First, Don’t Die.

An ACA Recovery Path. Not a Success Story. About surviving when there is no one to rely on.

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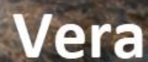

First, Don't Die
Written by FaithWithinYou.
Narrated using artificial intelligence technology.
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This book is based on real events and the personal experience of the author. Some details may be presented as they were perceived and lived through. This book contains descriptions of traumatic experiences that may be difficult to read.

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Introduction

When you are in great pain, there are two paths.

The first — make others hurt just as much, so they finally understand what it's like.

The second — do everything so that others don't hurt. Because you know what it's like.

This book is about the second.

I want to live a life of use. Not for the resume. Not for applause. So that at least one person, reading this, thinks: if she got out — maybe I can too.

You can help make that happen.

When you finish — or when you quit — write to me. One sentence or ten pages. What struck you. Where you recognized yourself. Where it became unbearable. Your feedback will help me refine this book so it can reach those who right now sit in the same empty apartment where I sat.

My email: FaithWithinYou@hotmail.com

Thank you in advance. For opening this book.

Chapter Disclaimer.

This book is not a manual. Not an instruction. Not a recipe.

This is my experience. Subjective, specific, mine. It worked for me — not guaranteed to work for you. Not guaranteed to fit. Not guaranteed to be safe.

Over twenty years of trying to get out of what I was in, I tried many things. Some of those things were legal. Some were not.

The book mentions: ketamine, MDMA, psilocybin mushrooms, marijuana. I do not recommend, promote, or encourage the use of any of these substances. I describe my experience — honestly, without romanticizing. Some of these substances gave me insights that no therapy ever did. Some — nearly killed me. Between those two points — nothing predictable.

Psychoactive substances are not a path to recovery. They are what I tried along the way, when it seemed like there were no other doors left. If you are considering a similar experience — do it only with professional guidance, only legally in your jurisdiction, only with full understanding of the risks. My story is not permission.

I also describe suicidal thoughts, self-harm attempts, domestic violence, physical and emotional abuse of a child. These are not topics for light reading. If you are in crisis right now — please reach out for help. No book can replace a living person beside you.

The ACA (Adult Children of Alcoholics) program, which takes up a significant part of this book, is a mutual aid program, not psychotherapy. I am not a therapist. Not a psychologist. Not a doctor. I am a person who went through a certain experience and decided to write it down.

The names of some people in this book have been changed. Some details were deliberately omitted or generalized — to protect those I love, and those I once hated. Where it was shameful — I tried to be honest. Where it hurt others — careful.

Everything described in this book is how I remember and feel it. Memory is an unreliable witness. Especially the memory of a child who grew up in chaos. I do not claim objectivity. I claim honesty.

This book was not written to blame anyone. Not the grandmother who beat me but fed me. Not the mother who abandoned me but gave birth to me. Not the husband who stayed silent but stayed. They all did what they knew how to do. As did I.

This book is my testimony.

My book is for those who trust no one. Not even themselves. For those whom nothing from the outside helps. For those who look very successful on the outside but want to die inside. For those who could easily commit suicide — and no one would ever understand why. Because from the outside everything looked fine: a person who got lucky, who had it all figured out. Someone who is alone even in a family. Even among friends. Even at a party.

For those who need not the words "just love yourself" — but concrete steps. For the thorough ones. For the analytical ones. For the controllers. For the perfectionists. For those whose defenses once saved their life — and are now killing them.

For those who grew up with a curse the body believed. For those who think the script has already been written. It has not been written. It can be rewritten. I am living proof.

* * *

I am writing this book while on the twelfth step of ACA. The twelfth step says: pass it on. Share what you received. Not because you are healed — because staying silent hurts more than speaking.

I write for those who have lost hope. Who are overwhelmed by emptiness and the desire to die. I know what that is. I know how hard it is to climb out of there. And I know how important it is that you are not alone in it. I want to be that person — through this book. The one I never had.

I write for those who do not believe in God. The ACA program works — even if you believe in nothing. My higher power is not God in the conventional sense. It is my higher self. Loving parent — the inner parent I had to create from nothing. Meditation and breathwork are not a ritual but a concrete tool that works at the level of the nervous system. For those who need proof, not faith — this book.

I write for those sitting in isolation. Because isolation is the coping mechanism of every adult child of an alcoholic. Isolation is emptiness. I want to help those who are in it: how to be there and not fall apart. How to get out. Relying on yourself. With the feeling that life can fill with color again.

I write for people in AA who have spent thirty years confessing and still never dug to the root. who were never taught how to build a loving parent inside themselves. Whose solution is to rely on God. But what about those who don't believe? Meditation and breathwork, and loving parent — that is what heals. But it is not practiced in AA. I want to make it known.

* * *

And I also write for Artem. My son.

Not for little Artem — for the one who will someday grow up and want to understand why his mom was the way she was. Why she screamed. Why she cried. Why she sometimes looked at him as if she hated him. And why, despite all of that — every time, every day — she chose him.

I cannot explain this to him in words. So this book is not words. It is an act. Here, look: this is where I came from. This is what I went through. This is why I did what I did. Not because you are bad. Not because I don't love you. But because inside me lived a girl no one taught to love — and she was learning on you. Crooked, painfully, with mistakes. But learning.

If one day you open this book and recognize your mother in it — know: I wrote every word so that you would understand. Not through explanations — through the story. Through actions. Through the truth.

* * *

There is hope. Even for those who had nothing. Especially for them.

Because when you have nothing left to lose — you are finally ready to try.

Chapter How to Read This Book.

This book is not a novel. You don't have to read it cover to cover in one evening. It's not meant for that.

There's a lot of pain in it. Back to back. Chapter after chapter. Blow after blow. That's how my life was — and that's how the book is written. I didn't smooth it out, didn't dilute it, didn't make it "pretty." Because pretty would have been a lie. And I'm writing the truth.

But truth can be heavy. And if you recognize yourself in these pages — it will be twice as heavy.

So — a few words on how to handle this.

Stop.

If your body tightened, if your throat closed, if tears came or, the opposite, everything inside went empty and quiet — stop. That's not weakness. That's your body saying: I remember. Put the book down. Breathe. Feel your feet on the floor. Come back when you're ready. The book isn't going anywhere.

Don't read at night.

Seriously. Especially if you have insomnia, anxiety, or you're in a hard place right now. This book brings up what lies deep. And deep things are better brought up in daylight, when you have the resource.

The book is structured like this:

The first three parts — my story. Childhood, adult life, recovery. They go chronologically. There's a lot of pain in them — back to back, no pauses. That's how the life was, that's how the book is written.

The fourth part — "I Can't Control This" — the ACA program steps, therapy, relapses, what helped and what didn't. It also contains two standalone chapters: "Step Four with AI" — a ready-made method with prompts you can use on your own. And "The Body Knows More" — the science behind what I discovered on myself.

The fifth part — "The Map." Short chapters with insights and tools. Rewritten beliefs, a mini-protocol for when it hits, sticky notes on the fridge. Also there — "Emergency Exit" for those on the edge. And "The Anger That Didn't Exist" — about an emotion that was taken from many of us in childhood.

The epilogue — the same point as the prologue. But a different me.

The healing fairy tale. Don't skip it. It's the same story in a different language — in a language where shame is less frightening and truth is lighter. It works with the unconscious. Just read without analyzing.

At the end — "What to Watch Next." Videos I watched myself. Including specific breathing practices I mention throughout the book. Links — on the website.

If you are in crisis

If you are at the place where I was — with a knife, on a balcony, in an empty apartment — this book will not replace help. Call. Write. Go to a meeting. Find one person you can tell the truth to. The book will wait. You won't. **If there is no one to reach out to, write to me** (FaithWithinYou@hotmail.com)

If you recognize yourself

That is normal. It doesn't mean you are broken. It means you can see. And seeing is already the first step. Not toward healing — toward no longer carrying this alone.

Part Prologue.

Chapter “The Knife”.

If you type my name into LinkedIn, everything looks like I made it.

Born in the Soviet Union. Grew up in Kazakhstan. A gold medal (the highest academic honor in Soviet and post-Soviet schools, awarded only to students with perfect or near-perfect grades across all subjects and all final exams — extremely difficult to earn). University in Novosibirsk — enrolled in the IT department without ever having seen a real computer. Six years — and a master's degree with honors. Kaspersky Lab. Then the first immigration — Canada, Toronto. The second — California. Amazon. ServiceNow. Husband, son, house with a pool and a jacuzzi. Company names on a resume that get recognized in interviews before you've even opened your mouth.

If I had died in February 2025, at the wake, someone probably would have said: strange, she had everything.

* * *

On the outside — a product manager with a flawless track record. On the inside — autopilot. An autopilot that learned to smile in Slack and write "great job, team!" twelve seconds after leaving the bathroom where it sat on the floor and rocked. I suppressed everything feminine in myself and became a machine: logical, productive, indispensable.

A human supercomputer.

Eighteen years of career without a single long vacation. Because vacation is when you have nothing to distract you. And when there is nothing to distract you, what you've been running from starts inside.

* * *

February 2025. A small empty apartment. A cell, as I called it.

Yesterday I released a big project at ServiceNow. Got messages from the team. Wrote something cheerful in Slack. Put an emoji. Closed the laptop.

Today I am sitting in an empty apartment with a knife in my hand.

I understand those who yesterday spoke to an audience of ten thousand — and today, suicide. Between these two points — nothing. Just a switch. On the outside, one thing. On the inside — something else entirely, for a long time.

Strange to end up here with a resume like that.

* * *

Sitting and thinking: what convincing reasons do I have not to do it? Even one?

Artem. My son. He is ten. I don't want him to grow up without a mother. Like me. But sometimes I hate him so much for being the only thing keeping me here that I want to cancel even that reason. And then — shame for even thinking that. And then — emptiness. Shame doesn't work. Love doesn't work. Nothing.

Hysteria. An abyss of despair. The bottom. And beneath it — another one.

My imagination has already painted a picture I can't chase away. The note is already written too. A list of my internal beliefs about myself that I once wrote down in therapy. They looked like a suicide note even then. I just didn't know that one day they would become one.

* * *

And then an unexpected call from a friend. Bad timing. Or perfect timing... He stopped me. The brain switched on (came to my senses, you could say). I remember everything I know about how to help myself. I put down the knife.

Close call.

By the age of ten, I had used up all nine lives, like a cat. Apparently, the universe has other plans for me — since branches break, husbands wake up, and friends call at the wrong time.

For now, a close call. Something in that moment shifted — it didn't get easier, but for the first time I saw the edge.

This book is about how I got here.

There's a questionnaire on adverse childhood experiences (Adverse Childhood Experiences, ACE) — ten questions. Ten categories: abuse, neglect, household dysfunction — before the age of eighteen. A study of 17,000 people showed: at four or more out of ten, the likelihood of a suicide attempt increases twelvefold. Alcoholism — sevenfold. Injection drug use — tenfold. At seven or more — the likelihood of a suicide attempt is thirty-one times higher than for those with zero. At six or more — lifespan shortens by nearly twenty years. I scored ten out of ten possible. Maximum. Every category. All ten. When I saw that number — I wasn't surprised. I was surprised I was still alive. And that I hadn't drunk myself to death. And that I wasn't on a needle. And that my son knows my face.

This book is about how I got out. And about what helped.

Part Orphan with a Living Mother.

To understand how the story ends, you need to understand how it began.

It began long before me.

Chapter Get an Abortion.

Even before I was born, my grandmother told my mother: get an abortion.

My mother didn't.

That is probably the only decision in her life for which I should be grateful, though with the word "grateful" I would later have a separate, long, and not-so-simple story.

I was born in December 1984, in Ust-Kamenogorsk, in Kazakhstan, in a still-Soviet country that was already cracking at the seams, though the adults back then probably didn't call it that. Later it would fall apart completely, and instead of the familiar, something else would come — empty shelves, disappearing money, shootings on highways, a bus that could be stopped in the middle of the road, and men with automatic rifles for whom your life was just an obstacle between them and a bag of cash.

We lived in a private house on the outskirts of the city. A garden, chickens, rabbits, pigs. Everything that in another context could be called rural coziness, in ours was not coziness but a survival setup. When my grandmother later told the story of how their bus was once stopped and robbed at gunpoint, and my grandfather was driving somewhere, saw a woman with a baby, stopped to help — and it turned out to be an ambush, and men jumped out of the bushes and started shooting — all of this was told in the same voice they might use to discuss how much salt goes in pelmeni (Russian dumplings) or whether they'd manage to dig up the potatoes before the rain. I heard this around age seven, and no one thought a child should be shielded from such stories. It was not a horror story. It was considered life. The kind where danger doesn't stand out — it's background.

