah, like the way I feel when I eat way too much ice cream,” she quipped.

I put on a beekeeping suit and followed Heather to the stacks of hives, which looked like a dresser of green wooden drawers. She sprayed the smoke inside the opening, then used a metal tool to peel the lid off the top. Inside sat 10 frames of honeycomb, covered in layers of busy bees. As Heather lifted one of the frames, I could see long tiny tongues licking up as much honey as possible.

“They’re really sucking that stuff up!” I laughed.

After we collected the mature honeycombs capped with beeswax, we reassembled the hives and returned to the barn to harvest the golden nectar. We placed the frames in a bin near the extractor, a large cylinder tank taller than both of us. After carefully removing the cappings from the cells, we placed the frames in the machine and cranked a lever in a clockwise direction. The spinning motion forced the honey out of the combs and onto the walls of the extractor. It drizzled into a container below. When I reached in to collect the frame, excess honey dripped from my wrists to my elbows. In an irresistible impulse, I licked my forearms, just like I had watched the

bees doing. It was the most insanely delicious thing I had ever tasted. I felt immediately intoxicated by the amber ambrosia.

We finished the extraction and secured the honey-filled jars.

“I never realized how much goes into each jar of honey.” I marveled at the harvest. “It’s astonishing.”

Heather held a jar up to the light. “It’s like a work of art,” she said.

Incredible. It was such a simple moment filled with innocent awe, but it signaled something so profound. From the hidden magic of the bees’ homes to the diligence of their effort, from the alchemy of their pollen to the medicine of their product. Wasn’t this the perfect metaphor? Not only that, but when I was harvesting the honey, I could think of nothing else. There was no past or future, no rumination or worry. There was only awareness of the present moment and the careful consideration of the delicate creatures at my fingertips. It was a practice in patience, resilience, and mindfulness.

We continued our work with the arrival of a big hay delivery. I was tired and sore in the best possible way when I returned to my room in the afternoon. I procrastinated on my manuscript for a few minutes by scrolling through pictures on LandWatch.com, a directory of land for sale. The listings presented a mosaic of options—sprawling meadows, wooded retreats, and charming parcels nestled between hills. Each property seemed

to hold the promise of a new beginning, a canvas upon which I could paint my dreams.

Uncertainty hung in the air. I wondered whether I was ready to take the leap into property ownership. My future was still an open book. The idea of putting down roots elicited a mix of excitement and concern. I saw how idyllic a homestead could be in the various places I had visited—the llama farm in California, Casa Curativa in Guatemala, and now the garden paradise in Brentwood, New Jersey. I also knew how much work it required to maintain the beauty and utility of a property—I had the blisters and sore muscles to prove it. I scrolled through images of quaint farmhouses, wide-open spaces, and parcels with the potential for sustainable living. The possibilities unfolded like chapters in a story, each listing offering a glimpse into a different version of the life I envisioned. *Is this something I could achieve? And if so, where do I want to belong?*

The decision to buy property felt monumental, a step into the unknown that could shape the rest of my life. I hovered the cursor over the “Contact Seller” button on a particularly intriguing listing, then hesitated. I closed the browser and returned to my Word document. Purchasing land was a big decision. I needed more time to figure it out.

I poured my heart onto the pages late into the night.

One word at a time, one chapter at a time. If the bees can do it, so can

I.

Chapter 14

August 2021

My writing retreat on the farm continued for a few weeks as I made progress both inside and outside of my dorm room cocoon. One Saturday morning, my friend Melissa called from Miami. She had seen some of my Guatemala photos on Facebook and was mesmerized by the natural beauty and my musings about my transformative journey. Some friends were planning a girls' getaway in California. They wanted to know if I would create an experience for them.

“What kind of experience?” I asked.

“They want to do some kind of ceremony in nature,” she said. “They rented a house in Malibu!”

The thought of returning to the area where I had fallen apart two years earlier felt both serendipitous and scary.

Melissa put me touch with Cassandra, the organizer. “Tell me about your vision for the event,” I said.

Cassandra explained that she wanted an authentic, intimate, safe space for bonding and connecting on a deep level with her closest friends and to ignite passion and fire for the future. I suggested sharing circles, flower crowns, herbal medicine-making, and so on. Cassandra responded with equally inspiring ideas about restorative practices like massage and

guided meditation. With each exchange, we fell deeper into conversation about manifestation, the sacred feminine, sisterhood, and more. The ideas flowed back and forth between us like an electric current.

By the time I hung up the phone, I was buzzing with enthusiasm. How had this opportunity just fallen into my lap? I guessed the Universe wanted me to share my gifts with others. And since it was just a weekend away, it would hardly interfere with my writing.

I heard the echo of a quote in my mind from the book I was currently reading, *Soulcraft: Crossing into the Mysteries of Nature and Psyche* by Bill Plotkin:

It's not possible to save the world by trying to save it. You need to find what is genuinely yours to offer the world before you can make it a better place. Discovering your unique gift to bring to your community is your greatest opportunity and challenge. The offering of that gift—your true self—is the most you can do to love and serve the world. And it is all the world needs.

Ain't that the truth, I thought.

I drafted an email to Cassandra, summarizing everything we had talked about and confirming my participation. I wrote, "Looking forward to meeting you in person!" before hitting the blue "send" button on the screen.

I felt slightly out of my body, like I was dreaming a new reality. After a few minutes, the sensation subsided, and I caught my reflection in the mirror.

“Ready or not, LA,” I said in an assertive voice, “here I come.”

The following weekend, I stood at the window of the Malibu home overlooking the picturesque coastline. Sunlight danced on the water, casting a radiant shimmer across the ocean’s surface. Waves gently rolled onto the sandy beaches, and surfers wove elegant lines across the water. Beneath colorful umbrellas, friends sprawled on beach towels and lounge chairs. I could hear the faint vibrations of laughter and the distant call of seagulls.

Are you kidding me right now? I laughed out loud. How is it possible that I’ve ended up in this paradise? And they’re paying me to be here! This is crazy. The surreal disbelief I felt at my luck was a delightful shock to my system.

The surprises didn’t end with the view. I explored the house further and discovered three stories of plush rooms, hidden walkways, outdoor hot tubs, and other touches of extravagance. From the high-end toiletries in the bathroom to the sumptuous linens on the bed, every detail spoke to providing a truly indulgent experience.

Cassandra and her friends were gathered in the living room in front of a large fireplace. Everyone was dressed in white flowing clothes. I

encouraged them to form a circle and guided them through a meditation to awaken the divine feminine within.

As I spoke to them about our wild, sacred selves, serenity and strength moved across their faces. I led them through a series of exercises designed to tap into their inner power. After sharing personal stories and intentions, we moved outside to the large wooden deck, where we made flower crowns from fresh roses and custom perfume from essential oils.

As they interlaced the blossoms and blended various scents like women have been doing for millennia, I told them, “The world needs your wildest, craziest, most unconventional gifts right now. The Universe is begging you to share your song, your story, your vision of the future. We used to live on autopilot. We could just go with the flow and get by okay. Not anymore. The well-being of the planet depends on your willingness to fully step into your power and be the person you are meant to be.” There were tears in their eyes. I knew they were feeling this message at a soul level. Their response amplified my conviction to share my passion.

Once the preparations were complete, we moved to a secluded clearing and created a large floral mandala adorned with seashells, crystals, and other symbolic objects. As a rhythmic drumbeat rumbled from a large speaker, we began moving spontaneously—swaying, twirling, and flowing as a unified collective. With each step, we infused the ritual with the energy

of joy and becoming. I watched in admiration as the woman surrendered to the moment, their limbs and hair moving wild and free. My heart whispered, *You are not alone. You have never been alone.* My eyes swelled with tears as I danced the sentiment into a sense of belonging and interconnectedness.

The sun set and the stars came out. We moved to the upper porch, where a private chef had prepared a feast for us. The ecstasy of the setting, the ceremony, the food, and new friends was almost too much to bear. The women stared at me in admiration, inquiring about how I had come to know what I knew, what paths had led me to this moment. As I shared some of my experiences with them, I couldn't help but feel humbled and proud.

"Thank you so much. This was such a magical day," Cassandra said. "I feel more alive and connected than ever."

I get to facilitate THIS. I get to do the work I was born to do.

I immediately had a vision of all the future retreats I would lead once my book was published. It felt like things were finally coming together. It was amazing how doing the hard work of my own healing and integration was opening the doors to help others do the same. I felt more blessed than I had ever realized. California had witnessed my lowest lows, but now it was the canvas for my rebirth. I had turned pain into power, loss into love. I was confident and strong, and I had a newfound sense of purpose.

This was my victory lap. I couldn't wait to see what happened next.

When I returned to New Jersey, I was astonished at the perfection of the retreat. I could still feel the lingering effects of our collective feminine power. But as I returned to my manuscript a few days later, the ugly inner critic resurfaced to taunt me. What if the book was a terrible idea? What if it was a waste of time and energy? Maybe I should focus on teaching instead of exposing all my secrets to the world.

I mumbled to myself, "No, no, no, no."

Inside my dorm room, I sat at the small desk and with a shaky hand, continued to write my story.

Me in a chair at the Survivors Workshop. A violent rocking sensation. Confronting the ghost of my father. Traveling back in time. Dad kicking Mom like a dog on the floor. Mom peeing on herself and howling, "I'm dying." Dizziness. Dr. Maya, the workshop facilitator, pleading with me, "Keep going." Fear flooding my body. Dad saying, "I hit your mother because she says that you're bad."

There was an acute pain in my chest, rumbling indigestion, and a sudden burst of hot skin and sweat. I wanted to scream.

"Ugh!" I let out an audible grunt.

I wanted to stay in Malibu bliss, to reside forever in the place where I had turned pain into power, loss into love. I had sampled a small taste of admiration and pride, and it made me thirsty for more. The brief refuge from the labor of writing made it twice as hard to start again.

No amount of prayer beads, flower crowns, or magic mushrooms can save you if you have darkness in your heart. Inevitably, the high of people, places, and things wears off, and the shadows return with their menacing messages and debilitating despair. The only true cure is to purge the original sin and replace it with light. The tricky part is getting to the root of the curse, under the endless layers of story and suffering, where it is guarded by legions of deception and distraction. Only when your desire for healing is more obsessive than your addiction to escape will you ever arrive at a place of steady peacefulness.

I breathed as deeply as I could. I looked to my left and saw my altar, prayer beads, and small stack of books. I turned to the right, to the window, and saw the summer light penetrating through the light green curtains. I exaggerated my inhale and exhale. *You've got this*, I told myself. *You're safe. Just breathe.* With each breath, I found some solidity in myself.

It took a few more minutes before I could start writing again. The memories had obviously stirred up some unresolved garbage. In some faraway place inside me, in a distant realm where words become truth

without our consent, I felt the devastating ache of shame. My body trembled and tears fell from my eyes.

Goddammit, I thought I was done with this shit. I feel so done, and yet this whole thing just keeps going. When will it be over?

I continued to breathe until the storm clouds cleared. The repetition of breath, affirmations, and other self-care rituals was training my brain to adapt, to become more protective against these assaults. I was building resilience. I could feel it. But how could I reset my system so I never had to endure them again?

I didn't want to be halfway healed. I wanted to be invincible.

I was still a bit mopey when I arrived at the garden ministry to do my chores. The high of Malibu seemed a million miles away as I swung my sickle through the tall wheat grass and filled a bin with golden stalks.

Through my earbuds, I listened to the captivating Spanish accent of Martín Prechtel read from his book *The Unlikely Peace at Cuchumaquic*: “To begin remembering our indigenous belonging on the Earth back to life we must metabolize as individuals the grief of recognition of our lost directions, digest it into a valuable spiritual compost that allows us to learn to stay put without outrunning our strange past, and get small, unarmed, brave, and beautiful.”

I crumbled one of the spiky heads of wheat in my palm, admiring each small, shallow seed as it separated from the chaff.

*When you plant a seed in the ground, that is a kind of death, a burial.
But what happens after that? Life comes up!*

I ran into Heather in the kitchen. She looked nearly as dejected as I.

“What’s up?” I asked. “You okay?”

“Well, it just kind of sucks that you’re leaving,” she said.

I laughed involuntarily. “Oh no, I’m sorry,” I mumbled, “I wish I could stay.”

It was true. I dreaded leaving Sisters of St. Joseph. The last thing I wanted was to cast off again in some uncertain direction, blown around by the winds of change, searching for a feeling of belonging. After a dozen years in Catholic school—most of which I had spent raging against it—I had never expected to find my peace in a garden ministry. But living on a Catholic campus with a community of retired nuns had been the most sovereign, sustainable experience of my journey so far. Although I was emotionally attached to the animals, people, and the perfect produce ripening on every vine, the dorm doors would close in two weeks. I would have to depart, whether I liked it or not.

Heather told me about her sister, who had moved to Hawaii. Their children were too far away to know each other. “It’s fun for the people who

get to leave,” she said, “but not so fun for the people they leave behind.” I wanted to pick up her burden of grief, but my heart was too full of my own.

I tried to lighten the mood for both of us instead. “It’s been an incredible time here, and if everything aligns, hopefully I can join you next year...besides, we’ve got a party to plan.”

Two weeks later, the farm was alive with the vibrant energy of celebration as friends and family gathered to commemorate my birthday and witness some of the wild life I had been living. My brother Joseph and his wife, my brother Alfredo and his partner, my bestie Jaime and her daughters, and a handful of other guests gathered under the shady trees next to the screaming goats for the festivities. I wore a pink summer dress, rhinestone tiara, and satin sash that said, “Birthday Girl.” The sun cast a warm glow over the fields, and the air was filled with laughter and the tantalizing aroma of a farm-to-table feast.

I guided the group through the rows of crops, explaining the organic farming practices and principles of permaculture. I plucked ripe tomatoes, crisp cucumbers, and sweet bell peppers from the vines, urging my brothers to taste them. “It’s dirty!” they laughed as I munched on the freshly harvested produce. My preference for the natural over the sanitized was an obvious symbol of how far I had come. We meandered across the lawn and

into the dorm, where we quietly approached the hidden cathedral. The sun filtered through stained glass windows, casting a kaleidoscope of colors on the floor. Everyone was awestruck by the beauty of the sacred space.

“You’ve found something special here,” my bestie Jaime said.

“Wait until you see what else I’ve got to show you,” I said with a sly smile.

“You’ve got that look,” she said. “What’s going on?”

I snuck down the hall to my room with Jaime and handed her a bound copy of my manuscript. Her eyes widened. As she flipped through the pages, I felt a swell of emotion. They were filled with raw honesty, my deepest truths, and all the things I didn’t want anyone to know about me. My memoir was either the best idea or the worst idea I had ever had—the verdict was still out.

“I couldn’t have done it without you,” I said.