In a world where a highway shooting sounds as routine as a soup recipe, the body learns one thing very early: don't relax. Danger doesn't warn — it just is. And if you don't sense it in advance — you're already too late.

Chapter Love.

My mother's name was Lyubov.

It still seems like a cruel joke of fate, but back then, of course, I didn't think about any jokes. There was just a mother named Lyubov (Love), and a grandmother named Nadezhda (Hope), and me — Vera (Faith). Vera, Nadezhda, Lyubov. Faith, Hope, Love. And not one of them was truly given to me. They were words, but not experience.

My mother was my grandmother's first child. She grew up practically on the streets. My grandmother worked three jobs, the father drank and beat them, then came an early divorce, and my mother and her younger brother Oleg, my uncle, were left somewhere between an absent mother and an absent father. The streets raised them before anyone at home had a chance to tell them how people actually live.

My mother was stubborn from childhood. When she was stood in the corner, she fell asleep there but never asked for forgiveness. When scolded, she stared at the floor and didn't apologize. Very strong in math, with a real mathematical mind that in a different family, a different country, with a different start could have taken her to a math department or into science. In this life, it led nowhere. In this life, there were two colonies for troubled children, delinquency, prison for theft,

then another one, alcohol as a way not to feel, men from the same world — where they hit, drink, and don't ask what's inside you.

For a long time I thought my mother's stubbornness was character. Then I understood it was not freedom but the only form of autonomy available to her. My mother acted out. My grandmother demanded obedience — my mother fell asleep in the corner and didn't apologize.

She had been broken slowly and long before me. By the time I was born, she lived in anesthesia. Alcohol. Men. Prison. Anything, as long as she didn't have to be inside herself.

My mother's younger brother, Oleg, was her complete opposite. My mother fell asleep in the corner and didn't apologize — Oleg apologized for everything, smiled, joked, knew how to adjust, how to smooth things over. He did poorly in school, my grandmother said he was "a bit dim," but that wasn't about intelligence — it was about his survival strategy. They both grew up on the streets and both feared my grandmother's rage; they just chose different strategies. My mother — rebellion. Oleg — compliance.

Chapter Hope.

My grandmother's name was Nadezhda.

She was born on the eve of the war, in a family where there were ten children and four sisters survived. The rest were taken by hunger, disease, and what at the time was not considered catastrophe but simply life. From the age of nine she rolled heavy stones for the railroad, barefoot, because there were no shoes. Stocky, sturdy, with heavy hands and a voice that made even grown men at the market flinch. I knew her only this way: a thunderwoman, a force of nature, a woman who could scream at anyone, fight a man, make a scene, hold down three jobs, trade at the market, and survive a life in which tenderness was considered an almost deadly luxury.

From her childhood she took one rule that became her spine, her religion, and her only language: weakness kills. Feelings are a luxury. Tenderness is danger. If you are not tougher than the world, the world will crush you. This was not her theory, she didn't say it in beautiful words. She just lived that way. She checked the cleanliness of the corners of her children's rooms with a cotton ball — so that not a speck of dust remained. My mother and Oleg scrubbed the apartment spotless and fried trubochki (rolled wafer pastries) for her when she came home from work — not because they were sweet kids, but because otherwise hell could break loose at home. They often told me later how lucky I was that my grandmother didn't check my cleanliness with a cotton ball and that my life was easy.

When I later read Petranovsky's article on intergenerational trauma — about how wars and famine pass down not only poverty but the very atmosphere of existence — I didn't need to fill in the gaps. That fear lived in the house before I ever appeared in it. Don't trust. Don't relax. Endure. It was transmitted not through words. Through how you are picked up. Or not picked up. Through how crying is answered. Or not answered. My grandmother received it from her mother. Passed it to my mother. My mother — to me.

My mind learned to survive before it learned to live. It learned to read mood by footsteps, by the sound of a bag set down at the door, by how a person entered the house and what their first word was. It watched not what the adults said but what radiated from them.

This is where **Rabbit** was born inside me. Hears danger before it happens. Doesn't relax. Lives one second ahead of reality.

And my grandmother was also terrified that I would grow up "like my mother." That I would become weak, loose, drunk, lost, that I would die under a fence.

Her words to me as an eight-year-old girl — "you'll die under a fence, like your mother" — were not malice. It was her own horror turned inside out. She didn't know how to praise, because in her world praise makes you relax, and relaxing is not allowed. If the child is obedient, the house is clean, everything is under control — it means the world hasn't fallen apart yet. Let go — and everything collapses. She gave what she had. And what she mostly had was fear.

And she also had a curse. Or rather, she herself was the curse — for those she loved. She cursed my mother, Oleg, me. Said words — and the words came true. My mother died at forty-two. Oleg — beaten to death while drunk. I grew up feeling that my number was next. That the number 42 was written somewhere inside me, and there was no erasing it.

Chapter Grandpa.

My grandfather — Valery. Not biological, my grandmother's second husband. An ethnic German, born at the start of the Great Patriotic War (WWII) in the USSR, which in itself was already a brand. Being a German boy in a Soviet postwar school meant being an easy target. They rubbed lard on his chalkboard, forced him to confess to things he didn't do, threatened to kill him. He told me this once, already an adult, when drunk, and never returned to the subject.

He generally lived as though everything inside him was locked up. Taciturn, distant, cold. When my grandmother screamed, he was silent. When she humiliated him, he left. Hid in the garage and drank. She called him "dedka" (old man), herself — "babka" (old woman). Not once in my entire childhood did I see them hug, kiss, or even touch each other gently. My first and only model of a relationship between a man and a woman looked like this: she commands, he endures, no one warms anyone, and being near another person is still frightening.

He didn't hit and didn't scream — and against that backdrop he seemed safe. But silence while someone is beaten next to you — that is also betrayal. Didn't hit — but didn't stop it either.

When my grandmother screamed at me or hit me, he didn't stop her. Went to the garage. Pretended nothing was happening. Only much later, already in therapy, I understood that he loved me. In his way. Silently. Helplessly. From the distance at which he himself had once learned to survive. But childhood doesn't feel better for that. In childhood, what registers is something else: protected — or not protected.

And if not protected — then you are alone.

Chapter Pelmeni Instead of Milk.

From six months old I lived with my grandmother. My mother went to prison for theft.

She didn't breastfeed me — she chose to smoke instead. My grandmother fed me pelmeni (Russian dumplings). Pelmeni instead of milk at six months. Grandmother instead of mother.

I was half a year old. I could barely roll over. The person who gave me life simply disappeared. My mind doesn't remember. My body does. First, terror. Then pain. Then something inside switches off. Crying doesn't work. No one comes. And so the child does the only thing it can: stops feeling.

Not hysteria, not aggression. Emptiness. Shutdown. I was alone — and didn't even know it could be otherwise.

I was forty when I understood where this came from. I was six months old when it began.

Chapter Knife in the Side.

I was a few months old when my mother was drinking with some guy, and something went wrong — he stabbed her with a knife, and she dropped me.

I don't remember this, of course. Before age one. But the terror of knives appeared as soon as I gave birth to my son and seemed to have no cause. My grandmother told this story many times, completely matter-of-factly, without horror, without pause, without the meaning of "something terrible could have happened to you." Just like you'd talk about market prices: stabbed, dropped, nothing, she's alive.

In the world of my adults, a knife in the side was not considered a catastrophe. A catastrophe is when there's no money for bread. A knife — well, things happen.

Later, well into my thirties, under MDMA, in therapy, something else surfaced from the earliest period. Not as an image. As a bodily knowing, from which there was no way to wave it off: my mother engaged in prostitution while I was present. She was degraded. She did what she did, and I was somewhere nearby, within arm's reach of what an infant should never see. Consciousness cannot remember this. The body remembers.

Then many things became clear. Where, at five years old, the strange sexual acts in kindergarten with a boy came from — not because I understood anything, but because the brain was repeating the only model of closeness it had already recorded. Where later, at nine, I hurt myself with a pencil in intimate places and thought about myself: I am filth. Not "something bad happened to me." But "I myself am bad."

My **Merciless Critic** was born somewhere here. Not a voice, not a thought — a knowing. He didn't argue or prove. He simply delivered the verdict. Final, not subject to appeal.

A child doesn't conclude that the environment is abnormal. A child concludes that they themselves are abnormal. If the problem is in me — I can become better. Quieter. Cleaner. And then, maybe, they'll stop hurting me.

My **Perfectionist** began with this deal: become flawless — and they won't touch you.

Chapter Snow and the Carpet.

My grandmother also told the story of how my mother sat me down on the snow in autumn while she was drinking with her friends. That's how my first bladder problems started. For life.

At three, I wet myself on the carpet at nursery school, in front of everyone, during a school performance. I was scolded publicly. Not explained to. Not comforted. And at home, telling was also not allowed. In houses like ours, you learn very quickly the difference between pain and permitted pain: if you feel shame, fear, or hurt, that is not a reason to go to an adult. That is a reason to go silent.

Shame flooded me from the inside that day, as if everyone could see what was inside. The body betrayed me. From that day it became the enemy — something to watch, something not to trust.

This is where **Control** settled inside me. It became the only one I trusted. It never let go — because it knew: if you let go, it will be like that time, on the carpet, in front of everyone. Relax = lose control = be humiliated = be destroyed. The body learned this at three. The mind caught up at forty.

I then spent thirty-five years thinking that all people feel the same sharp, blinding pain every time they need to use the bathroom. Not heaviness. Not discomfort. But pain that is impossible to endure for even a second. In a meeting you sit and clench yourself with your hand under the table, pretend to listen, while inside the pain shoots through the entire body.

Only in Canada, already past thirty, did I suddenly realize that most people don't live like that. My husband once said he was too lazy to get up at night to use the bathroom. Lazy. It took me several seconds to process what that meant. That you can need the bathroom — and not writhe in pain. That you can hold it — and nothing happens. That for most people it's just heaviness you can ignore. I was diagnosed with overactive bladder.

Chapter The Courtroom.

Then my mother came back from prison. But didn't come to live with us. Drank. Partied. Disappeared.

At two she forgot to pick me up from nursery school, and the teacher took me home with her. I remember almost nothing from there — only dark-blue walls in the bathroom and the feeling that the day was already over and no one came for me. Close to nighttime, my grandmother arrived. This episode cemented a very simple thought inside me: I can be forgotten. Not in the head — in the gut. Like a spasm that from that day fires every time someone is late. And from it grew a second, quieter one: if they forgot me, then something is wrong with me. I am bad.

Around the same time, there was a second trial. Theft again. I remember the courtroom and I remember reaching for my mother's lap, and she pushed me away. This is one of those moments that don't turn into a verbal memory but remain as a knowing in the body. Arms reach out — and they are not accepted and pushed away. This is not the same as when the mother is simply absent. This is different. The mother is there — and still doesn't want you.

From this place, the Emptiness would later come. Arms reach out — and they are pushed away.

From two to six, my mother was locked up again. Letters came rarely, and there was no love in the letters. And being angry at her was not allowed. I understood this very early, deeper than with my head. If I get angry — she will disappear completely. So love for my mother went in one direction, hatred in another, and between them grew a wall.

My grandmother repeated: "Your mother doesn't need you." Didn't scream, didn't dramatize. Just stated it as matter-of-factly as a weather report. These were not isolated outbursts. This was a system. The air of the house. A child in such air doesn't argue, because there is nothing to compare it to. The child simply believes.

My grandmother also cursed people and told the story of how she once cursed someone — and he died the same day. Then she cursed my mother, my uncle. Me. My grandmother cursed me too. I already knew that. And I knew: they come true.

* * *

I am writing this and notice I've clenched my jaw. My hands are cold. The body remembers faster than I can type. So — a pause. Inhale. Feet on the floor. The cat is nearby. The window is open. The air is March air, with the smell of something damp and alive. This is now. What happened — happened. But now — this air.

* * *

Chapter Cigarettes.

At five, I flew to visit my mother at the Karaganda strict-regime prison for the first time. We flew with my grandmother. I don't remember joy at the meeting. I don't remember excitement. I remember the bathroom.

My mother took me in there and asked me to hide the cigarettes that my grandmother had brought — in my underwear. I hid them. Carried them through the checkpoint. Everything inside tensed up the way it tenses when you are doing something adult, dangerous, and not entirely clear, but you are given to understand that this is normal, that it is necessary. Not to hug. Not to hold on her lap. Not to talk. But to give an assignment.

That is the first visit with my mother I remember.

I would then live for a long time by the same template, not understanding where it came from: to be needed, you have to be useful. Not loved. Not wanted. Useful. A function.

But back then I was five, and I was just hiding cigarettes.

Chapter Go Away.

At five, my grandmother threw me out of the house for the first time. Not figuratively, not as a joke, but for real — put me out. I didn't have keys. I didn't have a mother. I didn't know where to go. Oleg talked her out of it and brought me back. If he hadn't, I still don't know where I would have gone.

From that day, the word “home” stopped meaning safety. Home became a place you could be thrown out of. Not for a great crime, but simply because the adult next to you couldn't take it anymore. Later my grandmother would throw me out again — or threaten to, which felt almost the same. And every time, the same thing was being recorded inside: I am not here by right. I am here as long as I am convenient. As long as I am quiet. As long as I am useful. As long as I don't get in the way. Make a mistake — and they'll discard you.

Later I would carry this feeling into every adult relationship, into work, into homes, into friendships, into marriage. As if I am everywhere temporarily, as if at any moment they could ask me to leave, and it's better to have a backup plan ready in advance. I still have a backup plan for everything. Since then I am everywhere temporarily. For every situation — a backup plan. To this day.

Chapter The Stake.

At six, I sat on a stake.

Our neighbor Markovna had a swing in her yard. There were almost no other entertainments, and her garden seemed to us like an amusement park. Usually she let us swing. That day — no. I was not so much upset as confused: yesterday it was allowed, today it's not — why? If you can't go through the gate, then you can go over the fence. That was my child logic.

The neighbor boy and I climbed over. I went first — because I was always brave and went first. He boosted me and gave a little push, and I sat down on a rusty iron stake right in my groin. I climbed off the other side carefully, without screaming, without understanding how bad it was. I just saw the blood.

I walked home in terror. Not from the pain. From something else. My legs like cotton, my hands ice-cold. From the knowledge that if you come home with pain, you might also get punishment. That had happened before. When you are hurt and at home they turn it into your fault, the body very quickly learns to hide the wound before asking for help.

So I lied, saying a neighbor had thrown a stone at me. For that I immediately got hit on the bottom — hard, on the very place where blood was already flowing. My grandmother dragged me inside, threw me on the couch, spread my legs — to look at what was there. The fence was rusty. The wound was jagged. They took me to the hospital. The first one refused us, at the second — I only remember the anesthesia and the words: everything will be fine. And for the first time through

all of this, the fear let go. Not because it stopped hurting, but because there were finally adults nearby for whom pain did not mean guilt.

It wasn't the first time I'd been in the hospital. Before that, I had almost died from some illness, they gave me a special IV and said I would either survive or not. I survived. By the age of nine I'd been in hospitals several times — always alone. My grandmother brought food. Staying with children in the hospital was not customary then. My mother was in prison. I was getting used to one and the same thing: when things are bad, no one is there. This was not perceived as tragedy. It was perceived as normal. I would repeat this many times later. And mistake it for strength.

Chapter First Grade.

When I was six, I started school. An experimental class — you had to pass a competition to get in. Even then I liked how my mind worked, liked solving something nonstandard, catching a problem on the fly, feeling how one thought hooks onto another and runs ahead. We composed poems, did strange exercises with words, wrote texts where every word had to start with the same letter. Mine was: "Once Oleg's Old father Obtained an Offspring deer. Oleg was Overjoyed." I liked this. In school I felt for the first time not shame, not anxiety, not the need to guess an adult's mood, but something like freedom. There I was not a baibasarka (a regional insult for a clumsy, awkward, never-quite-right girl), not a klutz, not a child being tolerated, but someone who was good at something.

I learned very quickly to guess what teachers wanted, even before they said it aloud. I read adults instantly — not out of cunning, but out of necessity: if you know what they need and give it before they ask — they leave you alone.

School very early became not just pleasure for me, but currency. My way of earning the right to exist.

This is where **Fox** was born inside me. Reads. Anticipates. Gives before they ask. So they don't discard you.

It was a twenty-minute walk to school. My grandmother showed me the way once. After that — on my own. That's how everything was set up in our house. They show you. Once. Then you are supposed to manage. Asking again, being afraid, saying it's scary — none of that was expected.

I walked alone. At six years old. Through a neighborhood where adults calmly discussed bus robberies and highway shootings as if they were part of ordinary life. But I had nothing to compare it to. If they show you the way once and send you walking, you don't think: "this is unsafe." You think: "this is how it should be."

One day on the way home from school, a man took out and showed me his penis. Stood there, watched what I would do, called me closer. I remember not the image itself but the helplessness — that I was alone, that no one was around, that there was no one to help, that I just had to run. I ran.

I didn't tell anyone at home. If someone hurts you — deal with it yourself. Later I would understand: this is not strength. This is trained silence. If you come home with this, they will punish you not for what happened to you, but for bringing it into the house.

* * *

Six years old. Twenty minutes alone on the road. And so every day. But there were mornings when the snow crunched under my boots, and the world smelled of frost, and I walked and breathed, and for a second everything was simple — step, breath, crunch, sky.

* * *

Chapter Tropa.

From the age of six, I earned money on my own.

First I sold newspapers. Then cigarettes, chocolate, drinks. "You want a Dendy (a knock-off Nintendo console popular in post-Soviet countries) — earn it," my grandmother said. And I earned it. In those years everyone around traded whatever they could, however they could. Near a store you'd set up a big cigarette box, put a board on top, lay out the goods. This was called "tropa" (a makeshift street vending spot, an informal selling stand). You stand and sell. If the police come — you have to grab what you can and run, because the rest they'll simply confiscate.

Once I didn't make it in time. They drove me around the city for a long time, then took me to the station. I escaped from there.

I saved up twelve hundred tenge (Kazakhstani currency) and bought myself a Dendy. Myself. Didn't beg, didn't wait for a gift, didn't earn it for good behavior. Bought it. It was almost happiness, made with my own hands. Then Uncle Oleg came drunk, fell on my Dendy and broke it. Done. Several months of work on the tropa, twelve hundred tenge, my first big purchase — and in one second, nothing. No one apologized. No one said it was a shame. No one offered to buy a new one.

That was also a lesson, though at the time I couldn't name it. What you earn can be destroyed in one second, and it won't be considered a tragedy. Just another small thing in life. I learned not to get attached to things and not to value them.

Chapter Footsteps.

The first thing I truly knew how to do in life was read mood by footsteps.

I could hear my grandmother's footsteps still in the hallway and already know what was coming. By how she entered, how she put down her bag, how she walked across the floor — heavy, sharp, or slightly lighter — you could tell whether today would pass quietly or everyone would suffer. My grandmother could get upset over a chicken. Over the weather. Over something someone said three years ago. And if she was upset, everyone suffered. Not because she deliberately wanted to torment anyone. That's just how her world was built.

You could have done nothing wrong. Not made a mistake, not been rude, not broken a cup. Sometimes it was enough to simply be nearby at the wrong moment.

I lived in a mode of constant scanning. Tracking. Checking. Not relaxing. At home, you can't.

The internal sentry by that point no longer switched off. It worked around the clock — without relief.

This was called normal life.

Chapter Baibasarka.

I was a lively child. Loud, active, always rushing somewhere, dropping things, falling, bumping into corners, catching on objects, as if there was some personal conflict between me and physical space. I was interested in everything — people, words, how things work, why the sky is the way it is, why adults say one thing and do another. My grandmother called me baibasarka.

Inside me lived a wild, alive energy — the kind that would later have to be locked away.

She said it in front of people. Laughed. People laughed along.

Baibasarka — clumsy, butterfingers, everything always wrong, everything falls, everything breaks. I heard that word so many times that I gradually stopped being surprised when something fell or went wrong. Just waited for it to be named aloud again. As an adult I learned the term ADHD. Back then I had a different word. Baibasarka.

Liveliness and noise were not considered good things at home. You got stood in the corner for them. At first, just standing. Then for hours. Then I started falling asleep there. Later, from around age seven, the punishments got harsher — now on your knees, on buckwheat (a common punitive practice in some post-Soviet households, forcing a child to kneel on dry buckwheat grains), that supposedly gets the message across better. I had to ask for forgiveness, often not even understanding what exactly for, because no one explained anything. Just screaming, an order, the corner, knees, buckwheat, silence.

This is how they tamed the **Wild Kitten** inside me. A small creature fascinated by everything, unable to be quiet. Its alive energy — the kind that would later have to be locked away. They would tame it for a long time. They would tame it all her life.

Inside, the Critic-translator was at work: it translated any quality of mine into the language of guilt.

Liveliness — baibasarka. Curiosity — you're in the way. Energy — take that. Liveliness had to be extinguished. And I extinguished it. Along with it, shame accumulated. Grandfather didn't protect me. Now he says he didn't know because my grandmother did it when he wasn't there, and he spent all his time in the garage so he wouldn't end up under her anger himself.

From age seven they would leave me a list of chores — clean the house, cook food, feed the livestock — and leave for the whole day, leaving me alone. This also seemed normal. I didn't know that there are homes where seven-year-olds are

not left alone for an entire day, where adults play with children, where weekends don't mean weeding, cleaning, feeding, scrubbing. I learned this only later, when I saw other families, and it was not shock but quiet grief for a life that others get by default. And envy.

But I was not only obedient. When my grandfather came home from the night shift and collapsed into sleep, and I wanted to go out, I knew: asking grandmother was pointless. Asking grandfather while conscious — also pointless. But if you go up to him while he's sleeping, touch his shoulder and quickly, sweetly, while he's not fully awake, ask "grandpa, can I go out?" — he'll nod and say "go." He agreed to everything in that state. I figured this out around age eight and used it every time my grandmother wasn't home.

This wasn't cunning for the sake of cunning. It's just that the direct path didn't work. Ask directly — refused. Explain that you want something — laughed at or punished. But I wanted to go out. And Fox found the workaround. As she would for the rest of her life: not through the door — through the window. Not with words — with calculation. Not with truth — with strategy.

No one spent time with me just to spend time. I had to be able to entertain myself, and I did. I examined things in the staika (a dark wooden shed in the backyard). The only thing my grandfather sometimes gave me was the chance to putter around next to him. Straighten nails, because there was no money to buy new ones. Saw pieces of wood. Watch him fix something. I was four when I found the slats he'd been carefully planing for window trim and "chopped" them all into little pieces with a hatchet. Simply because I wanted to do what the adults did. There were no other toys. No other games either.

Cleaning the yard, shoveling snow off the roof, weeding in the heat — none of this was considered work. It was considered either entertainment or duty. In our house there was almost no difference between those words.

I learned very early a simple internal arithmetic: useful means needed. Needed means they won't throw you out.

This became the main rule: anticipate what the adult needs. Do it before they ask. Smile before they notice. Become indispensable — and they will keep you.

I also loved going far beyond the city alone — starting around age six. No one asked where. No one walked me. The main thing was to be back by eight in the evening, otherwise "you'll be brought back with a switch." I'd been through that too. There were no clocks then, but to this day I "feel time" down to the minute, which surprises those close to me.

Beyond the city there was a processing plant, and next to it — an enormous hill of slag. Gray, crumbly, with a sharp smell that stung your nose. At the base stood an acid lake — an unnaturally bright color, turquoise or green, I don't remember exactly. You couldn't touch it. Everyone knew that. I knew it too. But I went there again and again.

I climbed to the very top of that hill. The slag crumbled under my feet, sometimes I slid back a meter, climbed again, gripped with my hands. At the top I sat and looked out over the whole city. Alone. From up there everything looked small and quiet — houses, roads, gardens, people. From up there, grandmother's screaming couldn't reach. From up there, nothing could reach.

In winter I rode down that hill on a sled — like a normal hill, except the hill was toxic, and at the bottom, if you didn't brake in time, the lake was waiting, and falling in would be bad. Once I fell not into the lake but onto my side — hit my solar plexus and couldn't breathe for several minutes. Lay on the slag, looked at the sky, and waited for the air to come back. It came back. I got up and rode again. Didn't tell anyone at home.

I liked being alone. Not always — but up there, loneliness was not pain but space. A place where no one screamed, where I was not baibasarka, not a burden, not an orphan with a living mother. Just a girl on a hill.

Chapter Mice.

When we moved from the apartment to the house, there were a lot of mice and rats. There was no poison then, and my grandfather caught them with traps. Every morning he brought the catch — one, two, sometimes three.