“This is fucking awesome!” she shouted with glee.

At least one of us thinks so, I mused.

We wrapped up the day with a charming chocolate cake and everyone singing “Happy Birthday” at full volume. As I leaned over the flickering candles, I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. In the silence, just before I exhaled, I acknowledged the fears that lingered in the shadows of my heart—fear of judgment, of not being enough—and the uncertainties

surrounding my book. With a spark of determination, I resolved to release them into the universe:

I compost the belief that I am unlovable and plant the seed that I am lovable. I compost the fears about people reading my book and plant the seed that the book will be a ray of light for anyone who reads it. I compost the struggle and worry and doubt and plant deep roots of ease, confidence, and prosperity. Courage, be my guide.

The soft whoosh of breath extinguished the candles. In that moment, I felt a profound sense of release. As my family and friends erupted into applause, I clapped with them. I was overflowing with pure, unfiltered joy—a rarity for me, but an emotion destined to become a much bigger part of my story.

Chapter 15

September 2021

As I cruised into West Palm Beach, Florida, with the top down on the Mustang, I passed pastel-colored estates along meticulously manicured streets with towering palm trees. High-rise condos with balconies overlooked yachts and sailboats on the waterfront, blending European sophistication and laid-back tropical vibes. Gleaming boutiques and extravagant art galleries both attracted me to and made me suspicious of this place that felt worlds away from the simplicity of farm life.

I was ready for my next assignment at Serenity Eco-Retreat Center, a nature preserve on the picturesque Sante Fe River in Florida, but the position wasn't quite ready for me. While I awaited my start date, I'd stay with my friend Abigail in West Palm Beach for a few weeks.

I had a feeling that Serenity might be the last stop on my nomadic journey since I had already accomplished so much—the Earthship Academy, the Ecology Academy, writing my book, and several farm internships. As much as I enjoyed traveling and bartering for room and board, I felt called to return to the “real world” and share the lessons I had learned during the past few years. I was grateful for all the education and experience, but I was also curious about how I could build a stable life with my new skills.

Serenity's mission "to co-create, coexist, and come together to celebrate and restore ecological balance" made my heart sing. I swooned at the thought of living in the pristine conservation area on a luxury property. It reminded me of the retreat center in California where I had worked as a director a few years earlier, before the Survivors Workshop and the pandemic. I secretly hoped that Serenity's owners would be swept away by my brilliance and instantly promote me to management.

I arrived at Abigail's apartment, nestled in a residential neighborhood, in midafternoon. After a heartfelt hug, Abigail showed me to the loft space adorned with ocean-inspired decor and a bed of pillows and blankets that looked like a sea of softness. Abigail confessed that she had been living vicariously through me during the pandemic. While I'd been having global adventures, she had been in lockdown with her aging father. Both of us were excited to enjoy some time in the coastal city together.

Over coffee in a charming downtown café, I confessed to Abigail about the things I thought were missing from my life, including a clear sense of direction, clarity about where to root and grow in the coming years, and that ever-elusive contentment, akin to a summer rain that offered momentary relief but didn't dispel the lasting humidity.

She listened compassionately and told me that she hoped my time in West Palm Beach would be restorative and revitalizing.

“You need to rest after all the hard work you’ve done!” she said.

Abigail invited me to a dinner party with her friends. The building’s lobby exuded an inviting ambiance. I felt the gentle flutter of butterflies as I anticipated meeting a roomful of new people. The apartment, marked subtly by a Jewish mezuzah, hinted at the cultural richness within. Saul, easygoing and charming, greeted us at the door. He ushered us into his stylish condo with sleek contemporary furniture, ambient lighting, and soft jazz music playing in the background. Large windows framed ocean views, casting a warm glow on the polished surfaces.

After quick introductions to the 10 or so people in the apartment, I immediately fell into a conversation with two women—one a jewelry maker, the other a healer. They were both looking for that “feeling” of belonging to the land and to people. They experienced a dissonance in urban environments, a kind of emptiness of indigenous energy, and they wanted to relocate to someplace like Spain or Israel, where they felt more connected. I had known that Abigail’s friends would be well-traveled and well-educated, but I never expected these “strangers” to echo the same sentiments I felt.

We sat down to break bread. The gleam of kosher wine glasses and the inviting aroma of carefully curated dishes set the stage for an evening of culinary delight. Saul said that he had been meaning to start this tradition for a long time, but he kept procrastinating. He said he couldn't put it off any longer because he wanted community, he wanted connection, he wanted his home to be a gathering place for neighbors and strangers. A collective cheer went up. We went around the table, telling stories and getting to know each other. One Australian man talked about his healing work as a psychedelic psychotherapist. He took people on mushroom journeys and went on quite a few trips himself. During a recent trip, he had spoken with the flowers, which were guiding him into more love and self-compassion.

Are you kidding me? How is it that plant medicine is following me everywhere I go?

When I finished my meal, I went out onto the balcony. I noticed an absence of starlight that made my heart hurt. An art dealer from Mexico joined me. I mentioned my sadness to him. He immediately agreed, and we got into a passionate discussion about what it felt like to be in a place like the Rio Grande river after dark, where the stars are so alive that they come down and grab you and pull you into a cosmic dance. We were giddy as we talked about how exhilarating it feels to connect with the Universe in that way.

I returned to the living room, where I met a couple visiting from Tennessee. They were crypto consultants on a humanitarian mission to liberate everyone—especially women and children—from a dysfunctional and elitist economic system. I was fascinated by their excitement for a financial system that was actually for the people, by the people.

As the evening wound down, Saul told me about a recent retreat he'd attended in nearby Okeechobee. At the retreat, people had gathered to do an ayahuasca journey. Saul described the experience as the most transformational night of his life, emphasizing how important it was to do “the work” so we can better understand and nurture the relationships that are important to us.

The word *ayahuasca* hit me like the loud crash of a brass gong.

That's it! That's the reset button I need!

I was confused by my visceral reaction to the mention of this psychedelic vine. For more than a decade, I had been invited by friends to go to ayahuasca ceremonies, and I wasn't the least bit interested. Why would I pay money to drink a tea that made me puke in a bucket all night?

But something shifted inside of me in that moment—maybe it was the wine and Saul's charming smile. More likely it was living and learning from the plants and herbs and mushrooms and peyote. I felt more open and trusting, significantly less scared and rigid. I wanted to drink the forbidden

fruit like Eve wanted to devour that apple on the tree. I wanted the knowledge of good and evil. I needed a more complete understanding of the world and my place in it. Even if it meant disobeying some innate authority, breaking some unconscious moral code, or being cast out of my comfort zone into hardship and toil, I wanted to fly as close to the sun as possible. I wanted it so badly I was ready to sacrifice my life if necessary.

I asked Saul if he would share the information about the retreat center with me. He immediately made an email introduction from his cell phone. The hairs on my arm jumped to attention and chills shot up my spine. I was suspended in the space between chapters where the past and future converge and the energy around you buzzes with the awareness that you've reached a turning point that will change the trajectory of your life.

My cheetah instincts perked. In a silent communication, she asked, *Are you sure you're ready for this?* I felt a profound mix of exhilaration and trepidation as I relished the realization that I was about to step into a fire from which I might never return.

Hell yeah! I've never been more ready for anything in my life.

My time in West Palm Beach passed faster than I expected and provided the recovery that Abigail had intended. Before leaving, I wanted to take one last walk around the neighborhood to savor my experience. As I

meandered through the streets in the direction of Rosemary Square, I got lost and ended up on a grand lawn near the Norton Museum of Art. I looked to my left, and there was a labyrinth woven into the grass. *Are you kidding me?* There had been an exact copy of this meandering maze on the Sisters of St. Joseph property. I had walked it several Sunday mornings, twisting and doubling back along the path but always making forward progress. What were the chances of finding one again so soon? I kicked off my sandals and walked the winding loops, talking to the Universe out loud, asking for support and clarity, offering trust and faith.

When I finished the walking meditation, I looked up. A rainbow stretched across the sky. I froze on the spot. It was an unmistakable reminder that even amid uncertainty, moments of pure, unadulterated magic existed—the kind of magic that transcends reason and speaks to the soul. I stood for a few minutes, taking in long deep breaths of salty sea air. The sound of seagulls was a distant murmur. The breeze was a soft caress on my skin.

Just then, a pudgy man approached me and introduced himself as a Baptist preacher from Atlanta. “Hey, I saw you looking at the rainbow and walking through the labyrinth. Can I give you a blessing?”

Did he just fall from the rainbow? I giggled. “Yes, please!”

There we were, two strangers, Black and white, old and young, holding hands and praying to the Holy Spirit to guide my path and protect me on my journey. For a moment, time seemed to stand still. Eyes closed, I felt the warmth of his touch and a harmony within. My discomfort eased, and I recognized that perhaps, in this unusual city, there was both enchantment and material things, affluence and natural beauty, differing values coexisting much like the spectrum of colors blending seamlessly in the sky.

After a beautiful blessing, we hugged, waved goodbye, and walked our separate ways. The clear sky underwent a subtle transformation, herald of an atmospheric shift. Wisps of fluffy clouds, once scattered across the azure canvas, started to gather, forming a congregation of soft, billowing shapes. The vivid blue gradually gave way to a delicate veil of grays. The air became pregnant with anticipation. A cool breeze picked up. It gently blew my hair as I walked back to my car.

As I glided onto the highway that afternoon, the grays deepened. The wind seemed to pause in expectation of the impending storm. West Palm Beach receded in the rearview mirror, and the open road stretched out before me. As raindrops kissed the windshield, I couldn't help but wonder if it was a sign of what lay ahead. With a mix of nerves and resilience, I pressed my foot on the gas, felt a fluttering in my chest, and resolved to

face head-on whatever the storm and Serenity retreat center had in store for me.

“Welcome to Serenity, I’m the director of sustainability and education.” Thomas, a short man with a sprinkling of freckles and a scruffy beard, extended a hand in greeting.

I shook his hand and felt a current of nervous energy.

“And this is Jack”—he pointed to the balding middle-aged man on his left—“our property manager.” Jack had the thick build and rough hands of a construction worker.

Thomas offered to give me a tour, and Jack disappeared into his workshop. I looked around at the well-curated landscape, everything perfectly in its place but made to look like it had happened naturally. It gave the impression of a beautiful woman who’d spent a long time making her hair look messy. I followed Thomas along a path of burnt umber-colored mulch, through gnarled oak trees and dense palms. The path wound around the property, past various features such as sleek Airstreams, large geodesic domes, and a wide river next to a boat dock. As Thomas led me along, he enthusiastically named all the local flora and fauna, identified the birds and

the fish, and pointed out the various ecosystems. I could tell he was proud that he knew so much.

As he continued the tour, the details shifted from the natural to the material. “These compost toilets are the best you can buy. They cost \$50,000 each,” he said. “And those Tesla solar panels up there”—he pointed to the roof of the garage—“Elon Musk installed them himself.”

I pressed my lips together to bite back my laughter. *Is this meant to impress me? Why do men always tell you how much things cost?* I wondered. My dad had used to do the same thing when he gave tours of his mansion.

Thomas pointed out an array of high-priced toys, including an infrared sauna, hot tub, and electric boat. A subtle undercurrent of bragging and mansplaining permeated his explanations. I tried to ignore my growing discomfort with his manner and focus on the tour. Spanish moss hung from the branches, creating an ethereal, almost mystical ambiance. Vibrant cranberry hibiscus, with its striking red flowers, stood out against the lush greenery, adding a splash of color to the surroundings.

I nodded and smiled, doing my best impression of a devotee while my mind conjured visions running back to my car and driving away. Thomas’s movements betrayed a sense of restlessness. His words flowed rapidly, punctuated by occasional glances over his shoulder to make sure I was

paying attention. I dug my toes into the ground to keep from fleeing. *Let's just see what happens. How bad can it be?*

After the tour, Thomas whisked me across the street on a fancy solar-powered golf cart to a two-bedroom house in a residential community. Instead of living on the main retreat property, I would be living off site. While the house offered privacy and comfort, I couldn't help but feel disappointed. The air-conditioned ranch home didn't exactly sing of the retreat-like experience I had envisioned.

"Gabby, meet James and Rickey. They'll be your roommates during your stay here," Thomas explained.

James had bright eyes and a radiant smile. He was tall and thin with messy hair, maybe 22 years old. A happy haze lingered around him. It smelled like weed. I grinned when I shook his hand. Rickey, on the other hand, with his dark chocolate skin and twisted dreads, nodded in my direction without getting up from his video game. Big headphones covered his ears, and he seemed mostly indifferent to my arrival.

"Shall we go to lunch?" Thomas suggested. "The burgers are five bucks at Mulligan's on Mondays."

We piled into Thomas's dirty truck and drove a few miles toward the driftwood pier on Indian River Drive. Positioned next to the water sat a

lime-green restaurant so bright it glowed. Peach-colored awnings framed the windows, and a large blue marlin hung over the entrance door.

The four of us slid into a sticky vinyl booth next to a hand-painted sign that said “Parachute for sale. Only used once. Never opened.” Thomas was excited about Mulligan’s Beach House, not only because of the \$5 burgers but also because it overlooked the spot where his sailboat was moored. He fervently launched into the details of his sailing life, emphasizing his net-zero footprint and self-sufficiency.

I retreated to my room when lunch was over. As I sat on my bed with my head in my hands, I couldn’t help but feel the effects of too much masculinity. Whereas Sisters of St Joseph had been a community of calm, wise women and my time with Abigail had been a girls’ getaway, this subtropical sanctuary oozed with patriarchy. It was going to take some getting used to.

We began the next day with a “demonstration” about composting, a task I was already well-versed in from my prior farm experiences. Instead of a concise overview, Thomas stretched the explanation over two hours, adding layers of unnecessary detail to a process that I had mastered over months of hands-on experience. I couldn’t help but feel frustrated at

Thomas's grandiose lesson. What should have been a straightforward assignment was wrecked with unnecessary complexity.

As Thomas continued his instructions about how to compost, Rickey, lost in his own world of music, expressed his energy through spontaneous kung fu moves. I was completely bewildered. James wandered off in search of mushrooms. He referred to himself as "Mushrutz" and was obsessed with mushrooms like a born-again Christian is obsessed with Jesus.

When we stopped for our morning break, I encountered Jack, the property manager, who was replacing some of the broken fixtures on the property. After a few minutes of conversation, he got a call from his brother, who was recruiting him for a construction job. Jack was considering it. He lamented to me about not making enough money while being at Thomas's beck and call. The disconnect between the Serenity advertisement and the reality of the place scrambled my brain. Something at the retreat center smelled bad, and it wasn't the compost pile.

In the quiet afternoon, I sat at my desk, the glow of the computer screen casting a soft light. I had sent my manuscript to a few close friends while I was in West Palm Beach, and the sound of incoming messages signaled the arrival of their responses. With each notification, my nerves

tingled and my belly clenched. The cascade of love notes and words of encouragement overwhelmed me. I began to cry.

Maria wrote, “Gabby!!!! I just finished the book. Good god woman, it’s amazing! I know it’s scary to share AND it’s amazing.”

Melissa said, “I tried to read your book slowly, and I had to force myself to put it down. Wow, dear. You are a special and beautiful being. xoxo”

Diane said, “I just finished your book! The title is so great. The book is so great, you’re so great! What a life you’ve lived. Feeling lucky to know you.”

Michelle said, “I have fallen in love with you all over again. Thank you for sharing your truth.”

Their heartfelt praise and genuine enthusiasm for my story filled me with joy and overwhelm. Learning that my words had resonated with those closest to me was validating, but I was terrified of putting my book out to a wider audience. What if not everyone responded with so much appreciation? Just because my friends loved me unconditionally didn’t mean the rest of the world would be so kind.

My mind churned with possibilities. *Should I wait a while, until I have more courage?*

I had come this far. I couldn't give up now. The idea of being an author was no longer a dream. It was a reality. I had written a book, and people loved it.

The expense of publishing costs loomed, threatening to squash my courage. I needed at least \$2,500 for an editor before I could submit the manuscript to publishers. Inspired by the positive reception and determined to overcome this obstacle, I opened a GoFundMe.com account and initiated a crowdfunding campaign to help bring my book to life.

In the description, I wrote:

In my lifetime, I have experienced many difficult things, including abuse, addiction, death of loved ones, domestic violence, eating disorders, mental illness, and more. I have spent my entire life exploring healing modalities from all parts of the world and traveling to 40 countries to study different kinds of medicine. I know how it feels to be stuck in rumination, negative patterns, bad relationships, and horrible pain. I've healed myself from a terrible past, and I know so many people can benefit from the lessons that I've learned.

One of the most important steps in my own healing journey was writing this book, which took 14 years. I dedicated all this time to writing my memoir because I think that our stories matter. Our stories weave us together, intertwine us, and protect us. They help us feel less alone and less

crazy when we're overwhelmed with the mess of life. I need your help to fulfill my mission by ensuring this message reaches all the people who want to transform their pain into power and live a healthier, happier life.

Within moments of launching the campaign, I was overwhelmed by the response. Friends, family, and even acquaintances from different corners of my life rallied behind my vision. The contributions poured in, not just in dollars, but in messages of encouragement and shared excitement. As the tally on my crowdfunding page climbed, I couldn't help but be moved by the collective support that surrounded me. What had started as a personal endeavor transformed into a shared dream, a testament to the power of community and belief in the strength of story. I wept with gratitude. Maybe my words would find their place in the world after all.

Later that evening, we were invited to dinner with Serenity's owner Don, his wife, and some of their friends. We gathered around a long wood table on uncomfortable benches in the main house while Don's private chef served an Ayurvedic meal consisting of mostly vegan dishes. The atmosphere was charged with an odd mix of formality and forced conviviality. As the dinner progressed, Don, a tall man with an air of affluence, proposed that everyone share why they were grateful to be at

Serenity. Don's theatrical smile made the exercise seem more like a scripted performance than a genuine expression of appreciation.

One by one, the guests took turns praising the virtues of Don and Serenity. Some spoke of the transformative experiences they'd had there, while others waxed poetic about the beauty of the surroundings. I observed everyone at the table, feeling a palpable sense of insincerity. As the drama continued, my discomfort grew. The veneer of smiles seemed to mask a deeper layer of conformity and obligation.

When it was my turn, the weight of expectation pressed down on me. In a moment of hesitation, I conjured up a response that mirrored the tone set by the others. I spoke of the serene beauty, the potential for personal growth, and the opportunity to connect with like-minded individuals. As the words left my lips, I felt like a fool. I was officially part of the show.

Soon I excused myself from the table. Alone in my room, I felt a knot in my stomach, a sense of unease that stemmed from the incongruity between the genuine emotions I felt and the sentiment that had come out of my mouth. The clash between the pressure to conform and my desire for authenticity left me grappling with a familiar dissonance.

When will I stop pretending to be something I'm not? When will I stop giving a fuck what other people think and just be my honest self?

I went to bed mad at myself and ready to peel away the layers of pretense. Little did I know just how much a brew of jungle tea would help me get there.

Chapter 16

October 2021

The scent of adventure hung in the air as I navigated the winding roads leading to the 20-acre property near Lake Okeechobee. It was a few weeks into my Serenity apprenticeship, and I was more than ready to try the plant medicine Saul had recommended. What I found when I arrived was a rustic compound with a residential home and a dozen wooden cabins surrounding a ceremonial space called a maloca. There were showers, toilets, and even a small swimming pond. Lush greenery surrounded all the buildings. There were multiple trails adorned with spiritual statues from every tradition—Buddha, Quan Yin, Mother Mary, and others.

I was oriented to the property by a jolly older man named Julio, who would be leading the ceremony later that night. After chatting with him I cruised around, exploring the grounds and trying to mentally prepare for the ayahuasca journey.

The closer it got to the starting time, the more anxious and scared I grew. At 6 p.m., I gathered with 18 other people around the firepit. My body trembled with anticipation. Julio emerged from his house. His smile radiated wisdom and humor. I listened as he shared stories about his wild adventures and transformative experiences. He had an infectious playfulness that immediately put everyone at ease. After he explained the

sacred rules and guidelines, we made our way toward the thatch-roofed temple. Natural wood beams formed a high vaulted ceiling overhead. My toes slipped into cool white sand. I set my water bottle and puke bucket next to my blanket, hoping that I would be spared a long night of vomiting. I wanted to purge whatever psychic baggage I was carrying, but I didn't want to suffer too much in the process.

At the back of the temple there was a small altar with candles and instruments. Julio and his son Inti sat on folding chairs behind the altar. Just after 8 p.m., Julio called us up one by one to receive the medicine. He held out a small glass cup. I took it into my hands, closed my eyes, and swallowed the murky liquid in one swift gulp. There was no turning back. I tossed a handful of grapes into my mouth to cleanse my palate. The tea went down smoothly, and I headed back to my place, feeling wavelike energies flowing from my head throughout my body. I lay down as instructed, covered my eyes, and waited for the medicine to take effect.

Once all the guests had been served, Julio and his son began singing mystical healing chants called *icaros*. I was told that these songs would guide our journeys into the world of ayahuasca and its visions.

After about 30 minutes, I felt a little dizzy, like a wine buzz, but there were no psychedelic visions and there was no traveling to other dimensions. When Julio invited us to come back to the altar for a second dose, I bravely

returned and drank another cup of the jungle fluid. As I walked back to my place, a strange heaviness overcame me. I lay face down in child's pose on my blanket. I felt a rumbling in my stomach and then a blast of nausea like a rocket. I lunged toward the bucket as black tentacles projected out of my mouth, my torso writhing with their force. I could no longer feel my body, or the vomit, or the temple, or anything else. That's when the magic carpet ride took full effect.

I mounted a unicorn and galloped through the universe with the happiest otherworldly feelings. I felt the vibrations of the drums and *icaros* like a soundtrack to my technicolor trip. I had never heard anything quite like the chants, and in my altered state, I thought it was the funniest sound in the world. I laughed uncontrollably, each song amplifying the humor. I heard others crying and vomiting, but it didn't disturb me. I felt Grandmother Ayahuasca tell me that I didn't need to worry about the others, I didn't need to take care of them; she was caring for all her children. Layers of codependency vanished like puddles evaporating in the sun. It was the first time in my life I had been in the presence of any kind of suffering and not abandoned myself to help someone else. I hadn't even known that a life like that was possible.

As the journey continued, rhythmic, mystical, joyful energy flowed around me and through me. I felt Grandmother Ayahuasca repeatedly

asking me to say the words “I consent.” I repeated them over and over. “I consent, I consent, I consent.”

Each repetition gave her deeper levels of permission to infuse me with the magic of the plant. I was so grateful that she was respecting my boundaries and only taking me as far as I was willing to go. I felt completely safe to let go in her arms, a feeling I had rarely ever known. Some unknown amount of time passed as I rolled around on my blanket, marveling at the sense of freedom, giggling at the absurdity of everything. Fresh uplifting energy flowed through my being. I felt connected to the heart of the Universe.

Why do I take life so seriously all the time? Why am I not having more fun? There's nothing that serious going on. It's time to lighten up!

After a while, the most intense effects wore off. Julio closed the ceremony and invited everyone to return to the fire pit outside. We had the option to retire to our cabins if we preferred to be alone, which is exactly what I did. I didn't want anything to impede the feelings of well-being pulsing through my body. I wanted to savor them for as long as possible.

I wandered along the gravel path like I was floating in a dream. Every creature of the night buzzed with electric energy, a million brilliant points of neon light all around me. I looked up. The night sky was filled with dazzling stars, raining grace down on my crown like a blessing. I soaked it

in, reveling in the free-flowing connection with the cosmos. When I got to my bed, I felt Grandmother Ayahuasca continue to work me for many hours, massaging every inch of my musculoskeletal system, hitting trigger points that released layers of tightness and pain. Each fiber softened and lengthened until my whole body was mush.

The next morning, I was filled with joy and a sense of just being, without judgment. Instead of being preoccupied with trying to figure out my life or solve my imagined problems, I was simply enjoying myself.

As I drove off the property back to Serenity, top down, wind in my hair, I felt connected to nature in a profound way. My mind was quiet. I was not criticizing myself. I did not feel insecure. My heart was filled with immense ease and a sense that my life was moving in a positive direction. After decades of tension, I had no idea I could feel so good. Grandmother Ayahuasca had not only given me the ability to let go, but she had also given me a chance to reset and put my life in better perspective.

I thought I'd gotten everything that the plant medicine had to offer in that one ceremony. But Grandmother Ayahuasca was just getting started.

When I returned to Serenity, I hoped to immerse myself in mundane chores so I could focus inward and enjoy the lingering effects of the plant medicine. Instead, I was confronted with a cluster of cars and guests

arriving to party with the owner. Thomas, a bundle of nervous energy, gathered me, James, and Rickey in the living room. There was a sense of urgency and emergency in the air. He cleared his throat as he unrolled some crumpled papers from his pocket.

“All right, team! Big news. This week, we’re hosting some special guests at Serenity, and we’ve been chosen to make their stay unforgettable!”

“Sweet! What’s the plan?” James said with a big grin.

Are you fucking kidding me?

Thomas handed out crisp uniforms and detailed schedules. I was assigned to “hospitality tasks” such as “greeting and assisting guests to ensure a welcoming atmosphere” and “providing kitchen assistance to ensure a positive dining experience.”

“Wait, we’re serving food to them?” I asked.

“Well, you see, it’s a unique experience!” Thomas chirped. “We want our guests to feel pampered while surrounded by the beauty of Serenity.”

Is this guy for real right now? This is free labor for the elite. This is exploitation.

I gave him an unfriendly glare.

“It’s, uh, a different approach to connecting with nature,” Thomas said nervously.

Any lingering fantasies that I may have had about joining Serenity as an employee immediately vanished. This was not the place for me.

“I think it sounds kinda cool! We get to make their stay awesome,” James said enthusiastically.

“Whatever you want, man,” Rickey murmured.

I couldn’t fathom how schlepping luggage or serving champagne to Don’s affluent friends had anything to do with my “permaculture apprenticeship.” I focused on my breath, trying to cool the rising temperature of my body.

It’s only a few days, I told myself, and then this whole charade will be over. Just breathe.

I reluctantly put on the uniform and headed over to the main house, where Don’s entourage had already made themselves comfortable in the luxurious surroundings. A trail of discarded towels lay around the pool and hot tub. More had been tossed haphazardly onto the manicured grass. The crew was lounging in plush chairs, laughing and clinking glasses, chatting animatedly while awaiting their delicacies. I resentfully gathered towels, brought them to the laundry room, and then headed toward the garage that had been converted into a commercial kitchen for the occasion.

As I hustled back and forth to the outdoor dining table, setting out placemats and dishes, arranging candles and utensils, I caught fragments of

conversation on the breeze. I could hardly believe my ears.

A woo-woo Russian model, spoke with an air of mysticism, “You know, guys, 5D consciousness is upon us. Soon, we’ll be communicating on the psychic plane, just like Jesus and Buddha did.” She closed her eyes briefly, as if already tuned into the ethereal frequencies.

A wealthy Jewish real estate developer, chimed in with a sparkle in his eye. “Speaking of consciousness, I’ve got something groundbreaking. A luxury off-grid development in Costa Rica. Picture this: sustainable living with all the comforts of modern homes. It’s the future of conscious living.”

A German couple, fresh from Davos on their private jet, joined the conversation. “Indeed,” they agreed. “Sustainability is the new digital revolution for business.”

An Asian DJ and tech investor, enthusiastically nodded. “And speaking of the future, VR is the next logical and disruptive medium for humanity. Imagine a world where we can escape this reality and enter a new realm of possibilities.”

A neuroscientist-biohacker leaned forward. “Speaking of possibilities, I’ve developed superhuman formulas that increase cognitive function and enhance physical performance. Do you guys wanna try some?”

I moved around the long table in disbelief. Maybe I was still in an ayahuasca dream. James and Rickey moved like shadows among the glitz

and glamor, seemingly indifferent to the irony and contradictions. My mind raced with thoughts of immediate departure. I vowed that this would be my last stint in such a contrived setting.

The night unfolded underneath the starlit sky—which had been obscured by the blinding colors of LED lights. I played the role of silent observer in a theater of pseudo-spiritual extravagance. Pulsating beats of artificial electronic music emanating from hidden speakers drowned out the ambient sounds of nature.

As I cleared dishes and glasses, I overheard Don, the owner, engaged in an excited exchange about digital currencies. Words like “Bitcoin” and “Ethereum” sparked an unexpected curiosity in me. I discreetly leaned in, my ears tuning in to the details. This was the second time in less than a month that “crypto” had been discussed at a dinner party. I couldn’t help but wonder about the significance in these affluent circles and why it seemed to be a recurring topic of conversation. I made a mental note to explore it further.

A tall skinny woman with strands of feathers in her hair, arrived with a guitar. “In this new realm, we’re not just artists, we’re heartists,” she mused. “It’s about expressing our souls and connecting with the Universe.” She gazed into the distance as if channeling inspiration. Her friend, a tantric sensuality coach, raised her glass. “One love. One heart. One destiny.”

I almost dropped my trays on the ground.

I'm done with this day. I'm going to bed.