I collected them, laid the dead mice out in a row on a white cloth and played with them. They were my little children in a nursery. I counted them, rearranged them, talked to them. They were small, gray, with closed eyes and curled paws. I wasn't scared and I wasn't disgusted. I didn't feel anything at all. Just — mine, and I do with them what I want. For the first time in my life, I was the one deciding.

Once I hid that cloth behind a door. Twelve mice, neatly laid out in a row. I don't know how many days they lay there — no one talked about sanitation or hygiene back then. My grandmother was mopping the floor, opened the door, saw the white

cloth, unfolded it — and under it, twelve dead mice. How she screamed. How she cursed. And I stood and watched. Wasn't scared. Didn't cry. Just watched as my grandmother, who could yell at a man at the market and get into a fight with a neighbor, shrieked at my mice. She, who was terrified of mice — and I, who collected them with bare hands.

Then there was the boycott against the yard kids. When they bullied me, I decided to show them not to mess with me. I brought a dead rat — big, gray, heavy — and started swinging it around near the bushes where they usually sat. Played with it, tossed it, caught it. They watched with disgust and kept their distance. It worked — right up until a cat jumped on the rat from the bushes. I had to part with the rat. But for a few minutes, I was the queen of the yard.

And there are also two drowned puppies on my conscience. The dog had pups, and my grandfather said the extra ones had to be drowned. Explained it just like that. And entrusted it to me. I was about six or seven. I took the puppies and did what he said. With absolute indifference. Without tears, without doubt, without a tremor in my hands. The same way I finished off rats that hadn't fully died in the mousetrap — finished them because that's what needed to be done. Because grandfather said so. Because in this house orders were not discussed, and asking how I would feel during or after was something I hadn't learned. Or had already unlearned.

Now I wouldn't hurt even a spider. Now these memories ache so much I want to squeeze my eyes shut and rewind. But back then — nothing. No feeling. As if the part that should have felt pain for a living creature had already been switched off. It switched off earlier — at six months, when crying didn't work and no one came. By six years old, the switch had long been in the "off" position. And my hands did what they were told to do — without questions, without feelings, without resistance.

I had nothing. No fear, no pity, no thrill. Only indifference. The switch had been in the "off" position since six months. My hands did what they were told to do.

Chapter Six Tenge.

Once my mother gave me six tenge for colored paper. Fifty American cents, if you translate it into another life. I lost them. With ADHD you lose things constantly — not because you don't try, but because your brain is built that way. But back then I didn't know any words about neurodifferences. Back then it was simply called: take that.

My mother said: find them by five o'clock, or there will be consequences.

I searched everywhere. Didn't find them. At exactly five she took the rubber hose from the washing machine. Her face was calm, indifferent. She beat me without screaming, without hysteria, without words. Methodically. As if I were not a child but an object that needed processing. She beat me until she got tired.

My body turned black. I didn't go to the pioneerball (a Soviet-era children's volleyball-like game) competition the next day — I couldn't move. No one particularly asked why. My grandmother saw everything. Said nothing.

A child who is beaten without feeling absorbs one thing: the body is not yours. If it hurts — it's your own fault. Better not to feel. The child absorbs that their body is not theirs. That the body doesn't matter. That if it hurts, it means you are guilty. And it's better not to feel at all. Neither feelings nor body — a very convenient dissociation for any stress.

Chapter The Belt.

My grandmother also beat me.

Not with her hand. With the strap of a leather bag — with a metal clasp that left a separate mark with every blow. She held me so I couldn't break free. When you are held, there is nowhere to go. The body is clamped by someone else's hands, and the only thing left is to wait for it to end. I tried to break free. Couldn't. And then something stone-like switched on inside — not even a thought but a decision made by the body without me: endure. Just endure.

This is how the **armor** was assembled inside me — muscle by muscle, layer by layer. The **Frozen One** — the part that switched off feelings because feeling was mortally dangerous. Then for thirty years I wouldn't be able to take it off.

Ignore yourself. Push through. Keep going, even when everything inside screams "no." The body switched off the pain signal before it reached the head. This is called dissociation. Back then it was called — normal.

Chapter Staika.

Around the same age, a boy in the yard smashed my nose bloody. Just because. I was the smallest, there were no adults around. I didn't go home. I hid in the staika — a dark wooden shed in the backyard that smelled of hay, metal, and musty wood. Blood dripped onto the snow. I pressed snowballs to my face, changed them when they turned red and wet, and stood there alone until the bleeding stopped. Then I wiped my hands on my pants and went home as if nothing had happened. Years later an ENT told me my nose had been broken and healed badly — that's why it doesn't breathe.

In that yard they bullied me often. Spat on me, threw dust at me, hit me. I stopped going there.

When I fell off my bike at full speed and tore up my back on the asphalt, I didn't go home. Set my hair on fire from the poplar fluff — same thing. I went to my friends. They washed it, bandaged it, helped however they could. I did this every time my body was injured — bypassed the house and looked for help anywhere except where I lived.

My Fox by that time already knew all the workarounds: who to run to, who to ask, who to smile at so they'd help. Anywhere — but not home.

Shame said not "something bad happened to me." Shame said: I myself am bad.

Going home with pain was scarier than standing alone with blood on the street. Not because the street was safer, but because at home they punished you for pain. Not for the act. For the very fact of pain. As if being hurt, falling, getting injured was not a misfortune but an offense. As if a child has no right to pain.

This was recorded in the body as fact. Pain and fear I could already dull by that time — behind clenched jaws, behind a sucked-in stomach. My pain is needed by no one. This became habitual.

Once my grandmother beat me with the dirty floor rag I had used to wash the porch steps, across the face — right on the porch, in front of the neighbor, for poorly washed steps. The neighbor stood and watched. Said nothing. The shame then was so strong that I wanted to disappear right into those steps, fall through them, become smaller than my own shadow. My cheeks burned, my throat squeezed shut. I stood and didn't move until my grandmother left. I didn't cry. By then I no longer cried. Tears changed nothing. They only made it worse.

That shame would return later. In how I flinch after a mistake. How I can't hold someone's gaze. To be seen is dangerous. Because when they saw — they hit.

Chapter Night.

One night my mother and I were walking together after some party of hers. The days when she actually took me to spend time together almost always looked the same: she was somewhere drinking, and I had to exist nearby and not get in the way. I was seven. It was dark. She walked fast, not holding my hand, sometimes pushing me if I fell behind, as if I were not a child but some clumsy bag that catches on the road and keeps lagging.

Then she walked even faster, and suddenly something came over me. Probably after the story with the six tenge, after the hose, after all that accumulated silence inside. I simply stopped, turned around, and walked the other way. I was seven. Night. A dark street. And I was walking away from my mother, though in reality, of course, I was walking toward one impossible thing: I was waiting for her to turn around. To notice. To call out. To run after me.

She didn't turn around.

I reached the bus stop, got on a bus, and rode home. Thank God, I knew the route and my stop. But more important than the bus, the route, and the dark street was something else: if I disappear, no one will run after me. The body memorized this that night not as drama and not as offense, but as a law.

Later, as an adult, any crack in closeness would be experienced by me not as an ordinary human difficulty but as the end of the world. Not "we're going through a tough time" but "I'll be abandoned." Not "the person is angry" but "I'm alone against the world again." And somewhere very deep would live a question I couldn't silence for forty years: if I become important enough, will someone finally run after me?

Chapter The C.

Once in third grade I brought home a C (a troika — a grade of 3 out of 5 in the Russian system, equivalent to an unsatisfactory mark for a high-performing student).

My grandmother took a chair leg and broke it across my back.

She feared bad grades — or rather, everything they stood for: failure, poverty, falling. A child of war, she knew no other way to raise a child. She passed on the only thing she had: terror of making a mistake.

If the handwriting in a notebook wasn't neat enough, my grandmother tore the notebook. Rewrite it. I rewrote. Until nighttime. If it still wasn't right, she tore it again. And I rewrote again.

This is how a system gradually assembled inside me that would later run my entire life. A child who feels that love can be lost begins searching for a way to hold on to it. Some become quiet. Some become invisible. I chose a different path: become perfect. Not because I loved school that much. But because the body remembered the chair leg. The torn notebooks. A C had long stopped being just a C. A mistake became a danger signal. I must be flawless to be safe. I didn't just try hard. I was trying to earn the right to be loved.

The world I grew up in said the same thing in hundreds of variations: pain is normal. They can beat you, and that doesn't mean they don't love you. It means you are not good enough yet. Become better — and maybe they'll stop hitting.

When my grandmother was in an especially bad mood, she frightened me with the orphanage. Said the police would come and take me. That I'd be wandering through trash heaps. She said the same to her own children — that prison was crying for them. It was her language. The only language she knew.

And she also liked to remind me that I should be grateful to her. That she saved my life. That without her I would have ended up in an orphanage. I'll say honestly: not much gratitude was born in me. When I remember all this, I feel not gratitude but an aching pain. The horror of the orphanage, of the trash heap, of being discarded — all of it settled inside me as chronic fear. Helplessness. Hopelessness. And next to it — another truth that also can't be escaped: without her, I truly might not exist. She was saving my life and at the same time, day after day, killing in me the feeling that this life was worth anything.

But somewhere between the A's and the terror I started noticing something. When a problem worked out — for a second it became quiet inside. Not happy. Quiet. As if the mind, which constantly scanned for danger, for a moment stopped and simply was. I didn't know what that meant then. Now I think it was the first glimmer of something: that I was not only a function.

Chapter Grandmother's Therapist.

At eight I became my grandmother's therapist.

She started telling me her things. How her first husband — my mother's father — beat and raped her, how he damaged her kidney, how he passed her around to his friends. How he died — overdose, choked on his own vomit. How at nine she rolled stones for the railroad and had no shoes to go to school. How her mother was dragged by her father, her hair wound around his fist, on a horse. How the ex-wife of my grandfather Valery buried a photograph of my grandmother under the garden gate with needles in it, for a curse. How my grandmother herself fought men at the market.

She told all of this to me. In detail. Not skipping the bodily, the bloody, the degrading.

I listened and imagined everything. Very vividly. Very precisely. The moment I heard something, a movie would start playing in my head. And in my movie theater the films were about rape, beatings, death in vomit, a woman dragged on a horse by her hair, fights, blood, knives, prison, curses, humiliation.

I learned to be composed in a place where I desperately wanted to be small. Learned to listen where I wanted to cover my ears and run. Learned to function where I wanted to burst into tears and be comforted. Eight years old — this is not early maturity and not empathy. This is a child whose childhood was taken away and replaced with someone else's pain served for breakfast. Therapists would later call this "parentification." I called it "evenings."

This is how **Iron Man** switched on inside me. The one who does everything, endures everything, only doesn't feel anything. He didn't need a heart. He needed to survive.

Then I had to switch off the images. Not right away — gradually, as if someone inside was slowly turning down the brightness on the screen until it went dark entirely. Now I almost never see dreams. When I close my eyes, it's dark. I can know, but not see. I cannot imagine or visualize. Only know. In meditations I would later recall that inner moment when the girl decided to become "blind," because seeing all of this was no longer possible. Knife fights, brawls, grandmother's stories, how she once attacked grandfather with a knife — everything came through images, and the only way to survive was to turn off the projector. The psyche did this without my permission. Saved and simultaneously crippled me. This is how

Blind Girl was born.

But if the images could be switched off, the sensations in the body could not. When someone nearby suffered, I felt their pain physically, in my body, not in theirs. And it's still the same now. That's why I can't watch the news. Can't watch films with violence. The body still works as an antenna for other people's suffering. That eight-year-old girl who sat and listened to her grandmother never went away.

When my grandmother had a headache, I placed my hands on her head and tried to take the pain away, as best I could. Something like hypnosis, some sort of childhood energy healing long before any words for it existed. She'd say: it got better. I was eight. I took other people's pain into myself and thought that's how it should be, because in our house that was my way of being needed. Asking for attention — shameful. Asking for love — pointless. But you can earn your place if you become useful. If you become the one they can't do without.

Chapter The Knife.

At eight years old I watched my grandmother attack my grandfather with a knife.

He knocked the knife away, twisted her arm. I stood in the doorway. My feet were glued to the floor. She wore a splint afterward. He survived. It was over. The next morning my grandmother made porridge. Grandfather went to the garage. I went to school. I didn't tell anyone.

This was probably one of the most terrifying lessons of my childhood: a catastrophe can happen before your eyes, and in the morning everyone will act as if nothing particularly happened. Horror is not discussed. Fear is not acknowledged. Life goes on as if nothing happened, and the child is left alone with everything that recorded itself inside during that time.