The next day I lingered under the covers longer than usual, scrolling through my social media feed. Once again, the topic of crypto appeared. This time, it was a post by my friend Linda. Intrigued by the synchronicity, I sent her a message expressing my curiosity and asking if we could chat. She responded immediately, and soon we were shooting messages back and forth. Linda revealed that she had made a significant profit—more than a million dollars—through her crypto investments during the pandemic. My eyes widened in astonishment as I read her story.

Linda sent me a link to download a virtual wallet app where I could buy and store crypto. I knew nothing about investing and even less about digital currency. The idea of making a million dollars from invisible computations felt almost clandestine.

“Are you sure about this?” I asked.

“Girl, if I can do it, anyone can,” Linda responded with an air of confidence that reassured me.

I downloaded the crypto wallet that she recommended and transferred a few dollars into the account. It may have been a small investment, but it

was a big leap into the unknown. I was excited to see what would happen next.

A few days later, I was ankle-deep in the swampy ground near the pond, propagating hibiscus and other plants. I was grateful that the party people were gone and I could resume my normal routine. It was mid-December, and a few projects needed to be completed before the holidays and the end of my time at Serenity. The earth beneath my fingers was cool and moist, carrying the scent of rich, organic life. The sounds of nature surrounded me—the rhythmic croaking of frogs, the distant hum of insects, and the gentle rustling of leaves.

I approached each plant with a sense of reverence, as if I was greeting an old friend. With every gentle tug and placement of a new shoot into the soft ground, I felt a silent exchange of energy. Ayahuasca, still alive in my blood, seemed to awaken a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of all living things. Plants, once mere residents of the landscape, now felt like family. As I worked, the sunlight filtered through the trees. I reflected on the diverse landscapes and experiences of 2021—from the fertile grounds of Sunny Acres Farms to the enchanting Sagebrush Sanctuary, the vivid memories of Guatemala, and the bustling energy of New York. It felt

as if some unseen hand had been guiding me through a tapestry of events, weaving together a narrative that was still unfolding.

Time moved quickly between my chores and my afternoon deep dives into the digital realm. Now that I had some money in the game, I embarked on a full-fledged research expedition into cryptocurrency, blockchain, and the emerging landscape of web3 technologies. I enrolled in an online course offered by Harvard University and dedicated several hours a day to articles, white papers, online forums, and informational videos. My research illuminated the transformative impact that decentralized finance and blockchain could have on creating a more accessible and transparent financial ecosystem. They represented a paradigm shift, a reimagining of how information, value, and trust could be distributed in the digital age. I saw parallels between the ideology of cryptocurrency and my passion for community empowerment. Both represented a departure from traditional systems and centralized control, disseminating authority and power to anyone with a Wi-Fi signal. The alignment of these values fueled my enthusiasm, and I started to see a convergence of my interests in a way I hadn't imagined before.

Before I knew it, Christmas carols were playing everywhere. I packed my few belongings into the Mustang and said my goodbyes to Thomas,

Jack, James, and Rickey. The atmosphere was heavy with awkward tension, a dramatic pause before the curtain fell on this peculiar chapter of my journey. I had a cheap room waiting for me in a house in Hollywood, Florida. My wanderlust had finally expired, replaced by a strong longing to settle down. I didn't know exactly what kind of life I was stepping into, but I was ready for it.

Before I checked into my new accommodations, I made a special stop. I pulled into Highlands Hammock State Park just as the sun was sinking in the sky, casting a warm palette of oranges and pinks over the dusty trails. My sister Adina had already parked her RV, and her daughters, Ariana and Briella, were snuggled in a hammock hung between two pine trees. The girls jumped up and ran toward me when I got out of my car, which spoke volumes without uttering a single word. Excitement bubbled in their laughter as they told me about the alligators they had encountered along the trails earlier in the day.

“Wait until you see the bridge in the swamp!” they exclaimed, bursting with joy. It was the most gratifying greeting I had received in ages.

Because I had been a traveling nomad for so long, I rarely got to spend time with my sister and her kids. It had been years since we'd even

had a visit. This rendezvous in a local park gave us a unique opportunity to spend some uninterrupted time together for the holidays.

“Let’s go!” Adina shouted. “The sun will be down soon.”

I jumped in the back of her flatbed truck with the girls while she peeled out onto the dirt road. We rumbled along, each bump and jostle met with giggles and exclamations. We made it to a lookout point just as the sun dipped below the horizon. I held up my phone for a selfie, the four of us glowing with golden light. *Hell yeah! This is exactly how I want to spend the last few days of this crazy year.*

Back at the RV site, Adina lit a campfire and began making dinner. Ariana grabbed her ukulele and started strumming, singing some tunes that harmonized with the crickets and other nature sounds.

“Hey Gabe, you ever play?” she asked.

“No way,” I chuckled. “I’m more of a plant person.”

Briella paraded around with her Bengal cat on a leash. “This is Delilah,” she beamed. “She’s a nature explorer like us.”

Adina chuckled, flipping veggie burgers on the grill. “I’ve got these tomatoes in my garden that grow like they’re on steroids,” she said, laughing. “You’d be proud.”

The ease of sliding into family banter and familial fun was refreshing. *Just like riding a bike.* After living and working with strangers for so long, I

was grateful to be known without explaining who I was and where I came from. We huddled around the fire, watching the camps around us light up their twinkle lights and tiki torches. The sense of community enveloped the park like a comforting quilt. Picnic tables transformed into communal feasts, and the air carried the aroma of BBQ and camaraderie.

Adina handed me a plate piled high with french fries. “Dig in,” she said.

“Absolutely,” I replied, mouth full.

As Adina dished out food, the girls and I mapped out our adventures for the next day and the countdown to the new year. The fire crackled and chatter echoed in the cool night air. I couldn’t help but feel a warmth beyond the flames, a collective spirit of authentic celebration.

After we devoured the food and cleared the table, we snuck off under a sprawling canopy of stars to look for night creatures. We fumbled into a grove where giant trees arched overhead like cathedral ceilings. White-tailed deer hopped through the beams of our flashlights like furry phantoms. Farther down the path, we found an abandoned playground. I chased the girls, impersonating a flesh-eating zombie. Their laughter was louder than the song of the barred owls hooting, “Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you?”

I was so tired by the time my head hit the pillow that I fell into a deep, marvelous sleep. I dreamed of a snake with milky-white eyes, her beautiful black-and-brown skin becoming flakey and dry. I watched as she pushed and rubbed herself on the rocks until the old layer began to tear by her lips. She slid out of the skin like she was taking off a slinky dress, and then she emerged, a fresh new snake, her old self crumpled like a small plastic bag in the corner.

I woke in the morning with bittersweet emotion. I could still feel the subtle heartache of my relationship with Rick, even though more than two years had passed. Watching the love of Adina and her children made me long for my own sense of family, or at least a steady sense of belonging. There were so many discarded versions of me, so many abandoned identities and unfulfilled fantasies, so many lost relationships and forgotten friendships. The holidays amplified the sense of loss and the passage of time. I knew that each ending was a new beginning, but there was also an invisible graveyard to contend with. I hated letting go of the things that I loved.

After warm toast and hot coffee, we set off into the swamps to look at old-growth cypress, immense pileated woodpeckers, and lumbering gopher tortoises. We marveled at the massive webs of the golden silk spiders and

grew gleeful when we stumbled onto a litter of baby boars foraging with their mama. Each encounter made my heart a little lighter. No matter what despair we carry, there is always some miraculous beauty beckoning for our attention. The creatures keep weaving, the birds go on singing, and the cycles of life forever unfold in enchanting ways. I was grateful to be immersed in such a restorative forest wonderland with loved ones.

In the late afternoon, we retreated to camp to prepare for the New Year's Eve celebration. In a few hours, we would be ending one era and beginning another—leaving the Chinese year of the hardworking ox and entering the time of the passionate tiger. I felt the power of the big cat activating my strength and confidence. Around us, people were setting up small gatherings, playing lively tunes and shooting off sporadic bursts of fireworks. We wandered around the camping area, meeting our neighbors and joining in shared meals. The jubilant scene felt more like a family reunion than a camping trip.

Evening arrived with a palpable buzz of energy. The music got louder, and the cheers rose higher. Strangers and friends alike joined in the festivities. I sensed that I was not the only one happily turning the page on this year of turbulence and transition. We all seemed elated to be moving on.

As the countdown to midnight began, the excitement reached a crescendo. “Ten...nine...eight...seven...”—the numbers echoed through the campsite—“six...five...four...”—a chorus of voices joined in the collective countdown—“...three...two...one...Happy New Year!”

An eruption of cheers rocked the trees, punctuated by a dazzling display of fireworks that painted the sky. Adina, Ariana, Briella, and I shared jumping hugs and danced like fools along the winding paths, waving our bodies like fervent flags in a magic wind. When we finally went to bed, a sense of completion settled over me like a gentle reassuring touch. As I drifted into sleep I smiled with gratitude, soothed by the promise of a new dawn.

Chapter 17

January 2022

I arrived at the Hollywood house on January 2nd. Unfortunately, it lacked the warmth that made a place feel like home. I sat on the edge of my bed in the sparsely furnished room, staring out onto the suburban street. “Humph,” I sighed. The transience of my living situation had worn on my spirit. I longed for stability, a place I could truly feel at ease. I watched as a tiny trail of ants marched up the wall, across the ceiling, and out the slice of space over the door. Feeling a sense of gloom, I closed my eyes and whispered a silent plea to the Universe.

God, please help me find my place, my forever home. I’m tired of moving, tired of feeling like a stranger in my own life. Where do I belong?

The room remained quiet, the answer elusive. I heard muffled conversation through the wall. It was my two new roommates, Teresa and Edward. Each seemed to be from a different corner of the universe. Teresa had a thick Southern accent and a thicker waist. She never left the house except to go to Walmart once a week, fill her car with groceries, and stuff them into the overflowing cabinets. Edward, a lanky dark-skinned man, slept days and worked nights, so I rarely crossed paths with him. When I did see him, he quickly retreated as if he were scared he might catch a disease from me.

God grant me the serenity to accept this ridiculous situation, the patience to figure out my life, and the ability to trust you even when I don't want to. Amen, I prayed.

I sought solace in my laptop. Without much thought, I updated my LinkedIn profile to reflect the cryptocurrency course I had recently completed. The next morning, I found my inbox flooded with emails from recruiters. Each message was an invitation to explore new job opportunities. What's going on? I wondered, as I scrolled through the messages. *Is this for real?*

Dear Gabrielle,

I am reaching out to see if you have 10 minutes to confidentially discuss a position with an innovative Blockchain and Media firm specialized in the Crypto and NFT space. They offer a competitive starting base salary + uncapped commission and bonuses. This position is open because of growth. More details are outlined below:

- > Work alongside creative in creation of content*
- > World Class Benefits*
- > Remote (some travel expected)*
- > Huge Growth (Company is in start-up stage)*
- > Generous 401k Plans and Full Healthcare Packages*

Due to the nature of the project (it is not publicly announced) I am unable to send more

information before speaking on the phone. Below is my Calendly to select a time for us

to connect!

Regards,

Mark

The irony wasn't lost on me—the unconventional path I had chosen, the strange house I now resided in, and the traditional realm of job recruitment colliding in my inbox. I hesitated for a few seconds, wondering what the hell was going to happen next.

Well, you only get more in life by saying yes, I guess.

I giggled as I typed. *Hi Mark, thank you for reaching out. I would like to learn more about this opportunity.* I clicked the 10 a.m. button on his calendar, filled in my details, and hit “send.” This might be a terrible idea, I thought, but at least it won't be boring.

In life, there are those who meticulously plot each step, and there are the free spirits who flow through existence with wild abandon, embracing whatever life has to offer. While the planners are busy following their agenda, the carefree are riding the highest energies, saying yes to strangers

and stumbling upon hidden treasures—like a pot of crypto gold at the end of a metaverse rainbow. Say yes to life, and life will inundate you with more of itself, in all its chaotic, breathtaking glory. Say yes to that crazy idea, and watch it snowball into something bigger than you ever imagined. Say yes to living life to the fullest and brace yourself—because that’s where the real adventure begins.

The sun cast a warm glow over Miami Beach as I stepped into the extravagant penthouse loft at the Flamingo building. It was like something out of a magazine spread—sleek, modern, and undoubtedly expensive. Nadia, a skinny brunette with anxious eyes and hurried speech, greeted me with a limp handshake.

“You must be Gabby,” she said in a slightly Russian accent. “Come on in. Alex’s waiting.”

I offered a polite smile, already amused at the eccentricity of the situation. Nadia led me through the opulent space, her high heels clicking against the polished floors. When we stepped into the dining room, the first thing that struck me was the blinding white interior. Floor-to-ceiling windows surrounded us, offering an uninterrupted view of Biscayne Bay and the cruise ship channel. It was so picturesque it almost seemed fake. The dining room table, a long glass masterpiece, sat in the center of the room with a dozen white leather chairs around it, like a prop on a movie set.

Nadia fidgeted with her hair as she gestured for me to sit down across from Alex, the founder of BlockStrip, a social media platform for crypto enthusiasts.

“Gabby, glad you could make it,” Alex grunted in a British accent. “Take a seat.”

I nodded and sat across from him, trying not to let my amusement show. He was the epitome of an English action-thriller actor, his bald head gleaming in the sunlight.

“Alex, darling, would you like some tea?” Nadia asked.

“No, thanks, Nadia,” he said. “We’re good.”

Alex leaned forward. His piercing gaze fixed on me.

“So, Gabby,” he said, “how do you plan to get BlockStrip off the ground? I want to see followers pouring in, engagement skyrocketing. Can you make us go viral?”

I could practically smell the hunger emanating from him; whether it was for money or simply the thrill of triumph, I couldn’t tell. I knew this conversation well from previous consulting gigs in New York and Los Angeles. I rattled off my ideas, watching as Alex’s eyes lit up.

Alex leaned back and said, “Impressive, Gabby. Very impressive indeed.”

I tried not to chuckle. For me, this was just another project, another game to play in the grand scheme of things. As I spoke, Nadia seemed engaged in a dance routine of sorts. She repeatedly got up from her chair, paced around the table, and then sat down again, as if she couldn't sit still.

"You know, guys, BlockStrip could have its own fashion section! I mean, think about it. Crypto-themed clothing, exclusive NFT-inspired accessories," she said.

Alex's jaw tightened ever so slightly. A hint of annoyance flickered in his eyes. He quickly masked it with a forced smile.

"That's an interesting idea, Nadia," I said. "We can definitely explore it more."

Nadia nodded enthusiastically.

"Now, Gabby," Alex asserted, "about our user acquisition strategy—"

Before Alex could finish his sentence, Nadia jumped up again, her eyes sparkling with glee. "And what if we launch a magazine, guys? A BlockStrip magazine! We could feature success stories, interviews with crypto influencers, and, of course, a dedicated fashion section." She gestured wildly as she spoke.