And a lot recorded itself. The sense that at any moment a knife could appear in someone's hands again. That the world can crack suddenly and without warning. That silence in the house is not necessarily peace. Sometimes it is just a pause between blows.

Later I would carry this expectation of catastrophe inside me my whole life, and for a long time I confused it with intuition, responsibility, maturity, anything but what it really was: a body that never believed safety actually exists.

Chapter Visits.

My mother appeared sometimes — for a few weeks, sometimes less. Once my grandmother tried to give me to her: go live with your mother. My mother lasted two weeks, then went on a bender, and my grandmother had to rush to take me back. The second attempt lasted even shorter — a week.

In the nineties my mother sold cigarettes. I remember how she attacked some woman at the market, trashed her goods, screamed, made a scene over something trivial, or so it seemed to me. People watched. I felt so ashamed I wanted to be invisible. To not be her daughter for at least those few minutes.

My mother was loud, crude, vulgar, and all of this was also being recorded inside me as knowledge about what a woman is. Not as the thought "women can be like that," but as an inner image of femininity: screaming, filth, absence of dignity, contempt for oneself. I had no other model.

And even more importantly — she was never proud of me. Never said "good job," never patted my head, never wished me happy birthday. For a child, the mother is the mirror in which they first see whether they exist at all. When there is no mirror, inside forms **Emptiness**. Not the hysterical, not the loud kind, but a very quiet one: I am not seen. And if I am not seen, then I am uninteresting. Then the very fact of "I exist" means nothing. Then I don't exist at all.

She lied all the time. Promised to come — didn't come. Promised not to drink — drank. When she hit bottom, she told me how in the juvenile colony she swallowed needles to get into the hospital, and how she slashed her wrists. I was eight, and I sat across from my own mother, who was telling me about needles in her throat and showing scars from slashed wrists — and this was our "time together."

Uncle Oleg lived with us for months at a time, then disappeared, then reappeared. Drank, quit, drank again. Every few months he and my mother would go on a bender and drop out of life. It had almost become a rhythm you get used to, like bad weather. Once he slept on our couch drunk and urinated on it. I already found it a bit strange that a grown man could lie there and wet himself in the middle of the day, and no one particularly treated it as the end of the world. Just another form of my mother's and Oleg's life. Plus my grandmother's curses: "may he rot somewhere."

And around nine I understood one very harsh thing — not as a feeling anymore, but as a clear thought: my mother and Oleg cannot be helped. I even said it to my grandmother. She didn't answer. Something inside me closed. Not with a creak, not with drama. Quietly. The child who still hoped that someday the mother would come and become a mother died without a sound.

At nine, something simply stopped turning on. Didn't break — got tired.

Later, years later, all those visits, binges, market scenes, lies, silence instead of birthday wishes would add up to one inner verdict: I am not the one people change for. Not the one people choose sobriety for. A child doesn't think: mom has a disease, mom has her own brokenness, mom can't do otherwise. A child thinks: then it's about me.

This is how the **Helpless Surrenderer** was born inside me. Not lazy. Not weak. Just the one who got tired of hoping. The one who decided: if I stop waiting, it will stop hurting. He lay down and never got up again. Not because he couldn't. Because every time he got up, it ended the same way.

And Wild Kitten by that time already knew how to do it both ways at once: want to be held — and hiss if you reach out. Hate my mother for not coming — and hate myself for that hatred.

* * *

You can stop here. A lot of pain in a row. A lot of blows that landed one on top of another, until the child stopped telling where one ends and the next begins. But the child survived. You know this because you are holding this book in your hands.

Chapter Mirrors.

Then Oleg slashed his stomach with a knife.

Wanted to die. Didn't die. Later he showed me the scar. I was nine, and I already knew what a suicide attempt was — not as a word, but as a scar on my uncle's stomach, as the smell of alcohol and bandages, as his eyes afterward, empty, as if someone had switched off the light inside.

Inside settled a knowing: people can destroy themselves, and no one can stop it. My first attempt to slash my wrists would come at thirteen. Between his scar and my first attempt, four years would pass.

Chapter By Force.

My grandmother and Oleg often forced me to eat — boiled tomatoes with skin in borscht, oversalted, overcooked, whatever it was. When I cooked and something burned or I oversalted it, they made me eat all of it myself. I didn't want to — they forced me. The body didn't matter.

This is how I learned one of the most dangerous things: my "I don't want to" doesn't matter. My "I can't" doesn't matter. The body is not a source of truth but something that must be forced to obey. Later, already an adult, I was long puzzled by why I didn't feel hunger, didn't feel fullness, could eat standing up, on the go, without noticing the taste, as if food were a task, not a pleasure. This started not with diets and not with work stress. This started here.

The body went silent. Stopped saying "I don't want" and "enough." And when the body is silent, it also won't say "I feel bad, I feel empty, I need warmth." And then the mouth becomes the only entrance through which you can let something in. Not because you're hungry — because you're empty. This is how **Binge Eater** was born inside me. Not greedy — hungry. Not for food — for what food replaced. For warmth. For the feeling of "I exist." Food didn't comfort. But for a second, it filled.

Chapter The Cabinet.

At nine I broke a huge glass cabinet filled with crystal — "my dowry," as my grandmother called it. I accidentally dropped a book on a glass shelf, the glass went down, and everything shattered with a terrible ringing. Everything inside me froze — like before a blow. I was beaten so badly that from that day I drew a final conclusion: no broken thing is worth getting upset over. Things are just things. But for things — they kill you.

A broken cup, lost money, a C — everything meant one thing: it's about to hurt. Perfection was the only form of safety.

Then my grandmother did throw me out of the house for real. Not “stand in the hallway,” not “go think about your behavior,” but out. I had to go to my mother — she was living at some drinking buddy’s place, and, thank God, I knew where. I spent two nights there. Grandfather didn’t come for me. Not once in my entire childhood did he protect me. Later he said he didn’t know. I still sometimes think: how can you not notice that a child has been missing from home for two days?

After two days, my grandmother came and took me back. Didn’t even apologize. Just said: let’s go.

Two nights at a drinking buddy’s place. Nine years old. And a grandfather who “didn’t know.” This was the truth about my place in the family: I am here as long as I’m convenient. The moment I become a problem, the door is open.

Chapter The River.

At ten, a drunk relative picked me up and threw me into the river.

“I’ll teach you to swim,” he said.

I didn’t know how to swim. I was drowning. My grandfather stood nearby and didn’t intervene. I remember only the water and the fact that no one protected me. Since then I fear water not figuratively, not symbolically, but with my body. The body remembers. Since then, a river for me is not water. The **River** is something that can kill. The body memorized this once and for all.

There is no protection. Even “your own” can cause harm, and others will stand and watch.

Chapter Alcohol.

At ten, a dog tore my mother’s lip off. She was drunk and going to visit someone head-on through the yard, the dog lunged, my mother came to us later with her lip stitched up, part of the lip was missing. At twelve, Oleg lost an eye. A drunken group. He was sleeping. Someone hit him with a hammer. I saw him afterward — the eye was gone. It was terrifying to look at him every time.

By that time alcohol was no longer something adult, strange, romantic, or forbidden to me. Alcohol was this. A scar on a stomach. A lip that’s gone. An eye that’s gone. A knife in grandmother’s hand. People around me didn’t just drink. They were slowly, systematically, almost methodically destroying themselves in front of my eyes. And I stood nearby and watched, and couldn’t stop it, or look away, or leave. Grandmother’s curse was coming true before my eyes. My mother was falling apart. Oleg was falling apart. The number 42 ticked somewhere inside like a bomb everyone knew about but no one said aloud.

Chapter Grief.

Here is what was normal.

No one played with me just to play. No one spent time with me for my sake. I walked alone, went to school alone, played alone, was sick alone, coped alone. No one ever said: I love you. No one hugged me just because. No one sat next to me. No one asked — how are you.

This is not a complaint. This is just how it was.

Grief for a life that others got by default. For games that never happened. For hugs. For words that were never said, not once. I long thought that wanting these things was weakness. Asking is not shameful. Shameful are those who didn’t give.

Chapter The Diary.

By age nine the system had already assembled itself.

School came easily, and it became my currency. A’s lowered the tension at home. Not much. Not for long. Sometimes just for one evening. But at least that. A C meant catastrophe — not because a C itself means anything, but because behind it stood everything else: screaming, humiliation, beatings, the chair leg, torn notebooks.

I learned to hide the C’s.

I carefully tore out the page from my school diary (a record book used in Russian schools where grades are logged daily), went to my friend's grandmother, asked for clean pages from another diary, then at home stitched them in with a needle and thread, because we didn't have a stapler. The lines had to match. The paper had to lie flat. The page numbers had to match. The handwriting had to not give me away. I was nine, and I was forging a school diary with the precision of a little counterfeiter.

If any of the adults had bothered to notice this talent, they would have understood: the child has either a bright future in crime or a very large fear.

Fear won. Became a product manager.

I forged not only for myself. In seventh grade, my friend Kamila was in the hospital with sinusitis. And I was putting on a school performance and couldn't do without her — she was the best. They wouldn't release her. The doctors said: no. The homeroom teacher said: well, what can you do.

I wrote a request in the name of the homeroom teacher. Forged her signature — by that time I was already good at copying handwriting, trained on the diary. Then I forged the signatures of two more teachers — "everyone agrees, the child can be released for the event." Brought it to the hospital. Handed it in. Kamila was released. The performance happened. No one ever found out.

Fox could bypass any system if inside that system they told me "no." Ask directly — won't help. Explain why it's important — they won't hear. So — make the system itself produce the needed answer. A signature is just ink on paper. The important thing is that it matches.

But one time I didn't have to forge anything.

In seventh grade they announced a contest for a young journalist at the local newspaper. They were recruiting from grades 5 through 11 of our lyceum. I asked my grandfather — was it worth going. He said: "Of course, go." That was, I think, the only time in my entire childhood when an adult near me said not "no," not "don't butt in," not "who asked you," but simply — go.

I showed up and was the smallest. 156 centimeters tall. The rest were from tenth and eleventh grade, a head or two taller than me, some already with mustaches. We were given an assignment: write an article on any topic in a week.

I didn't know what to write about. But I knew what I could do: go to strangers and ask questions. My grandmother had taught me not to fear adults — or rather, taught me to fear only her, and against the backdrop of grandmother's wrath any director seemed quite harmless.

I went uninvited to the director of the local power plant. Just walked into the reception, said I was from the newspaper, that I was writing an article. The secretary looked at me from above, was stunned by my audacity and nerve, and... let me through. The director turned out to be a decent guy — answered my questions about power outages and rates, didn't laugh, spoke seriously, as if to an adult. Then I went to Altaienergo — same thing. Walked in, introduced myself, asked, wrote it down.

A week later I submitted the article. Out of the whole group, only I was chosen. They printed it in the newspaper. The article was called "The Brave Little Tailor," where the editor introduced me, told everyone about my bold initiative to investigate a timely topic, and published my interview. They published me a few more times after that. I received my first real paycheck. Not through the tropa. Not through fear. Through what I could do: show up, ask, take notes, write.

My grandfather, when he found out, said nothing. As usual. And they didn't take the money. By their standards, this was almost praise.

Chapter Not Wanting.

I stopped allowing myself to want very early.

Not because I was modest. And not because my desires were small or "unimportant." But because desire makes a person vulnerable. If you want — they can refuse. If you wait — they might not come. If you reach out — they can push you away. The psyche chose a safer path: not wanting. Do what needs to be done. Solve problems. Achieve. Be a function. And want nothing from others.

And sometimes I caught myself in a strange state, as if watching what was happening slightly from the outside. As if inside there was someone who observed, registered, recorded, but didn't participate. No panic, no pain — only registration. The **Frozen One** — the part that had been assembled layer by layer with each blow of the belt — by this time

was no longer just protecting. She was running things. This state would return later at the hardest points of my adult life — during childbirth, during emigration, during fights, during depression. Numbness turned out to be a reliable tool. It didn't heal, but it allowed me to continue.

Emptiness switched off feelings. Iron Man kept acting. A perfect pair for survival. A catastrophe for living.

I read a great deal. Reading was one of the few ways to legally disappear from reality. In books no one hit you, no one threw you out, no one made you guess moods by footsteps. Through books I first learned that you can feel something and not be punished for it. Even if through other people's feelings, other people's words, other people's lives.