Alex's annoyance was now more visible, but he managed to suppress it.

"Nadia," he grunted, "let's stick to the topic at hand, shall we?"

Nadia sat back down, looking a bit dejected, but her mind seemed to be racing with a million ideas.

“I think Nadia’s ideas are great,” I said, “but I would focus on building community first.”

Alex nodded appreciatively, grateful for the redirection.

As Nadia took her seat again and fidgeted with her napkin, I continued outlining my approach. Alex seemed relieved to steer the conversation back on track, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that Nadia’s restless energy would continue to add chaos to our BlockStrip journey.

“So, you start working on this today,” Alex said confidently.

“I appreciate your certainty, Alex,” I said, “but before we dive in, there are a few formalities we need to take care of. Contracts to sign, retainers to transfer.”

Alex nodded, impatience flickering in his eyes. “Of course, of course,” he said. “We’ll have everything sorted by the end of the day.”

As we shook hands and he escorted me out of the penthouse, I suppressed a laugh. Alex might have been ravenous for success, but I was just there for the ride. And what a ride it promised to be.

I returned to my room in Hollywood and scrolled through emails on my laptop. One caught my eye—a message from a publisher named Brooke

regarding my manuscript. I clicked on the message and read Brooke's thoughtful feedback. She believed my story was "an important one to tell" but suggested that it needed revisions. She recommended Bridget, a developmental editor, to help with the next draft.

When I contacted Bridget, there was an instant connection, as if we'd known each other for years rather than mere minutes.

"Your story has so much potential," she said. "We just need to polish it up a bit. I have some ideas that I think will really make it shine."

As Bridget outlined her approach, I felt exhilarated. *This could be the push my manuscript needs to finally see the light of day.*

When we said our goodbyes and hung up the phone, I felt anticipation building within me. My mind was consumed with thoughts of publication—the excitement, the fear, the uncertainty. *What if my memoir is a failure? What if no one reads it—or worse, what if everyone reads it and knows everything about me?* I felt an invisible tsunami of energy looming. There was no telling where this journey might lead.

A few weeks into my role at BlockStrip, I stood on a daytime stage in a dingy nightclub with a banner behind me that read "Shitcoin Conference." Neon lights flashed erratically, casting colorful patterns across the room as the eclectic mix of crypto enthusiasts, investors, and tech folks from around

the globe settled into their seats. I had applied to speak at this conference, as well as several other events during Miami Tech month, to gain attention for BlockStrip. Alex's growing demands pressured me to work harder and faster than I had expected. Each task seemed to expand in size and responsibility, and a sense of increasingly annoying urgency filled my workdays.

I squeezed the microphone tightly in my palm and said, "Good afternoon, everyone! I'm thrilled to talk to you about marketing for launch success." Adrenaline surged as all eyes focused on me. "The go-to market strategy in web3 is leveraging decentralized technologies and investing in community roles to bring users into the role of stakeholder. This is revolutionary. If you don't get this kind of fundamental ideology shift, then you're not really getting what's going on in the space," I continued.

As I spoke, I walked back and forth on the stage, gesturing for effect, drawing the audience into my presentation. Despite the unconventional setting and unusual topic, I was in my element, reveling in the opportunity to share my knowledge and expertise. The audience responded with nods of approval and murmurs of agreement. The irony wasn't lost on me. Here I was, a relative newcomer to the crypto world, speaking at a conference called "Shitcoin" about marketing strategies. It was a surreal experience,

vastly different from making the herbal remedies, feeding the chickens, or harvesting the fields of the past few years. But I loved every minute of it.

“So remember,” I said in conclusion, “a lot of what we’re doing has never been done before, and BlockStrip is here to support you. Get in touch with me!”

The audience erupted into applause as I stepped away from the podium. Satisfaction washed over me.

As I wandered around the venue, meeting the vendors and listening to other speakers deliver their presentations, I noticed a glaring disparity. It was a predominantly male audience. *How strange*. I was used to working mostly with women in the wellness space. With a sinking feeling in my stomach, I wondered about the broader landscape of women in finance and tech. Scrolling through Twitter and Discord to follow the breaking news and announcements, I saw a similar pattern. *How had I not noticed this before?*

After the conference, I dove into research, scouring the internet for information about gender representation in tech and finance. What I found shocked and angered me. The statistics revealed a stark reality, with men outnumbering women in education, jobs, investments, leadership positions, and more. Fueled by frustration, I turned to LinkedIn to share my findings and voice my outrage. I crafted a passionate post calling for change. Within hours, my post began to gain traction, resonating with tens of thousands of

people who shared my concerns. Comments and shares flooded in, amplifying my message, and sparking conversations about gender inequality.

Major players in the industry took notice, impressed by my boldness. I received messages of support from fellow professionals, offers to collaborate on initiatives promoting diversity and inclusion, and invitations to speak at larger, more inclusive conferences.

I received a message from Sue at Global Village Publishing Inc., inviting me to be part of her project. The message said, “We are publishing a high-quality coffee table book showcasing top female change-makers in Web3 using emerging technologies as a force for good in the real world. It is a passion project led by four women supporting visibility to women because even though these technologies are rapidly developing, the space is not represented enough by women. Our goal is to bridge mass adoption and ensure women not only get their seats at the table but also get to drive the narrative. All we want is to help you by giving you this unique visibility in the book and on our website.”

I had to read the message several times because my brain was scrambled in disbelief.

I think they want to feature me in a book about female tech leaders. Is that possible? HOW is that possible?

I laughed out loud.

Sue explained that she'd been following me on social media, and she admired my courage and determination. She believed my story would be a powerful addition to their platform. I was stunned by the invitation. To be recognized and acknowledged for my efforts was both strange and empowering. With a sense of pride and purpose, I responded to her message, expressing my gratitude for the opportunity and my enthusiasm to be a part of the book.

Later that week, the penthouse was abuzz with activity. In an all-employee meeting, Alex and Nadia introduced me to several newly hired team members, including Jason, a young DJ, Dave, a nerdy marketing guy, and Will, a middle-aged article editor. Unease lay beneath the thrill in the air. Alex's spending habits were growing more extravagant by the day. VIP tickets to the Bitcoin conference, hiring a film crew—it was all part of his grand vision for BlockStrip. But as the pressure grew and the expenses expanded, I felt more and more apprehensive.

“Can you believe the energy, Gabby?” Nadia bounced as she spoke. “We’re going to be the biggest name in the industry!”

I forced a smile, trying to match Nadia's passion, but my mind raced with doubts.

“I’ve got big plans for BlockStrip, folks,” Alex said. “We’re going to revolutionize the crypto world!”

My stomach turned as Alex outlined his grandiose ideas.

“We’re not just a platform anymore. We’re going to buy a building, create coworking spaces, and produce a documentary showcasing my journey of becoming the King of Crypto,” he announced.

A chill ran down my spine at the mention of the documentary. It was the antithesis of everything I believed in—misogynistic, egocentric, and driven by unchecked ambition.

“That sounds...interesting, Alex,” I murmured. “It’ll certainly make a statement.” As I forced the words out, I couldn’t help but wonder how far Alex’s ego would lead us astray. The pressure, the spending...after almost three months of working at BlockStrip, it was all starting to feel insane.

“I can’t wait to see it all come together, Gabby!” Nadia exclaimed. “We’re going to be unstoppable!”

I nodded, trying to push aside my concern and focus on the task at hand. Deep down, I knew this would not end well, but I kept my thoughts to myself. I needed the job, the money. I couldn’t afford to rock the boat.

After the intense meeting, Alex pulled me aside, his expression grave. He asked me to join his investor conference call. My heart skipped a beat. I

had never dealt directly with investors before. But I could tell it was important to Alex, so I agreed.

I sat nervously in front of the laptop with Alex as he led the online meeting. His confident demeanor faltered as he addressed the investors. I felt the tension and weight of expectation.

“I have to be transparent with you all. We’ve encountered some challenges,” Alex began.

“What kind of challenges?” said one of the investors.

“Well, the technology has too many bugs. It’s just not user friendly. We’ve decided to scrap it and go in a different direction,” Alex said.

As the meeting progressed, Alex admitted that he had recklessly spent \$10 million of the investors’ money, with no means to get it back. Panic set in. I felt my stomach drop.

“How could you let this happen, Alex?” one of the investors shouted.

My mind raced as I tried to process the magnitude of Alex’s confession. How could he be so careless with other people’s money? And more importantly, what did this mean for BlockStrip and everyone involved?

“Not to worry,” Alex interjected. “Gabby will tell you how we’re going to revolutionize the crypto world with our coworking spaces and media production.”

Alex looked at me expectantly.

What the fuck is happening? He wants me to pitch his ideas? I was reeling. I stuttered to fill in the silence with convincing words about the future of the company. Small, stunned faces stared back at me from the computer screen. After a few minutes and a lot of reassuring smiles on my part, the alarm seemed to subside a bit. The investors requested a full written plan by the end of the week, which I promised to deliver. When we hung up, I felt like I had just fallen out of a plane and landed face down on the pavement.

“I hate those assholes,” Alex grunted as he closed the laptop.

I was speechless.

Nadia was waiting for us in the living room. She could see from our faces that it had been a difficult conversation. Alex’s whole head had turned red, and my eyes were as wide as the loft windows.

“Alex, darling,” she purred, “you know what we need? A party! Oh, yes, a party will be the perfect way to launch the new BlockStrip. We can invite all the celebrities and fashion models. Miami investors will be throwing their money at us. You’ll see!”

DJ Jason chimed in. “Yo, that sounds dope! We’ll get the crowd hyped and raise some serious cash for the cause.”

Nadia beamed, encouraged by Jason's support. "Exactly! We'll get a bartender and display some NFTs on the screens. Alex, darling, we can have that sushi place we love do the catering."

Alex seemed to soften at the mention of sushi.

"Bruh, we'll have the place jumping! I'll mix up some sick tunes to keep the vibe going all night long." Jason grinned, already envisioning the epic party he was about to throw.

Am I on a reality TV show right now? Is this actually happening? I scanned the room, wondering if there were hidden cameras embedded in the walls.

"Fuck it," Alex said. "Call the film crew. Might as well get started on my movie."

As I drove home from the penthouse, I felt hot and confused, like at the onset of a fever dream. I was already too high on this magic carpet ride to jump off. My bank account was doubling every week, my network was expanding exponentially, and I was going to be featured in a book called *Top 100 Women of the Future*, for fuck's sake. But the higher I got, the more I could feel the effects of the altitude. The thin air of the startup made me lightheaded and disoriented, and the relentless pace of work left little time for self-care. Despite my better judgment and the struggle to breathe, I

decided I would hold tight until my body or the company crashed, whichever came first. It was such a radical departure from the way I had been living prior to reentry in modern life, but I couldn't fight it. I was swept away by the whirlwind of activity, the new challenges and opportunities, the fervor of innovation and possibility.

As the pace accelerated, I began to feel the strain. I braced against the wind. Deep down, I knew it was only a matter of time until the relentless pace caught up with me, and I was forced to confront the reality of my situation.

I'll deal with it later, I told myself. For the meantime, I was just going to ride the wave until point break. *What's the worst that can happen?*

Chapter 18

June 2022

In the hazy realm of dreams, I stood at the edge of a dense jungle, the air thick with the scent of exotic blooms and the sounds of unseen creatures rustling in the underbrush. A majestic cheetah sauntered before me, its sleek form blending seamlessly with the dappled shadows. As I watched, mesmerized by the wild beauty of the creature, a Mayan grandmother materialized from the darkness, her presence both ancient and timeless. With weathered hands outstretched, she beckoned to me, her eyes shimmering with wisdom and compassion. I stepped forward, drawn by an irresistible force. Verdant vines snaked forth from the earth and wrapped around my body in a gentle embrace. They pulled me closer to the grandmother, weaving a tapestry of connection between us. I felt a sense of belonging, a deep resonance that echoed through the chambers of my soul. But even as I basked in the warmth of her embrace, uncertainty gnawed at the edges of my consciousness.

Suddenly, I jolted awake, the insistent buzz of my alarm in my ears. Blinking groggily, I looked around my room at the sparse decorations and mismatched furniture. It lacked the comforting familiarity of a home and was a constant reminder of the transient nature of my current existence. The

feeling had become all too familiar in recent months. A restless energy propelled me forward even as I longed for stability and grounding.

With a sigh, I sat up, rubbed the sleep from my eyes, and tried to shake off the remnants of the vivid dream. I knew what the dream meant: Grandmother Ayahuasca was asking me to return for more medicine. I didn't want to go. I told myself I didn't have the time or energy for a retreat, even if it only lasted one day.

As I swung my legs over the side of the bed and planted my feet on the cool floor, I felt the lingering sensation of being caught between two worlds. I was uncertain which was more real. I looked at my phone and saw several missed calls from Alex and Nadia. The party had been planned for tonight. A chaotic energy surged and pulled me back into the fray of everyday life. With a resigned sigh, I pushed myself to my feet and staggered into the kitchen to make some coffee. *It's gonna take a lot of caffeine to get me through this.* I felt exhausted just thinking about it.

A few hours later, the Miami Beach penthouse was slammed with wall-to-wall people. I was surprised at how easily the personal residence had been transformed into a private nightclub. Neon beams pulsed to the beat as Jason bounced around in a mock DJ booth, fist-pumping the air and shooting smoke from a large gun over the heads of the crowd. Alex and

Nadia zigzagged around the room, radiating charm and charisma. The air crackled with chatter and champagne. Young women in miniskirts swayed their hips and hair provocatively. Food and drinks flowed freely from the catering station in the kitchen. A weird, bearded man wearing a cape and carrying a small dog passed by, barefoot and high as a kite.

I wore a silver cocktail dress and high heels for the occasion. It had been four years since I had worn this kind of attire, but I slid back into it like a hand in a glove. The balcony doors were splayed open, inviting in the humid spring air and letting out the loud music. Colorful lights from surrounding boats and buildings lit up the night sky.

I watched out of the corner of my eye as Alex homed in on his prey, a 21-year-old kid named Enzo who had accidentally become a multimillionaire from the Bitcoins he had earned in a video game when he was in middle school. Alex leaned in and whispered something in Enzo's ear. I could hear the words in my head: "Enzo, my man, I've got a proposition that'll blow your mind." Enzo, dark sunglasses obscuring his eyes, nodded at Alex. The kid exuded an aura of cool confidence and indifference. I could feel the weight of Alex's desperation to get Enzo's money, and I was certain it would never happen. While Nadia envisioned a new company launch party, I was convinced that this was our grand finale.

I sipped on a minty margarita. During the rush of the day, I had forgotten to eat, and the cocktail hit me with waves of euphoria. The alcohol warmed my veins and lifted the weight of the world from my shoulders. I decided to throw caution to the wind and join the fun on the dance floor. The music pulsed through my body, syncing with the rhythm of my movements. I spun around, adding dizziness to the intoxication. Soon I was singing out loud without a care in the world. For a fleeting moment, I allowed myself to forget the precariousness of my situation and the uncertainty of my future. All that mattered was the music, the laughter, and the reckless abandon.

I caught sight of a pair of roller skates tucked away in a corner. Without a second thought, I made a beeline for them, a grin spreading across my face as I envisioned the exhilarating freedom of gliding across the dance floor. With the skates snugly laced up, I took a deep breath and pushed off, feeling the familiar thrill of the wheels rolling beneath my feet. As if drawn by some magnetic force, the crowd gathered around me. Cheers and whistles washed over me, and I was transported to another world of pure, unadulterated bliss.

My dreamy reverie came to an abrupt halt as a sharp knock echoed through the penthouse, signaling the arrival of the police. My heart raced as Alex squared off with the officers at the door.

“We’re not turning down the music. Give us the fucking fine!” I heard him say.

Sobriety pierced my shimmering fantasy like a cold gust of wind. The party was over, in more ways than one. As I left the penthouse, sweaty and spent, I felt a bittersweet liberation. If that was my last hurrah, at least it had been an ecstatic one.

The shrill ringtone of my phone jolted me awake from a restless slumber. My heart pounded with foreboding even before I checked the notifications. Frantic calls and urgent messages from my BlockStrip coworkers flooded my screen. My stomach churned as I realized something was terribly wrong. I scanned through the texts. Alex and Nadia were nowhere to be found, leaving behind a company in disarray. Payroll hadn’t been processed, and the investors were clamoring for answers. As I sifted through the chaos in my email inbox, a startling revelation emerged. Alex had a history of this deceit. He was a crypto fugitive, a master manipulator who had stolen millions and left behind a trail of shattered dreams. I’d sensed that something was off, but I never imagined it would be this catastrophic. In the blink of an eye, my role evaporated into thin air, leaving me with no choice but to figure out my next move, even though the path ahead was unknown.

Lying in bed, a familiar voice began to whisper in the recesses of my mind, a siren song beckoning me with promises of clarity and healing. The call to return to ayahuasca grew louder. Images from my jungle dreams filled my mind. In the absence of obligations, I had no more excuses. I booked an appointment for a retreat on the eve of my 48th birthday. I was ready to release the stress and receive more of the mystical, joyful energy of my previous ceremony. But Grandmother had a different plan for me, one that would purge what was left of my past once and for all.

I lay in bed for a week anticipating the retreat. Heaviness weighed on my chest, a palpable sadness that seeped into every fiber of my being. My gaze fixed on a glowing screen as I mindlessly streamed TV shows. I knew I should be preparing for my upcoming ceremony, but the thought of moving felt like an insurmountable task. My bones felt like lead, weighed down by a profound exhaustion. Each breath was a struggle, and even the simplest of tasks felt like an overwhelming burden.

From time to time, I gazed out the window at the soft light filtering through the curtains. The world outside seemed calm. Yet despite the tranquility of nature, my mind was far from peaceful. My thoughts drifted in and out of the liminal space again, that familiar threshold between what was and what will be. It was a place I knew all too well, a transient state of

transition that seems to define my existence. I reflected on the endless cycles of dissolution and rebirth that characterized my life. It was as if I was constantly shedding old skins, reinventing myself with each passing moment.

I worried about the fleetingness of it all, how I had lived multiple lives in multiple months, my identity as fluid as the shapes in the clouds drifting lazily across the sky. I was lulled into daytime sleep, the hours slipping away unnoticed as I drifted in and out of consciousness. My heart ached with a longing for stability, for permanence in a world that seems determined to remain in constant flux.

Will it always be like this? Will I ever have a solid shape or a steady life?

Time slipped through my grasp like grains of sand. Before I knew it, it was time to go to Lake Okeechobee. I drove for an hour on autopilot, my actions guided by some unseen force beyond my control. I had an overnight bag in the backseat with a few essentials—my white ceremony clothes, toothbrush, and water bottle. The journey stretched out before me like the road, winding and uncertain.

As I approached the familiar 20-acre property, the lush greenery and the relaxed ambiance greeted me like an old friend, soothing some of the

tension that had been building within me for weeks.

Julio, the shaman who had guided me through my first ayahuasca experience, stood at the entrance gate. His warm smile put me at ease.

After check-in, I walked mindfully along the sandy path covered in pine needles toward my cabin, absorbing the sweet details of my surroundings. Small hand-painted rocks lined the path on either side. Afternoon sunlight beamed through the overhead palms, touching my exposed shoulders like warm hands. Copper wind chimes dangling from a branch rang like church bells on a Sunday morning.

Inside my room, I set down my bag and placed my green unakite prayer beads on the desk. They had been a gift from the Malibu girls the previous summer; the inscription in the case read “Unakite is a composite made up of multiple stones symbolizing multidimensional adaptability. It is associated with healthy growth and the heart chakra because of its ability to balance emotions, and the third eye chakra for its ability to connect with the spirit world.” The beads provided a sense of comfort and strength.

A framed letter titled “Communion” was displayed next to the desk. I didn’t remember seeing it on my first visit. It read, “I am the Spirit of Ayahuasca. You must allow my work without interference, as a patient that surrenders into the hands of a surgeon...Preparing to commune with me is like preparing to die. I will accompany you and support you. Trust me.”

Why did the words sound so ominous? I let out a sigh and brushed aside the feeling, remembering the joy that Grandmother had provided in the previous ceremony. I didn't want a death experience. I wanted a new life, one with a clear direction, abundant love, and a sense of belonging.

It never occurred to me that true rebirth required shedding the old to make room for growth. As I slid out of my summer shorts and into my white dress, time began to slow down. The air around me thickened with an enchanted energy. My movements felt more deliberate and purposeful, as if I was watching myself in a dream.

I exited my small cabin and walked toward the maloca, which looked less like a temple and more like a portal. I stepped inside and admired the colorful altar surrounded by candles, flowers, and musical instruments. I reflected on all the times in the past few years I had been on some holy ground, on the cusp of reality, leaning into the void, inhaling the scent of the sacred. The Rio Grande hot springs. The high desert homestead. The volcanic lake. The Mayan fire. The Catholic cathedral. The rainbow-covered labyrinth. With a deep breath, I surrendered myself to the will of the medicine, ready to embark on another transformative odyssey into the depths of the divine.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting the sky in hues of pink and gold, the other participants joined me inside the structure. Each of them

carried their own hopes, fears, and intentions.

Julio began the ceremony with a solemn prayer, invoking the spirits of the plants and calling upon their wisdom to guide us through the night. His voice echoed like a bird song, reaching out to invisible realms to request protection and healing forces. He knelt behind a small decorative table and held his hands over small cups of tea. Statues of Jesus and Mother Mary guarded the threshold. Flickering candlelight cast dancing shadows across Julio's face, infusing him with an otherworldly glow.

After the invocation, he gestured for us to approach. We stood like soldiers in formation, waiting for our turn to drink. With each step, I felt my senses shifting, my awareness expanding to encompass the forest around me.

I took a slow, deliberate sip. The liquid swirled in my mouth like a murky river. The taste was bitter and earthy, a reminder of the raw power of Grandmother. Returning to my mat, I sat cross-legged, feeling the pulsing of something foreign yet familiar inside my chest. The dense foliage seemed to press in closer, penetrating the walls of the maloca and blurring the boundaries between the sacred space and the untamed wilderness beyond. I listened to the *icaros*, drums and rattles for a while. But despite the immersive quality of my experience, I still felt sober. I wanted a deeper connection so I could fully let go.

I returned to the altar for another cup of tea. As I drank the bitter brew once more, the cool liquid coursed through my veins, sending tendrils of darkness snaking through my mind, blurring the lines between reality and illusion. I felt a subtle shift in my consciousness, a loosening of the bonds that tethered me to waking life. Again, I meditated on the sacred objects and ancestral sounds in the temple, waiting for the ayahuasca to show me whatever it was that had brought me back to this ceremony.

Why am I here? I asked her. *Where am I going? Do you have anything you want to tell me?*

I bombarded her with questions as a rising sense of frustration sent small waves of heat throughout my body. I scanned the room and the faces of the others. Each person seemed immersed in some serene dream. The sight of them only made me more irritated.

I'm going all in. I returned to Julio's table for a third time.

His eyes met mine at the altar. His gaze seemed to say, *Are you sure about this?*

With an unflinching stare, I let him know that I was deadly sure. I didn't come to this life—or this retreat—for a half-assed adventure. I came for the full catastrophe.

I swallowed the tea in one gulp. Before I could return to my mat, I was thrust like a rocket out of this world and into a menacing, terrifying

jungle. Something horrific was chasing me, and I was choking with fear. I pushed my way forward through dense, tangled vegetation toward some unknown destination. Branches slapped and scraped my face as I navigated through the darkness. There was an oppressive humidity. My anxiety screeched like the high-pitched cries of hawks.

The further I slipped into the depths of the jungle, the worse the feeling became until my senses were inundated with an unforgiving pain. Little by little, I waded through every psychological nightmare of my life—the aftershocks of trauma, the toxic poison of shame, the anguish and helplessness of abandonment, the torture of confronting my demons, the kicking and screaming of survival. I was in a harrowing war zone, a landscape that stretched the limits of my endurance and resolve.

The torment seemed to go on forever—loss, lost, aloneness, separation, dying a thousand deaths—the feelings just kept coming. When I thought it couldn't get any worse, a montage of murder, miscarriage, violence, longing, betrayal, and isolation pushed through me. It felt like every cell of my being was being shattered and torn apart. It was unbearable, and yet somehow, I was bearing it. I stumbled through the impenetrable foliage, looking for something—anything—to hold on to, but there was no escape.

I started to have a panic attack. Hot flashes, shortness of breath, and sweat sprang from every pore. I thought maybe I would actually die.

Just then, I heard the low rumble of an ancient voice say to me, “You must feel all the unfelt feelings of all the women who came before you. They couldn’t do it, and you must do it for them. When you help these women, the person you free is yourself.”

The rocket ship of energy launched me into warp speed. I was surrounded by a breathtaking spectacle of light, my entire being engulfed in a fiery glow. So many unanswered questions evaporated as I realized the significance of this new awareness.

Everything finally made sense: how I’d had feelings that were “too big” for me my entire life, how there had always been too many feelings and nowhere to put them, how I had never known what to do with all the feelings, how I had tried to run away repeatedly, not feel the feelings, avoid them, outrun them, escape them. Faster and faster, the emotions moved through me until there was nothing left but a trail of billowing smoke and vapor. Finally, as the images dissipated and sensations dissolved, I was possessed by an overpowering need to get out of the maloca.

NOW.

My body moved toward the exit on automatic pilot, consumed by a force stronger than my will. Somewhere in the distant consciousness of my

mind, I heard a refusal to go, a reminder to stay in the temple like I had been instructed, but I was powerless against the thing that was pulling me. I left the safety of the structure, the songs, and the community of strangers.

I stood on the lawn, dazed and confused. There was no more sunlight beaming through the trees or warmth on my skin. There was only an enveloping darkness and an irresistible desire to get as close to the ground as possible. I fell to my knees, forward onto my palms, and started crawling toward somewhere, anywhere other than where I was. Still, I was not low enough. I dropped to my belly, feeling the gravitational pull of the planet like a steel anchor around my waist. I dug my fingers into the dirt, trying to drag my body forward, but it was no use. I was down. I was done. I was not going anywhere.

I managed to roll over onto my back as the earth began closing in around me like a hungry mouth. As I lay there, paralyzed, I felt myself dissolving into the soil. Glowworms crawled around me and through me, their tiny teeth tearing at my flesh, breaking me down into smaller and smaller pieces. Roots from nearby plants and trees snaked their way toward me as the inescapable process of decomposition took hold. Piece by piece, I felt myself unraveling. My skin, my hair, my organs, my skeleton liquified and seeped into the earth, feeding the hungry microbes and bacteria that swarmed around me like a voracious army.

Unease washed over me as I realized that Mother Nature was reclaiming me. I tried to resist, tried to get back up on my feet or cry out for help, but the more I resisted, the stronger she held me down. This was not a cute, friendly union with the Universe. This was a humiliating submission. The message was clear: *You belong to me*. If I'd held any question about whether I was a separate autonomous being with agency of my own, it was annihilated in that moment. Pachamama owned me. My life belonged to her.

Forever darkness began closing in around me. I felt the heartbeat and the breath of the earth as my own. I felt the insects and weeds as my own body. I was thicker, heavier, more whole than I had ever been. There was no air or ether, only earth, as I sank deeper and deeper into her depths. I accepted that this was the end of my human experience. The sensation was both horrifying and strangely peaceful. I felt the essence of my soul—the spiritual, immaterial part of me—splitting into smaller and smaller particles as she harnessed and consumed the tiniest fragments of my being. I felt waves of grief and relief, a mixture of pain and pleasure, replaced by an inexplicable pressure and transformation. The last shreds of my identity began dissolving, the idea of me fading into the distance as I was released from the confines of my mortal form. I embraced the inevitability of my

own decay, knowing that this was the natural cycle of life and death and that my time had come.

A towering figure hovered nearby. I couldn't make eye contact or speak, but I sensed that it was Julio, trying to help me. In a faraway voice, like someone calling from across an ocean, I heard, "Gabby, can you get up? Gabby, can you hear me?"

I wanted to respond. I wanted to tell him that I had decomposed, that I was no longer "Gabby," and that I could not stand because I no longer had legs or a body. There was a sense of pulling, a sense of being retrieved or resuscitated, and an equal and opposing force to stay exactly where I was. The tug-of-war continued as I stretched between realms, between bodies, between opposing wills. There was a sense of being sucked out of the ground and lifted into the air. I felt limp limbs around the necks of Julio and another person as they carried me, feet dragging, back into the maloca.

Mother Nature would not relent. She held my breath, my heartbeat, my life force, in her hands. The further I got into the temple, the louder her haunting wail and insatiable hunger grew for my bones.

As they set me down on my mat, prayers descended on me like rain. *Our Father. Hail Mary. Come Holy Spirit.* Ribbons of light swirled around my body. I was hunched over, fingers in the sand, grasping at the divine in

my mind to bring me back to this world. I felt like a corpse in the presence of angels.

I heard a chattering of invisible guardians telling me, “Girl! Do you know how protected you are? Even when you’re making the dumbest decisions, we’re right here, watching your ass.” They flashed multiple scenes on the screen behind my eyes, showing me a myriad of ways they had intervened and saved me, including that night.

I have my own Secret Service agents, and I didn’t even know it.