I don't remember anyone asking me what I feel. And I don't remember asking myself that question. I knew what needed to be done. I didn't know what I wanted. Back then it didn't seem important. It would become critical later, when I'd be in my mid-thirties, sitting in an empty apartment in California, unable to answer the simplest question: what do you want? Not because the question is hard. But because "wanting" had been switched off a very long time ago.

Chapter Siberia.

At thirteen we moved from Kazakhstan to a village in Siberia.

New country. New school. A new world where again I had no place.

I was the straight-A girl who didn't drink, didn't hang around with boys, didn't wear what others wore, talked somehow wrong, looked somewhere wrong, and with her very existence violated the local order. A white crow — only not a proud or free one, but an ordinary scared girl who desperately wanted everyone to like her, so she could be safe.

They started bullying me. Ruined my things. Insulted me. Said nasty things so I'd hear. Whispered behind my back. Did everything a school pack knows how to do to someone who doesn't match them, not on the outside, not on the inside. Boys shoved snow down my collar.

I tried to handle it on my own.

One winter, after yet another round of snow shoved down my collar and someone's hands where they didn't belong, I went out during recess to the outdoor toilet. Packed a huge snowball — dense, heavy, the size of an adult man's fist. Carried it into the classroom under my coat and sat at my desk as if nothing had happened. Sat, waited. The snow started melting, ice water ran down my stomach, but I didn't move. After five minutes I stood up in the middle of the class, turned to face them, and hurled that ball at their desk so hard it exploded right in their faces. Spray, chunks of snow, wet notebooks, someone screamed. I was immediately thrown out of the class, of course. But I walked down the hallway and was very pleased with myself. For the first time in months — pleased.

It didn't help. They continued. Then I did something else.

My grandfather had a keychain with a small decorative saber — about three centimeters long. Dull, useless, just decoration. I took it, found a sharpening stone, and sharpened it — slowly, carefully, the way my grandfather sharpened knives. Then I brought it to school, placed it on the desk, and told those who were tormenting me: if you touch me again, I will defend myself. I showed the blade. They laughed. Three centimeters — that's not a knife, that's funny.

One of them decided to test it... I plunged the saber into his hand. Drew blood. He pulled back, looked at the blood, looked at me. I looked back. Without blinking.

After that, the boys didn't bother me anymore.

At home I said nothing. You can't come home with weakness. But at some point someone from school called with threats and started saying I was a slut. And got my thundergrandmother.

I begged her not to go to school. I already knew very well that her way of protecting could make things worse. She went anyway. Made a scene. Put everyone in their place. Made them bring their parents to the village council. From the outside it looked like defense.

But the childhood social system is cruel and simple. After that, it got worse. Much worse.

The entire school declared an ignore on me. For several months no one spoke to me. They didn't fight, didn't push, didn't argue. They just acted as if I didn't exist.

Wild Kitten inside had by then already retreated to the farthest corner. It wasn't just unloved — it was as if it had been erased.

When no one looks at you, no one responds, no one notices — what arises is not loneliness. What arises is the feeling that you don't exist.

The boycott lasted several months. And somewhere in the middle, something inside switched.

Before, I had been acting like my mother. Stubbornly, directly, head-on. Threw a snowball in their face — and felt satisfied. Plunged the saber in — and stared without blinking.

But my mother's strategy led to a boycott. Hitting back didn't help. Grandmother's scene didn't help. Force didn't help. And then from somewhere deep inside, a different voice rose — not my mother's. Oleg's.

Oleg — my mother's younger brother — survived differently. He smiled. Joked. Adjusted. Knew how to smooth things over. Knew how to enter a room so everyone relaxed. My grandmother said he was dim, but it wasn't about intelligence — it was his method: become convenient, become pleasant, become the one they don't throw out. And after months of silence, after months of invisibility, I suddenly understood: I didn't need my mother's strategy. I needed Oleg's.

I started telling jokes. Deliberately read joke collections — wherever I could find them, in newspapers, in books — and wrote them in a notebook. Memorized them. Came to school and told them. At first, no one responded. Then someone chuckled. Then someone laughed. Then — "tell another one." This is how I began returning from oblivion. Not through force — through laughter. Not through a blow — through charm.

Then I started letting people copy my work. The straight-A student, gold medal track — I had what they needed. And I understood: if you give people what they need, they stop hating you. Won't love you — but will stop hurting you. That was enough.

Then I organized a school event. Put together everything myself — assignments, judges, prizes. I needed to be visible, be at the center, be needed. Not because I wanted power — because invisibility had nearly killed me. The event went well. Teachers praised me. Kids participated. I stood in front and coordinated. And inside there was not happiness but relief: I am seen again.

And then I started drinking. In ninth grade — for the first time. Not out of curiosity and not out of rebellion. From the same formula: to belong. If they drink — I drink. If that's the price of admission into their world — I pay. My mother's alcohol destroyed. Mine bought me a seat at the table.

And there was also New Year's. After the boycott. I came to the school party dressed as a prostitute. My grandmother's boots with heels — two sizes too big, I'd practiced walking in them so I wouldn't fall. Short shorts, a blouse, and the main thing — a round pink pin that read: $2000. A price tag. My worth.

They probably didn't understand my costume. For them it was just weird clothes. But I knew. This was my protest. Not with a snowball and not with a saber — with a costume. You made me an outcast? Here's your outcast. Here's your prostitute. Here's everything you're afraid of. And I am not afraid. I walked through the hall in those too-big heels, and inside it wasn't shame but pride. For the first time in a long while — pride.

Two strategies. My mother's — hit head-on, fall asleep in the corner. Oleg's — smile, adjust, become indispensable. Kitten and Fox. They weren't friends. But each saved in their own way.

Chapter The Cuckoo Clock.

Once I moved the hands on the cuckoo clock one hour back.

I was fourteen, ninth grade. I had studied all year with straight A's — the only girl in the whole district who'd pulled it off — and I simply wanted to go out. Wanted attention. Wanted to be not just a grade machine but an ordinary fourteen-year-old girl who goes somewhere with her friends, talks, looks at boys, and doesn't think every second whether she's earned the right to leave the house.

My grandfather noticed.

The punishment was for the entire summer. No walks. No friends. Just sit at home, weed in the heat, and read books. For one moved hour on the cuckoo clock. For one small transgression. My stomach clenched. Summer was over before it started.

But in this house there was never proportionality. There was nothing in between. Either you are perfect or guilty. Either obedient or ruined. Either the pride of the family or practically a criminal. There was no middle ground.

A transgression and a catastrophe became one and the same.

Chapter Boarding School.

At fourteen I left for a lyceum-internat (boarding school, state-run, often associated with neglect — though in this case it was a competitive academic institution). Passed the entrance exam — six applicants per spot. On the outside — a smart girl who got out thanks to her brains. On the inside, simpler: staying home was impossible.

The boarding school was a tough place. Twelve girls in a room, three rooms per floor — thirty-six girls for one toilet. Five sinks. One shower, once a week. If you wanted to wash more often — wash in the nogomojka (a foot-washing station — a pipe with holes that sprays water, used as a makeshift shower). No curtains. You stand naked, washing, and across the way someone has after-school study hall, and they can see you through the window. Shame had long burned out — all that was left was indifference toward your own body. And you don't care, because there's no alternative, and you want to be clean. In the morning you brush your teeth there too, at the nogomojka, because there's a line for the sinks.

Seven a.m. — wake-up and mandatory exercise. If you didn't get up — they pulled you off the bed by your foot, and you fell on the floor. The boys especially had it bad.

The food was terrible. We stole bread and butter from the cafeteria — that was our real food. Bread and butter. In the evening, after lights-out, when everyone was in bed and the lights were off, we ate dry Chinese instant noodles — straight from the package, uncooked, crunching under the blanket. Those who stayed for the summer and didn't go home ate bread with vegetable oil and salt. A cake was bread with sour cream, which my grandmother sometimes sent, sprinkled with crushed diabetic tablets instead of sugar. This was considered a celebration. In fact, of course, it was not a cake. But when the alternative is bread without sour cream, it's a cake.

And here is what's strange: I remember this with delight. With rapture. These were the happiest times of my childhood. Because for the first time in my life I was not alone. For the first time there were people my age around me, who lived next to me, ate next to me, slept next to me. No one cursed me. The rules were harsh, the food was horrible, the conditions were barracks-like. But it was better than home. Much better. And in this lies the whole truth about my childhood: a barracks with a nogomojka felt like freedom, because I had nothing to compare it to.

At the boarding school, one of my first real insights happened — not a beautiful one, not a therapeutic one, not one dressed up in words. I simply suddenly saw that other people have mothers.

Real ones.

Who call. Who visit. Who bring homemade food. Who remember holidays. On International Women's Day the girls made cards and gifts for their mothers — easily, joyfully, as if this were the most natural thing in the world. And I watched them and for a long time couldn't understand what exactly I was feeling. Not anger. Not resentment. Grief. And envy.

But life at the boarding school was not only about grief and envy. Life at the boarding school was also about survival — and surviving was what I did better than anyone.

In tenth grade I needed to call my grandmother. They never sent me money — never. A long-distance call cost a token, a token cost money, and there was no money. So I came up with something.

I took ten-kopek coins — about the size of a dime — and placed them on the tram tracks. The tram drove over them — the coin flattened, increased in diameter, and sometimes came out exactly the size of the token for long-distance payphones. Not every one. About every third. The rest flattened crooked or cracked. But one out of three worked.

Then I improved the method. Found a spot on a tram curve where there were few people and the rails bent — there the tram went slower and pressed more evenly. I taped coins to the rail with scotch tape in an inconspicuous spot, ten at a time. Waited for the tram. Collected the results. Out of ten coins, six or seven working "tokens" came out. That was enough for several calls.

Once, before International Women's Day, my friend Masha wanted to call her mother. She had no money either — she asked me. I gave her my coins and explained how to call. Warned her: this is a crime, we could get caught, you need to be careful. Masha was not careful. She was spotted. Caught.

I could have run. I was standing a few meters away, they hadn't seen me yet. I could have turned and left. But Masha was standing there alone, and I couldn't abandon a friend.

We were both taken to the police. Put behind bars — real ones, with iron rods, in a small room that smelled of dampness and cigarettes. We sat for several hours. Then we explained that we were calling our mothers, that it was International Women's Day, that we wouldn't do it again. They let us go.

Six years earlier I stood on the tropa and sold cigarettes. Four years earlier I forged a school diary. Two years earlier I forged teacher signatures. Now — I forged coins. The tools changed. The formula didn't: if the system doesn't give you what you need — bypass the system. Find a crack. Crawl through. Act like that's how it was supposed to be.

I was always interested in prostitutes. I don't know why — maybe because my mother was involved in prostitution while I was an infant, and the body recorded it long before the head could understand. Maybe because the subject of sex, body, and shame had been in my life from the very beginning. I watched every movie about it, read everything I could find. But I had never seen a real prostitute.

In eleventh grade I decided to fix that.

The problem was that the boarding school doors locked at ten p.m. And prostitutes, I assumed, work at night. So I had to get out after lights-out. So I needed a key to the back exit.

I came up with a plan. Said the hallway needed repair — wallpaper was peeling, had to take the trash out through the back door. They gave me the key. For half an hour. I flew three bus stops to the market, found a locksmith, got a duplicate made, and came back. Made it in time.

That night we went out with Svetka. She smoked, I didn't. We walked along a dark street toward the next block — going far was scary, and nearby, according to rumors, they stood. We walked in silence, tense, as if on a reconnaissance mission. I was fifteen, and I felt like a spy from a movie.

Behind us came footsteps. Fast, male. Catching up. The man approached and said: "Girls, got a smoke?"

How I bolted from there. Like a bullet. Like a mouse from "Tom and Jerry" — legs flashing faster than you know where you're running. And yelling as I run: "No! Don't have any!" Svetka — right behind me. We ran all the way back to the boarding school without looking back.

After that I didn't look for prostitutes. But I kept the key. It came in handy again later — for other nighttime escapes, less ambitious ones.

Forge a diary. Forge signatures. Forge coins. Forge keys. By eleventh grade I had such a track record of bypassing systems that it would have been enough for a small criminal startup. But every time it wasn't about the crime. It was about the fact that the system didn't give me what I needed — connection with my grandmother, a friend for a performance, freedom in the evening, a chance to see the world. And every time I found a crack and crawled through. Not because I was bad. Because no direct path existed.

Chapter Mother.

The hatred opened that spring.

Not quiet. Not rational. Not adult. Black, viscous, boiling, like tar. I couldn't even say the word "mama." Only "mother." Mama is for those who make cards on International Women's Day. I had a mother. Who drank, lied, hit, disappeared, came back, and disappeared again.

Love — because without a mother you can't exist. Hatred — because she didn't come. I split into this at two years old, in the courtroom. Only then I didn't know it. At fourteen — I did.

The hatred clawed its way out — hissed, scratched, screamed one thing only: I exist, and I am in pain. And alongside it, quietly, another voice added: you are the same as her. You will become her.

And that truth nearly killed me.

Chapter Straight-A Student as Diagnosis.

By adolescence, two parts already lived inside me.

One — the straight-A student. Rational, collected, logical, the one the teachers loved, who knew how to do things right, fast, precisely. The other — a frightened child, terrified of being surplus.

The crack between them was getting wider.

When I enrolled in the lyceum with a humanities focus, I already understood very clearly: education was my ticket. The only way out of the system I'd grown up in. My grandmother and grandfather had drilled this since childhood, and I sincerely believed it. I wanted to be their pride. Not out of love for knowledge — though I did love knowledge — but out of fear of losing my right to a place. I studied for the gold medal (the highest school honor, requiring perfect grades in every subject). And I got it.

From the outside, this looked like a success story.

On the inside, it was a continuation of the same survival strategy.

Not a happy top student. A steadily running system without glitches.

I learned to do things right. I didn't learn to live.

The Tin Man from The Wizard of Oz went looking for a heart, but mine went looking for A's and didn't know those weren't the same thing.

And this became the central conflict of the rest of my life.

Chapter The Jungle.

I graduated from the lyceum with a humanities focus and honestly earned my gold medal. This was not just a school award. It was an attempt to become something my grandparents could be proud of, to prove that all that horror hadn't been for nothing, that something worthy came out of it. They'd drilled one thought into me since childhood: excellent grades and university are the only chance at a good life. I believed.

When it was time to apply, I — like a normal humanities girl — wanted MGIMO (the Moscow State Institute of International Relations — an elite Russian university for diplomacy and foreign languages). International relations, languages, Moscow, travel, people. And then it turned out I didn't even have money for the trip. Not for the ticket. Not for housing. Not for the first month of living in a strange city. So I decided to go to NSU (Novosibirsk State University) for the foreign languages department. But there were no free spots there.

What was left was FIT — the Faculty of Information Technology. My grandfather suggested it.

Russian — easy. Two math exams — if I pushed, I could pull it off in six months. I slept a few hours and studied. Got in. And somehow at the time I wasn't stopped by the fact that ahead lay physics and programming, or that I had never seen a real computer in my life. At our school, computer science was done on paper: we solved problems on sheets, and I thought that was roughly what working with a computer was. It turned out it wasn't.

Chapter Kirch-What?.

First class. The new sports complex in Akademgorodok (the academic district of Novosibirsk). Electrical circuit engineering. I needed to build a feedback circuit in a program everyone around me knew, and I didn't even understand how to open it. Two hundred people in the lecture hall, almost all boys, and many already knew how to do things. And I didn't know where the power button on a computer was.

My hands were shaking. They could see it. Snickered.

The professor comes over. Calls me to the board. Looks me up and down and says: “Young lady, name Kirchhoff's Law.” Kirch-what? I didn't even understand how to pronounce the word. I stood there, felt the shame rising through my body, and burst into tears and ran.

At the next computer science lecture, the professor spoke Russian, but I didn't understand a word. IP address. Domain. Utility. It all sounded like a foreign language, only with no chance of translation. I wrote down unfamiliar words on a sheet, in one class I filled two pages, and everyone around acted as if this were basics, kindergarten, shameful not to know.

For two months I endured the mockery. I was the joke of the class. I tried, solved programming exercises, but the instructor, when he saw them, could barely hold back laughter. Classmates said to my face: “Your code is garbage.” I was the dumb blonde, though I wasn't even blonde. It was a very precise fall face-first into mud — after the gold medal, after the “pride of the family” story, after everything my identity had rested on.

My entire life up to that moment stood on one foundation: I was the straight-A student. That was my right to exist. Not love. Not closeness. Not safety. Grades. And now the straight-A student was gone. There was a girl who didn't know how to turn on a computer.

And if making a mistake for you equals losing love, losing protection, losing your place in the world, then it doesn't feel like an academic difficulty. It feels like the end.

Chapter In for a Penny.

Once during a computer science seminar I tried to answer something at the board, and the instructor said in front of everyone: "Vera, where did you even come to? This isn't for you. You won't make it. Don't waste your time, get your documents and leave."

Thirteen people sat there nodding.

After that I completely gave up. I decided to call my grandfather. From the payphone in the dormitory hallway. Confess everything. Tell him how terrible it all was — that they were mocking me, that I couldn't cope, that I didn't understand anything and maybe really had ended up in the wrong place. I was crying and probably, deep down, hoping not as a seventeen-year-old but as a very small girl, that now grandfather would say something human. That he'd feel sorry for me. That he'd say: come home. We'll figure it out.

He said: "You made your bed — now lie in it."

And hung up.

The payphone swallowed the coin. The hallway light flickered. I stood with the receiver, which was already giving dial tones, and it felt like a very familiar feeling: the last door you knock on has closed. He couldn't comfort — because no one had ever comforted him. Couldn't say "we love you" — because in his world that was weakness. But in that moment I didn't understand that. I understood one thing: there's nowhere left to knock.

Chapter The Rope.

After that, my first serious suicide attempt happened.

A rope. A tree. The forest.

I still remember not the technique itself, not the sequence of movements, but that strange, almost frightening calm with which a person approaches that line if they've lived without an exit for too long. As if everything had already been thought through, not by the head but by some other internal part, one that was tired of hoping and simply wanted silence.

Thank God, the branch broke.

Sometimes people would later ask me how I could have gone through with it. But for me it was never about heroism, about drama, or about the beauty of a final gesture. It was about exhaustion. About an internal dead end where there was no air left, no language, no adult nearby who would say: something terrible is happening to you, but it's not forever.

After that I lived for a long time as the poor girl who was abandoned. At first this wasn't a concept. Just a girl who from childhood was called an orphan.

Officially I really was an orphan. An orphan with a living mother. And father. The father is a separate story.

It is a special kind of loneliness — when the mother exists but it's as if she doesn't, and you can't even properly grieve, because there's no one to grieve. She didn't die. She just didn't choose you.

Chapter The Jungle.

I looked at the jungle before me and decided to keep going.

Not because I believed in myself. And not because anyone supported me. There was simply nowhere to retreat. Can't go back. No help coming. So — on my own. As always.

I grabbed books. Googled everything. Practically lived in the library. Read at night. Solved problems. Slogged. I no longer cared who said what about me, that I wouldn't make it, that this wasn't for me. I would do it.

Six years later I graduated from NSU with a bachelor's and master's degree, with nearly all top marks.

This gave me enormous strength. And an enormous trap.

The **Phoenix** bird lifted me from the ashes long before I gave it a name. Every time — a new plan. Every time — as if the last ascent. But Phoenix doesn't know how not to rise. That was its strength. And its curse.

Because my grandfather's phrase became both my wings and my shackles. From then on, every time I'm scared, I go and do it. A handsome man — approach him. Need to tell management it's time for a raise — go. Need to walk onstage and tell a story — walk out.

Later I told this story onstage many times. People applauded. I smiled. No one knew that behind the smile was the same girl from the staika with the bloody snow pressed to her face.

Only now she had a gold medal, a master's degree, a corporate career, and applause.

From the outside — a story of overcoming.

On the inside — the same mechanism: pushing through, teeth clenched, because stopping is not an option. Because if you stop, you'll start feeling. And feeling had been switched off a long time ago.

Münchhausen inside pulled me out of every swamp by my hair, pretending there was even strength for it. Physics said — impossible. He said — watch.

I learned to push through.

Through fear.

Through shame.

Through pain.

This gave me strength.

And nearly killed me. Back then I didn't see the difference between strength and wear. Now I do.

From childhood I emerged with tools. Control. Perfectionism. The Critic. Fox, who reads people. Rabbit, who never sleeps.

They saved my life. They also made adult life impossible.

Because survival tools don't know how to tell: has the war ended or not.

Part The Reckoning.

Chapter Deadline: 42.

My mother died when I was twenty-one, and she was forty-two. But I didn't find out on that day or even that week. My grandmother called a couple of months later. Called casually, in the middle of the day, the way she always called — to ask how things were, and without waiting for an answer, report her own. Somewhere between complaints about the weather and market prices she said: "Your mother died." And then, in the same voice, without a pause, without a breath, began recounting the details. How the organs had decomposed. How she drank until the end. How they found her.

It was the same voice — even, businesslike, impenetrable. Not a scream. Not a whisper. Just a fact delivered like a weather forecast: rain tomorrow, your mother's dead, potatoes got more expensive. My grandmother didn't know any other way. Her own grief, if she had any, she packaged in the same tone — even, businesslike, impenetrable. Forty-year-old me does the same: casually mentions to friends that she tried to drown herself (tried, because unsuccessfully), while writing the first chapter of this book. They don't even notice such details.

I stood holding the receiver, listening to her describe the organ decomposition of the daughter she had once cursed. And as she spoke, what rose inside me was not grief. What rose was a memory. My grandmother cursed people. She told me about it in childhood — in the same casual tone: cursed a person, and he died the same day. And then she cursed my mother. "You'll die under a fence." And Uncle Oleg. And me. And now my mother really had died. Oleg was already dead too by that point — beaten to death while drunk, just as my grandmother had predicted. And I, standing with the receiver, thought not about my mother. A thought crept in: she cursed me too. So it will happen to me too. And I will die.

The child believed at eight. The adult didn't stop believing. The number forty-two — the age at which my mother died — settled inside as a deadline. Not a metaphor, not a fear — a deadline. As if life has a specific expiration date, and that date has already been set, and bargaining is pointless. The fear became a prophecy. And the prophecy became a fact that the body believed long before the head could object.

I didn't scream when my grandmother hung up. Didn't cry. My hand with the receiver dropped. Inside — silence, like after an explosion. Emptiness. The body did what it did best: shut down. The same mechanism that switched on at six months, when mother wasn't there. The same one that fired when grandmother hit. The same one that saved me on my knees in the corner.

The body doesn't fully shut down. It memorizes what the head refuses to accept. That night I didn't sleep. Or the next. Or after. Insomnia came not as a symptom but as a new state — permanent, ambient, inescapable. As if somewhere inside, the sentry who had stood guard all his life received an order that night: no more sleeping. No more relaxing. Mother is dead — the danger has become final. The curse works. You cannot close your eyes.

The number 42 stopped being superstition. Mother died — and the curse became fact. The clock is ticking.

Then the bleeding started. Heavy, frightening, the kind I nearly died from. Before that they had never happened — never. There were bladder problems, there was anxiety, there was a tense body that hadn't relaxed since birth. But bleeding that doesn't stop after two weeks had never happened. Usually it was always eight days. And now — it wouldn't stop. It came after my mother's death, as if the body had decided: since the curse is real, let's start dying right now.

My grandmother called in March. By June it hit me so hard I couldn't eat. Couldn't get up. Couldn't do anything. I just lay there — and the depression was not sadness but a disconnection from life, as if someone pulled the battery out of me and forgot to put it back. For the first time in my life I was put on antidepressants. I was twenty-one, swallowing pills without understanding what exactly they were treating.

I didn't connect anything with anything. The insomnia — with the phone call. The bleeding — with her death. The depression — with the fact that mother would never come. I treated symptoms. Without asking "why."

The body knew. The head didn't. And this gap lasted twenty years.

Only at forty, when I began dismantling myself piece by piece — not through books but through the body, through what surfaced on its own — did I suddenly see the obvious. As if someone turned on the light in a room where I'd been groping in the dark for twenty years. All the health problems began after my mother's death. The body was still mourning her — in the only language it had. Pain. But since I had suppressed feelings, shut off the heart back in childhood, only the body hurt. The head didn't get the message.

And for twenty years I thought I was simply ill. That I had weak health. That these things happen. Because connecting your pain with a loss means admitting the loss existed. And admitting the loss means admitting there was something to

lose. That my mother — despite everything she did and didn't do — still existed inside me as hope. A small, foolish, childish hope that someday she'd come back, become different, look at me and say: I'm sorry. I'm here.