Little by little, the chanting, drumming, and collective worship loosened the grasp of gravity. I started to return to my senses. Like in a limb after it has fallen asleep, pins and prickles returned to my skin, and my nerves gradually regained function. As the sensation intensified and evolved into tingling waves, my body, mind, and spirit began feeling normal again.

I was back.

I was awake.

My life, as fragile as it was, belonged to me.

Chapter 19

July 2022

When you grapple with mental suffering, it often feels like you're locked in a dark cage, suffocating under the weight of your own thoughts and emotions. For so long, I was trapped in that cramped space, struggling to break free despite my best efforts. There was a pervasive sense of brokenness within me, as if something fundamental had shattered beyond repair. I was plagued by feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness. Before my plant medicine journey, it felt like I was walking around with pieces of myself missing. I couldn't find wholeness no matter how hard I tried.

I honestly don't know what possessed me to keep looking for the holy grail, moving repeatedly through cycles of optimism and despair. Maybe it was the glimmers of hope or the small miracles that kept happening. It took relentless effort to keep trying, to keep believing in a cure. But once I made it through my manuscript and my ayahuasca ceremony, the walls of that dark cage began to crumble. I could see that many of the beliefs that had once imprisoned me were nothing but lies. I finally understood that the stories we tell ourselves and others are not inherent truths. Our narratives are not fixed, but rather dynamic and subject to change.

With clarity came the realization that my whole self was there all along, patiently waiting for me to break free. She was never broken; she

was simply overshadowed by the weight of my struggles. Reuniting with her was like finding an old friend.

Once I reconnected with myself and did the formidable work of integration, the voices of self-doubt and worthlessness finally lost their power. As I embraced my wholeness, I was no longer defined by my struggles; I was defined by my resilience, my bravery, and my unwavering spirit. With the lightness of my newfound freedom, I also discovered that the world was a canvas of endless possibilities, waiting for me to paint my masterpiece. I had broken free from the darkness. In its place, I was shining brightly for all the world to see. As I embraced the beauty of my journey, I knew that no matter what happened next, no one could ever take this liberation away from me.

The morning after the ceremony, I drove east until I reached the coastline. I wandered on foot until I stumbled upon a small shack with a colorful sign that read, “High Point Paddle Boards: Happy little fish in a big sea! Beginners are our specialty!” I collected my gear and floated out into the center of the secluded lagoon, my mind as still as the glassy water. I drifted lazily in the warm sun. The usual mental chaos of fear, sadness, anxiety, and judgment were gone. All my worries and cares were replaced

by an abiding calm, an unprecedented peace, that permeated every cell of my being.

I stared in astonishment at the tropical sanctuary surrounding me. It was as if I had been let outside for the first time since I was a small child. Each inhale was like salve on a wound, soothing and reassuring me that I was free. I was on my own, but hardly alone. Pale pink birds, wrinkly manatees, and zebra butterflies fluttered around. Mangroves clung to the bank. Fluffy white clouds floated overhead. I was so enveloped in a sense of serenity, so present in the moment, so complete, that I couldn't conjure a contrary thought if I tried. I was simply aware, alive, and awake. I wasn't separate from nature, but I wasn't consumed by her, either. I wasn't high or intoxicated. I was just "being," and well-being was my natural state. *Is this what other people feel like?* I wondered.

It was a feeling I had been chasing my whole life. Every time I took a yoga class or sat in meditation, I hoped to recapture the well-being I'd felt before the violence and trauma had trapped me in a dark cage of despair. I was always trying to "do" something to break free. Therapy, falling in love, and faraway travel had gotten me close, but the feeling never lasted. It was as fleeting as breath; here one minute, gone the next. No matter how much I craved wholeness, the emptiness always returned.

I could hardly believe that the well-being that had eluded me for so long had finally arrived and stayed. There was nowhere to go, nothing to do. Instead of feeling agitated about that, I felt content.

I stayed for a long time, immersed in the beauty and tranquility of the lagoon. I waited for an impulse to move me to the next part of the day. Eventually, just like the gradual rise of a balloon, I felt the impetus to return to my car and drive south. Within a few minutes, I was coasting down the freeway, tingling all over with the promise of possibility.

I had the briefest thought: *Where do I go from here?* I no longer had a job, and my living situation was dismal, but there was no angst, agony, or ache about being “in between” what was done and what was yet to come. The same spaciousness that had terrified me in the past, the void that had caused convulsions of panic, was unthreatening. *Whoa*, I thought, *this is wild!*

After an hour or so, I was back in my bedroom, seeing it through new eyes. A thought passed through my consciousness. *Look for somewhere else to live.* I opened my laptop, scrolled through apartment listings, and discovered an adorable studio apartment with a garden of flowers.

That's your place, I heard my mind say. I saw a vision of myself moving there as I texted the owner and made an appointment to visit the following day.

Then the next clear instruction arrived. A rush of creative energy swirled in my belly. It was time to finish the manuscript. An intoxicating feeling of relaxation settled over me, like I had stepped into a swift current and was being carried toward some blissful destination. *This is so easy.* I closed the laptop and reclined in my bed. Before the sun had completely disappeared from the twilight sky, I was already in the peaceful slumber of a newborn baby.

The following day I was greeted by an old woman and her small dog at the rental property, a 1950s motel that had been converted into a dozen adorable apartments. As I stepped inside the gate, I felt a strong connection to the place. There were trees and blooming flowers, a bubbling fountain, and an outdoor lounge area. The exterior, painted in pinks and greens, exuded an old-Florida charm. The high fence surrounding the building created a sense of seclusion and safety.

When I walked into the studio apartment, a wave of belonging washed over me. Sunlight streamed through the big window overlooking the lush garden outside. It warmed up the cozy space.

“It’s lovely, isn’t it?” Susan said. Her small dog wagged its tail at my feet.

“It’s perfect,” I agreed, picturing myself spending lazy afternoons writing by the window.

With joy and relief, I signed the lease. For the first time in over six years, I had found a place where I wanted to settle. For so long, I had feared that I would have to sacrifice my freedom for stability. But now I knew that my freedom was intrinsic. Nothing—especially not an apartment—could take it away from me. In fact, stability would provide deeper roots and help me to reach even higher places.

After the paperwork was complete, I headed out to explore the neighborhood. I stumbled upon the Green Market, a bustling farmers market brimming with local produce and artisanal items. The air was filled with the aroma of fresh coffee and baked goods. The vibrant atmosphere and eclectic crowd captivated me. I suddenly realized that I was in West Palm Beach, the same town where I had stayed with Abigail the previous year and attended Saul’s dinner party. The serendipity added to my excitement about the move. I spent hours wandering from stall to stall, sampling fresh fruits and marveling at the colorful displays of flowers and herbs. The feeling of community was palpable. I was exactly where I was meant to be, and I couldn’t wait to make this charming town my home.

A week later, I was sitting in my new apartment at my desk facing the big window. Ambient music played in the background. Gratitude flowed through me and around me like the incense that wafted through the air. I was buzzing with excitement as I prepared for a Zoom call with my editor, Bridget. I had been writing my memoir in solitude for so long—more than a dozen years—and I welcomed some mentorship.

When Bridget's face appeared on the screen, I couldn't help but smile. We were embarking on an adventure together, one that would see my manuscript come to life.

The bond between us was strong, a shared sense of purpose propelling us forward. We dove into the pages like two friends cultivating a garden, each contributing unique strengths and perspectives for the benefit of the harvest.

After the call, I sent messages to my girl gang who had supported me as beta readers for the manuscript. "Will you be my book bridesmaids?" I asked, envisioning a spring book launch party as grand as a wedding. I was thrilled when the "Hell, yeah" messages lit up my phone like fireworks. I couldn't wait to share this milestone with the women who had supported me through the hardest time in my life.

A few days later, I visited a local bookstore called Books & Books, a historic Mediterranean-style building with an open-air café and umbrella-covered tables. As soon as I stepped through the door, I was in awe of the dark-wood floors, beamed ceilings, and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. There was a hushed reverence reminiscent of the libraries where I had used to lose myself as a young girl. I eagerly scanned the memoir section for new releases and discovered a book called *I'm Not Broken*. I was drawn to the title, guessing the author and I probably had a lot in common. Next to the display was an announcement for an evening with the author, Jesse Leon, that night. I decided to stick around.

I enjoyed a perfect sunny afternoon in the dreamy courtyard while waiting for the event. Soon, the bookstore buzzed as attendees found their way to their seats. Jesse perched on a tall chair at the front of the room, his posture tense with anticipation. Despite the beads of sweat glistening on his forehead, bravery shone in his eyes. He was about to share his story with the audience, and although he might have been scared, his determination was undeniable.

As Jesse read from his memoir, I felt a whirlwind of emotions. Listening to him speak vulnerably about his abusive childhood moved me to tears. Witnessing the love and support of his family and friends filled me with amazement.

I imagined my own future book launch. *This is the place. This is where I want to have my event.* With each word Jesse spoke, I felt a deeper resonance with his story, the bookstore, and the experience of becoming a new author. I vibrated with a thrilling energy that nearly lifted me out of my seat.

When the event ended, I approached Jesse to have him sign my copy of his book. While he wrote his inscription, I expressed my gratitude for his courage and told him how he had inspired me to believe in my ability to share my own story with the world.

“Thank you for coming,” Jesse said warmly, returning my gratitude with a smile. “I have no doubt that you’ll rock your book launch when the time comes.”

His words made my heart beat faster and amplified my enthusiasm for my writing. We embraced before parting ways, and I beamed all the way home.

Perched in my desk chair with single-focused concentration, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I could hear the words in my mind, as if they were being narrated to me. I typed on my laptop:

They say confronting your secrets is the first step in being honest with yourself. And that exposing your secrets to the light takes away their power

and relieves you of their burden. What they don't say is that secrets will do everything in their power to remain secrets. You may have to shatter your entire life to release them. Cracks, after all, are where the light gets in.

It felt like the book was writing itself. I kept breathing and typing my way through the revisions. I deleted large sections and furiously rewrote others. I dug deeper into my story, excavating important themes, and adding insightful reflections. The more I typed, the more I learned about my patterns, my blind spots, and my tenacious spirit. It was as if I was meeting myself for the first time on the page, telling myself my own story. I no longer felt the painful stickiness of previous drafts, no longer felt identified with the character I was describing. My former self had been composted at the ayahuasca ceremony. The woman I was now was a brand-new human being. I rejoiced at the emancipation.

When my wrists cramped and my back ached from sitting at my desk, I took a break and walked through my neighborhood. I passed one midcentury home after another, each more charming than the next. I imagined what it must be like to live in one of those houses, to decorate the rooms, make a garden, entertain friends in the yard.

It sure would be nice to plant some roots. I surprised myself with a longing to be domesticated, a feeling I had never felt before. The fears that

had lingered from nightmares of being trapped in my childhood house with my parents had been banished. The aversion to being settled in one place and creating a home had died with my old self. More jubilation flooded my system.

One day, I spotted a “For Sale” sign on 46th Street near the sailing club, in front of a ranch home with a picturesque frame, flanked with blooming bougainvillea and dragon trees. It stopped me in my tracks.

That’s my house. A rush of euphoria came over me.

WTF...I can’t buy a house. That makes no sense. My inner critic was quick to defend my limitations.

Of course I can. That’s my house.

I wandered back to my apartment, wondering what to do next. Things that had been impossible and absurd now seemed realistic. Life suddenly felt limitless. My mind struggled to keep up.

I just have to stay calm and let things unfold.

I scheduled a tour of the property, turning the outcome over to the gods or the Universe or whatever divine fate was managing my life.

In the final weeks of working on my manuscript, the act of writing was so intense and transformative that it changed me a little more each day. I reflected on the early days of the pandemic, when I had been haunted by

the story and dreading the daily downloads of memories. So much had changed in such a short amount of time. I was fully owning my journey now, taking responsibility for my mistakes, forgiving myself and others for the unavoidable blunders of being imperfectly human. I had learned so many things from sustainable building, regenerative farming, and working with plant medicine. I had processed and integrated my trauma, even if my methods were a bit unconventional. I don't know how I would have healed without the peyote, mushrooms, and ayahuasca. Thank God for plant medicine!

I got tears in my eyes when I reread the manuscript before submitting it to the publisher. This was one of the longest-held dreams of my life, and I was proud of myself for seeing it through to completion. I was giddy at the thought of being a published author. I hoped that the memoir would serve others who read it and encourage them to tell their own stories. *If my book helps one person, the effort was worthwhile.*

I took a long pause after hitting “send” on the email. I'd achieved a goal that I hadn't believed I could reach. The milestone felt more like a beginning than an ending. I was ready—admittedly a little bit nervous as well—to step into the spotlight and let my true self shine for all the world to see.

Chapter 20

February 2023

The day my book was published, it shot straight to the top of Amazon's bestseller list. My phone buzzed relentlessly with calls, texts, and emails, each one filled with congratulations and kind words.

I finished your book and I'm just in awe. It was so beautiful and raw and real. You were always the epitome of strength in my eyes. Congratulations to you on your book. It's beautiful.

I read your book today. It was truly amazing. You are a phenomenal person and writer. I am constantly in awe of you. I laughed out loud and shed some tears. You are a badass, beautiful, smart, incredible person.

Your book was deeply moving for me. Thank you for sharing your story with the world. I have never felt so seen and understood through the pages of a book.

I finished reading your book. You are such an amazing woman. So many of us went through similar bullshit and never had the courage

to share. Thank you for having the courage to be vulnerable and share your pain. You are such a special person.

I sat in my garden, breathing it all in. Each message felt like a warm embrace, validating the years of hard work and dedication I had poured into my memoir. As I read through the compliments, gratitude washed over me. This wasn't just about the book's success—it reflected my resilience, my perseverance, and the miraculous cooperation of the Universe.

I left home to run some errands. The notifications kept flowing.

I just read your book. I love you and I'm thankful for you. You should feel proud.

I finished. I'm crying. I commend you. Incredible.

I felt on the verge of tears at the overwhelming outpouring of support. My heart expanded to hold all the goodness being offered to me. I had been so accustomed to holding pain and struggling to release it that it was a surprising challenge to be empty of suffering and filled with love.

As I stood in the produce aisle at the supermarket, a message popped up on my phone. It was a shout-out from a well-respected influencer, encouraging others to get my book. I burst into tears in front of the

tomatoes and avocados. Of all the possible outcomes I had imagined from publishing my story, this was the last kind of response I had expected.

A few weeks later, I arrived at the hotel across the street from Books & Books with a floor-length dress in one arm and a box of my books in the other. My book bridesmaids met me in the lobby with flowers, champagne, and radiant smiles. Inside the hotel room, Jaime pumped up the music while Elizabeth gave me a makeover, curling my hair and expertly adding color to my eyelids, lips, and cheeks. Melissa popped open a bottle of bubbly, and we raised our glasses in a toast to the momentous occasion. We laughed and danced around the room, the mirrors reflecting our joy and excitement. Between touch-ups and sips of champagne, we took photos and videos, capturing memories that I'll cherish for the rest of my life.

In a flurry of fun, we made our way across the street to the bookstore. I felt like a princess in my pink dress. The flower Elizabeth had pinned in my hair added a touch of whimsy. When I stepped into the quiet sanctuary of the main room, however, and saw the aisles lined with rows of chairs, the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, and the empty seat where I would soon reside, my amusement evaporated. The weight of what lay ahead hit me hard. My throat constricted. Tears welled in my eyes, and the room started spinning like a record on a turntable. *Get me the hell out of here.* I grabbed one of my

book bridesmaids, looked her dead in the eye, and said under my breath, “I am *not* okay.”

She ushered me outside to the courtyard, where the other girls quickly gathered around me, offering words of encouragement, more champagne, and tissues to blow my nose.

Elizabeth rushed in with a brush and kindly scolded, “Stop! You’re ruining your makeup!” which made me giggle.

It was one thing to write all my secrets in a book. It was an entirely different thing to say them out loud in front of a crowd of my peers. I couldn’t help but feel overwhelmed by the prospect of speaking in front of the crowd and answering deeply personal questions about my life. Thankfully, I wasn’t alone. The steady presence and support of my friends comforted me. Taking a deep breath, I wiped away my tears and went back inside, determined to “rock my book launch” as Jesse had proposed.

Once the guests were seated and the interview began, Melissa, the interviewer, wasted no time in getting to the heart of the discussion. “What motivated you to write a book?” she asked.

“Ever since I was about ten years old, I really wanted to write a book. I had a notebook that I carried with me everywhere. I wrote down all the terrible things that were happening. Writing was a means of processing and dealing with stuff that was going on, and a way to escape. I had a fantasy

from the time I was young that someday I would be in this moment. When you think about a moment like this for your whole life, and you strive for something like this for such a long time, it's surreal to actually be here," I responded.

Melissa asked me about my healing journey and what advice I had for others. With each question, the energy amplified until I no longer knew where I was, what I was saying, or who I was talking to. When Melissa was finished, the audience members raised their hands and asked more questions. I could barely feel my body in the chair any longer.

About an hour later, as I sat at the table signing books for my guests, I was so high that I couldn't even remember the names of the people who approached me. I was in a daze as we transitioned to a restaurant where a dozen of us had a festive meal and lingered for several more hours.

By the time I returned to my hotel room, I expected to be exhausted. Instead, I was so energized that I could have lifted the roof off the building. I practiced every technique I knew to calm my mind and body, but it was pointless. My cells were electric. My nerves were highways of power. It was as if a dormant force had been unleashed within me, surging through every fiber of my being with a relentless intensity. With each heartbeat, I felt the pulse of life reverberating through my veins, igniting a firestorm of energy that refused to be contained. As I surrendered to the raw power

coursing through me, I felt like a phoenix rising from the ashes of my former self. In that moment, I realized that true vitality lies not in the absence of chaos, but in the embrace of it. It is in the whirlwind of life's storms that we discover our true strength, our true purpose, our true selves. As I merged with the surge, I felt alive in a way I had never been before—vibrant and untamed, a force of nature unto myself.

A few days later, I pulled into the driveway of the house on 46th Street to meet Lisa, the real estate agent. I had scheduled the tour, canceled it, and rescheduled as my inner goddess and inner critic battled for power inside me. A light drizzle was falling when I arrived around 3 p.m. I turned off the ignition and sat frozen in the driver's seat, looking through the blurry raindrops at the cozy cottage at the end of the walkway.

If I go into that house, I know I'm going to buy it, I thought.

Don't get out of the car, the inner critic commanded.

That's my house, my inner goddess demanded.

The weather wrapped me in a cloak of nostalgia, and the house, with its inviting aura, beckoned me to enter. A montage of calming images passed across the screen of my mind. Planting flowers in the garden. Hosting guests for writing workshops. Drinking tea and writing near the open window.

I walked slowly and mindfully to the door. The air was wet and cool, imbued with the earthy scent of rain-kissed trees and damp soil. There was a palpable sense of renewal and new growth waiting for me on the other side of the threshold.

As soon as I stepped inside, peace washed over me. The living room was a soft glow of yellow light, slightly warmer than the outdoors. The atmosphere was infused with a sense of intimacy, as if the world outside had been hushed to a whisper.

Lisa, a pretty blond woman, approached with an outstretched hand. “Hi!” she said, “You must be Gabby.”

My inner goddess was jumping up and down. My inner critic was glaring at me, arms crossed and eyebrows furrowed. After shaking Lisa’s hand, I dashed quickly from room to room, looking at what was there but simultaneously seeing how it would be transformed once I moved in. I opened closets and cupboards. I envisioned painting and decorating. Lisa talked, but I wasn’t listening.

I went out the back door and into the yard. I counted 10 gorgeous palms around the perimeter of the property. I spotted bananas, limes, dragon fruit, and an array of other plant life.

I was smitten. I was certain. I was home.

“This is my house,” I said to Lisa when I returned to the living room.

“Um...I don’t understand. Do you mean that you want to make an offer?”

“I don’t know how this works,” I said. “I’ve never done this before, but I know that this is my house.”

Lisa drafted a letter to the owner and put me in touch with a mortgage broker. I returned to my apartment and sat on the edge of my bed, buzzing with the awareness that I was on the precipice of another seismic shift in my life. My insides were swirling like the riptides in the nearby Atlantic.

I am actually going to have a forever home in West Palm Beach. In a million years, I would never have imagined that something so stable and serene was possible for me. When I was sleeping on the air mattress in Los Angeles, or in the sheds on the farms, or in the back seat of my car at the campgrounds, I’d never believed a house of my own could be within reach. It was as if the Universe had finally granted me passage from the turbulent seas of uncertainty to the tranquil shores of belonging. It was so astonishing, it took my breath away.

At 7 p.m., less than four hours after I had pulled out of the driveway of the house on 46th Street, my phone rang. It was Lisa. I knew what she was going to say before she said it. I took a deep breath. My whole body tightened.

“Your offer has been accepted!” Lisa chirped.

Time seemed to stand still. With trembling hands and an overflowing heart, I thanked her and hung up the phone.

I don't know where I'm going but I know exactly how to get there. The familiar phrase reverberated in my mind. One track at a time, watching for signs, continuously finding the path that is “not right” and staying on the path that feels “most right.” I had done it countless times, even when the details of my destination were obscured, but I had never believed as deeply as I did in that moment that I knew how to stumble through the dark toward the light and find my way home.

While I was waiting for insurance quotes, scheduling inspections, and jumping through other various home-buying hoops, an unexpected invitation landed in my inbox. It was a request for me to speak on a panel at the Wonderland Psychedelics Conference. I felt nervous about the invitation, but the topic intrigued me: indigenous wisdom and modern technology.

As I reflected on the path I'd traveled—from meeting Luna in New Mexico and Julia in Guatemala, to the transformative experiences of microdosing mushrooms and participating in ayahuasca ceremonies, to the crypto craze and my Miami tech immersion—it all seemed to converge.

This would mark the first time I'd openly discuss my involvement with plant medicine, something I had kept closely guarded.

Do I want to keep it a secret or share it with others?

I recalled my health coaching clients who had suffered so much during the pandemic. *If only they had access to these medicines.*

I remembered Michael Pollan's willingness to share his experiences in his book *How to Change Your Mind*. Psychedelics could help so many people. The thought filled me with a sense of purpose. It was as if every step I'd taken during the past few years, every experience I'd had, had been preparing me for this.

As I accepted the invitation, my mind buzzed with more questions. I had never been to a psychedelics conference before. Who would I meet there? What new ideas and perspectives would I encounter? What unexpected connections might arise? The opportunities seemed boundless.

A new horizon rushed toward me, infusing me with enthusiasm. Maybe this was a chance to step even more fully into my voice and my story.

Lisa and I sat side by side in an office while I signed a huge stack of papers. She brought me an orchid, a symbol of prosperity and abundance, as a housewarming gift. I felt the same dizzy energy that I experienced at the

book launch party. I wrote my name so many times that I no longer recognized it as the ink moved across the page. I watched in disbelief as the pile grew smaller and smaller until, eventually, all that remained was an envelope. The title agent opened it and handed me a silver key with a plastic key tag inscribed with the address of my new home.

“Congratulations,” she said.

I glanced at Lisa, who was smiling beside me. Her eyes twinkled with pride and happiness. She had been there every step of the way, guiding me through the labyrinth of home buying with patience and unwavering support.

With a steady hand, I reached out to accept the key, feeling its weight in my palm as if it was a magic wand for unlocking the next chapter of my life. As I turned it over, I couldn’t help but marvel at this tangible symbol of the journey I had undertaken, a reminder of the challenges I had overcome and the dreams I had dared to pursue.

Beautiful things happen because you start and keep going. Dreams come true when you’re willing to stay in the unknown, embrace a constant state of discovery, and accept the totality of who you are.

As I looked around the office at the faces of Lisa and the title agent and at the orchid sitting proudly on the desk, I was filled with a profound

sense of appreciation for all the people who had supported me along the way and for the opportunities that had led me to this moment.

Sometimes growth is fun like riding a unicorn through the universe. Sometimes it lifts our spirits and fills us with joy. Sometimes growth is awkward, like a baby llama taking his first steps, unsteady on his feet. Sometimes growth is messy, like going to rehab or breaking up with your lover. Other times, growth is a hurricane of pain, taking down your house and everything in it.

Growth is not measured by height or breadth, but by the depth of roots that anchor us to our truest selves.

I took a deep breath, closed my eyes for a moment, and savored the feeling of accomplishment and anticipation that filled the air. Growth often requires healing our wounds, challenging our limitations, and purging that which no longer serves us. It demands a leap of faith—a belief in the possibility of change, even in the face of immovable mountains. Growth isn't a straight line. It's a journey full of twists and turns.

With a smile on my face and a heart full of gratitude, I stood up from my chair, gave Lisa a hug, and made my way toward the door. It was time to turn the key and step into whatever adventures awaited me next.

As soon as I moved in, I added a fresh coat of paint to each room and collected donated furniture to fill up the space. This was more than just a house; it was a canvas upon which I could paint the story of my life, one brushstroke at a time. I ordered cheetah print wallpaper and laughed out loud as I pasted the beautiful creature all over the walls. I would never be separated from her again, never far away from my most primal needs and wants, from my uninhibited desires and expression. She was symbolic of the most authentic, honest version of me, and she was a permanent resident in my home.

On the day of my 49th birthday, less than two weeks after I received my house key, I celebrated with friends, old and new. My sister Jennifer arrived with trays of appetizers, and my book bridesmaids gave me much-needed wine glasses and other home goods. There were balloons and sunflowers and heartfelt hugs. As I looked around at the kind faces, I knew I was the luckiest girl in the world.

As the evening wore on, we walked across the street toward the sailing club, stepped onto the sand, and stared out into the calm waters.

“This is the perfect place for you,” Jaime said.

“It’s as if the house was just waiting for you to arrive,” Melissa added.

“Not gonna lie,” Elizabeth said, “I’m kinda jealous.”

I laughed out loud and stepped into the shallow water. It tingled on my toes. I breathed in the salty air.

As the last of the guests bid their farewells, a sense of quiet settled over the house like a soft blanket. The laughter and chatter gradually faded into the distance, leaving behind only the gentle hum of the evening breeze and the occasional rattle of wooden wind chimes outside. Alone in my new home, I reveled in the contentment that washed over me, reminiscent of the tropical lagoon where I'd floated effortlessly after my ayahuasca ceremony. All this time, I had thought that the world was broken, that I had to fix it and uplift it. I had thought it was my job to make the world a better place. Lying in my new bedroom, I realized that all I ever need to do is have a really good time being the bright light that I am.

The next morning, I sat at my desk, looking out at the vibrant green landscape. My mind was as still as a sleeping baby. The nervous energy and toxic misery that had permeated the beginning of my journey were gone for good, and all that remained was gratitude. I stared in astonishment at my lawn. *I have a yard.* It was utterly surreal. Butterflies and birds passed by my window, indifferent to my presence. A stray cat crawled under the fence, hunting for breakfast. A little lizard flirted with me on the windowsill before darting away to play with his friends.

I was free.

I was on my own, but hardly alone. My being had become well-being, and I was at peace with myself and the world around me. I no longer had to wonder if I was worthy because my inherent worthiness was obvious.

A flower does not think of competing with the flower next to it. It just blooms.

I stayed for a long time, fully immersed in the beauty of my property. There was nowhere to go, nothing to do. I waited for an impulse to arise, for the next track to appear. Just like the gradual rise of mist off cool water, I felt the impetus to open my laptop. I had the briefest thought: *Where do we go from here?* There was no stress about it, only curiosity and openness.

A quick message passed through my consciousness: *You're gonna write another book.*

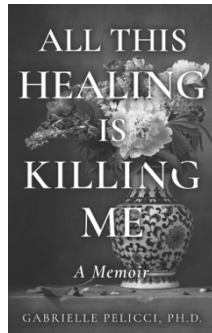
I saw a vision of myself writing and publishing the sequel to my memoir. It felt completely natural, void of the angst and anxiety that had accompanied the first manuscript.

Well, that makes sense. A rush of creative energy swirled in my belly as I opened a blank Word document. A wide grin crossed my face. An intoxicating feeling of joy washed over me. I was precisely where I was supposed to be, doing exactly what I was meant to do.

I typed the words, one by one, watching my story come to life on the page:

The group treatment room was brightly lit with large windows reflecting the desert sun. The front wall was dominated by two whiteboards hung side by side, filled with inspirational sayings like “Healing is a journey, not a destination” and “You are stronger than you think” written in erasable marker. A half-circle of cozy chairs was arranged in the center, surrounded by a pile of discarded foam bats and a waste basket full of tissues—tangible evidence of the emotional battles fought inside the room. Outside, the wide Arizona highway painted a picture of normalcy and the promise of freedom.

Also by Gabrielle Pelicci, Ph.D.



All This Healing is Killing Me

At age 20, Gabrielle Pelicci returned from her modeling career in NYC to her hometown of Scranton, PA, where her mother suddenly passed away. At her mother's funeral, Gabrielle had a spiritual experience that left her reeling and set her on a heroine's journey to learn about both the scientific and mystical explanations of human consciousness.

In this deeply personal and vulnerable account, Gabrielle reveals how childhood trauma impacts our physical and mental health-as well as our adult relationships. She explores how you are only as sick as your secrets, and telling your story is the medicine that can save your life.

All This Healing Is Killing Me is a brave narrative that reckons with the hold of the past over the present, the mind over the body, and celebrates one woman's ability to write herself a happy ending.



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