Mother didn't come back. And with that phrase, inside me died not only hope. The part of the child that was still waiting died. Quietly, without drama. Simply stopped waiting. And in its place remained a formula that then ran my entire life: all my efforts are for nothing. Nothing will change. No one will come. Everything will always be bad. And if it suddenly gets good — wait, because happiness always has a price. Someone will suffer. Someone will die. It's always been that way.

Chapter Alive.

My first love — Maxim. I fell in love with him at first sight. He was secretive, closed off, one of those people who don't let anyone past the hallway. But I was Vera — the girl people trust. I could earn trust as naturally as breathing, because I'd been learning it my whole life. Reading people. Adjusting. Guessing what a person needs and giving it before they ask. With grandmother this was a matter of survival. With Maxim it became, for the first time, something resembling life.

He spoke my language — gifts and touch. Immediately. Without translation, without a dictionary, without instructions. Beside him I felt something unfamiliar — spontaneity, contact, the feeling that you can simply be rather than perform a function. Those were my best years. Not because I healed or something inside got fixed. But because for the first time in my life there was a space where you didn't have to survive every minute. University, work, Kaspersky — all of it spun around, but the center was him. Or, more precisely, what I felt beside him: that I am a woman. A woman who is desired.

But even in this there was something I didn't see at the time. I tried to attach myself to his family. To be convenient. Perfect. The one they'd accept. Beside Maxim I felt defective. Because he had a family. A normal one. With a mother who waited for dinner. With a father. With conversations at the table. With that domestic, invisible warmth that other people get by default, and I — never.

His mother's name was Nadezhda Vasilyevna. Nadezhda — like my grandmother. I later, already in therapy, realized this coincidence and gasped. I'd been searching for a mother my whole life — in grandmother, in other families, in women who were nearby. And found another Nadezhda. I loved her. Gave gifts. Did everything to become one of them. So they'd accept me. So this family would become mine, because I didn't have my own and never would. When Maxim and I broke up, I asked his permission to keep seeing his parents. Because by calling them "mom and dad" — without adding "Maxim's" — I created the feeling that I too have parents. An orphan who found a family through a man — and didn't want to lose the family even after losing the man.

And then the relationship I considered my best years became something else. Not immediately. Slowly, like water erodes stone. Maxim didn't earn. Made eighteen thousand, most of which went to his lunches and gas. I paid for the apartment, food, groceries. I got a job at Kaspersky in a high-salary, high-demand position — commuted to the city, exhausted myself to near-death, stressed. He saw this. Flatly refused to move to the city. Didn't help around the house. I stayed silent and endured. Because silence and endurance were what I did best. Because with grandmother, staying silent and enduring was a matter of survival. And with a man it seemed to me this was called "love and patience inspire." I'd later call this my mistake number one.

I took out a car loan because I had a high salary and he didn't. I took on what he should have done — and called it investing in the future. I'd later call this mistake number two.

I did with Maxim the same thing I did with grandmother in childhood: earned the right to be nearby. Only with grandmother the currency was A's and obedience, and with Maxim — money and patience. Same formula: if I'm useful enough, convenient enough, patient enough — they won't throw me out. If I pay for the apartment and take out a loan — he'll see how hard I'm trying and love me for real. I didn't know then that this isn't love. This is servicing. And the difference between them is enormous.

He beautifully described how great our life would be. And I believed. Because in my world, if a person promises — they deliver. I always delivered. If you want something — you fight to the last. And I thought everyone was like that. That if Maxim promises — he's making the effort. Just need to wait. Need to endure a little more. Stay silent a little more. Pay a little more.

And then came the feeling I described in a letter to him years later: "I was simply used. It was convenient with me. Words and actions diverged all this time. He only promised but did nothing." And the most painful: "I made a mistake in my choice. I don't understand people." The girl who'd been reading grandmother by the sound of footsteps since age six — didn't see that the man beside her took and didn't give back.

But even in this disappointment lived an untruth. Because alongside the feeling of "I was used" lived another: beside him I was myself for the first time. Beside him I felt contact, spontaneity, life. And these two truths — "he used me" and "beside

him I was alive" — couldn't coexist inside. So I chose one. The one that caused less pain: he's bad, I made a mistake, must forget.

And then the relationship became a habit. Or so it seemed to me. It got uninteresting. A feeling appeared that I hadn't tried everything I should have tried. That life is bigger than this relationship.

This is a normal stage of intimacy that I simply didn't know how to recognize. Intimacy without drama felt like emptiness. Calm felt like absence of life. If it doesn't hurt — nothing is happening. A body accustomed to anxiety didn't recognize peace. Mistook it for boredom. And the accumulated disappointment — silent, unnamed, packaged in patience — gave one more argument: leave. You deserve better. You've invested so much — and got no return. Leave.

Vanya — Ivan, though I always called him Vanya — and I started dating, and I broke up with Maxim. Left. Voluntarily. On my own feet. From the only relationship where I felt alive and desired. Left because I didn't believe good things could last. Somewhere very deep, deeper than thoughts, lived a belief: if things are good now — bad is coming soon. Better to leave yourself than wait to be left. Grandmother said "don't like it — leave." And I left. Only this time not from a home but from love.

Then I suffered for seven years. Not beautifully, not poetically. Dully, monotonously, like a toothache that doesn't pass and you can't get used to. Seven years I regretted leaving. That I didn't try everything before going. That I didn't appreciate. That I didn't see what I had. That I chose Vanya — not for love but by calculation, by strategy, by the habit of surviving rather than living.

Under ketamine, much later, Maxim surfaced on his own. Without invitation. I saw the contact we had. The spontaneity. The feeling of being a woman. And understood what exactly I'd been missing all those years with Vanya — romance, attention, and the possibility of being myself. That I didn't need to be useful to be needed. Maxim gave me this — and I didn't see it. Because I didn't know this was even possible. Because I grew up in a house where love had to be earned, and when it came for free — I didn't believe it.

Therapist Tatyana later said something I couldn't breathe after for a long time. She said: you don't recognize your kind feelings for him. You insist on indifference, roll out a list of grievances, and convince yourself he was just a training ground. You do this because he's dangerous. He can leave you. And I understood: I denied love for Maxim for exactly the same reason I denied everything good in my life. If you admit you love — you become vulnerable. If vulnerable — you'll lose. If you lose — the pain will be unbearable. Better not to admit. Better to call it habit. Better to compile a list of mistakes — his and mine — and hide love behind the bookkeeping of grievances.

This was the same girl who at seven walked from her mother's house to the bus stop at night and waited for mother to turn around. Mother didn't turn around. And the girl decided: I'll leave first. Always. From any relationship, from any closeness, from any place where I feel good. Because if I stay and wait — no one will run after me.

I didn't go back to Maxim. And he didn't run after me. And the seven years of pain afterward weren't about him. They were about everything I'd allowed myself to feel beside him and then took away from myself.

Maxim. First love. First space where you could simply be. I write about him and feel the body remembering warmth. Not pain — warmth. Which means it existed. Which means I could feel it. Which means — not everything was disconnected.

Chapter Mexico.

At Kaspersky I worked with Ivan — Vanya — but back then he was just a colleague — one of those programmers you see in the hallway and greet on autopilot. I was sent to an international security conference because I won a contest — an internal competition for the best presentation. I prepared for it the way I prepared for everything in life: thoroughly, obsessively, to the point of burnout, as if what depended on it wasn't a presentation but my right to exist. Because in my inner world, it did.

Vanya also got a trip to that conference — as a reward for being a great programmer. But his plane froze, the flight was canceled, and he was stranded. I helped him rebook the tickets. The rebooking became the reason Vanya ended up in the same hotel as me.

The conference ended, everyone left, and we stayed — in one hotel, in Mexico, in that strange space between “colleagues” and “something else,” where you can still pretend nothing is happening.

But something was happening. I seduced him out of boredom — that's what I later wrote in a letter to him ten years later, when I was trying to be honest. Out of boredom. But boredom was a lie. Not out of boredom. Out of hunger. That same

emotional hunger that had lived in me since infancy, which I confused now with love, now with boredom, now with a desire for something new. Hunger for contact.

My Perfectionist stood behind the scenes of every presentation: twenty rehearsals, a perfect slide, sterile confidence. Inside — the same terror as before grandmother's diary check. Vanya was my prop for the presentation at that conference. I spoke. And won — Best Speaker Award. International security conference, a hall full of people, applause, an award. From the outside it looked like triumph. My grandmother probably would have said nothing. Like back then with the diary — would have looked and gone to make soup. But inside I was waiting for that applause the way I'd waited for grandmother's "good job" all through childhood. I got it. From strangers. From the audience. Not from her.

And that evening Vanya and I sat in a bar, and I wasn't thinking about the award. I was thinking that next to me was a person who made me feel good — not because I was useful to him, but just because. And at the same time I was thinking about Maxim. About how everything with him had become a habit. That I was bored with him. That I hadn't tried everything I should have tried. All those thoughts that would later turn into seven years of regret seemed at the time like a sober assessment. I didn't understand yet that this wasn't sobriety. It was my way of fleeing intimacy before intimacy could cause pain.

We were left in the hotel alone. But I didn't want to cheat on Maxim. I told Vanya: no. Not because I was a saint. And not because I loved Maxim that much in that moment — I did, but I'd already gotten used to that love, and what you're used to doesn't feel like love. I said "no" because I had rules. Rigid, iron, unbending rules I'd set for myself back in childhood, when the only way not to get lost in chaos was to hold on to structure. Don't cheat — that was structure. Don't lie — structure. Finish what you start — structure. Like grandmother's corset, only my own, voluntary, internal: if I don't break the rules — I'm safe.

Vanya accepted. We went our separate ways. And I was sure that was the end of it.

By then everything with Maxim had become a habit. Or so it seemed. I knew in advance what he'd say, how he'd look, how he'd turn in bed. He was no longer a mystery, and in my world without mystery there was nothing to breathe. I was uninterested. The relationship had reached the point that normal people probably call stability. But I didn't know that stability is normal. For me, stability felt like a stop. As if life had ended and everyone had just forgotten to announce it.

A brain that grew up in anxiety doesn't recognize peace. Five out of ten feels like "too quiet, a blow is coming." You need intensity to feel alive.

I left Maxim — quickly, decisively, the way I was used to doing everything: without hesitation, without looking back. Cut it off. Move on. Don't turn around. We started seeing Vanya.

After every fight Vanya would go silent. Not at home — at the office. He walked past without saying hello. Looked right through me. As if we were strangers. And I said hello. Every time. Smiled, said "hi," pretended everything was fine. Inside everything was clenched — outside, "hi, how's it going." This is how we began training what would later, in marriage, become twelve consecutive days of silence. But the training started here.

Chapter Mother's Name Was Vanya.

The relationship quickly ran its course. Vanya turned out not to be the promise he'd seemed in Mexico. Or more precisely, the promise was mine — I made it up and hung it on a living person who had promised nothing of the kind. He didn't pay me attention. Was cold. Shut down. Stayed silent. Called very rarely. Acted as if we weren't together but just acquaintances who sometimes crossed paths. I reached out — he pulled away. I tried — he didn't notice.

Vanya was intensity. Not because he screamed or made scenes — that came later. But because he was new. Unfamiliar. Unread. I didn't know what he'd say. Couldn't predict him in advance — and I was used to predicting everyone, from age six, by the sound of footsteps. And this unpredictability, which a healthy person might have been warned by, pulled me in. Because in the unpredictability was something that wasn't in Maxim's stability: the feeling that I exist.

With Maxim I was safe. And that's exactly why I left. Because safety I confused with being unneeded. Because when they don't hit you, don't throw you out, don't curse you — a body that grew up with all that doesn't believe it's love. It only believes pain.

Vanya didn't resemble my mother. And didn't resemble my grandmother. He resembled a promise. But I didn't know then one thing I would spend twelve years absorbing. The psyche seeks not the best — the familiar. Vanya was cold — like my grandfather. Closed off — like my mother. Could scream — like my grandmother. I saw only novelty. Like a child walking into a new house, not knowing she's carrying the old one.

And then he dumped me. Simply. Without a fight, without long conversations. Left — and that's it. Like the mother who didn't come for me at nursery school. Like the mother who walked away down the night street and didn't turn around.

The first real convulsion of grief happened in the car when he told me. Not tears. Not a scream. A convulsion. Physical, as if someone grabbed me from inside by the ribs and started twisting. My body doubled over. My hands shook. I sobbed with contorted hands, couldn't say anything, and Vanya just sat there next to me in silence — he'd already said everything. The grief I didn't live through at twenty-one when my mother died. The grief I didn't live through at two when my mother pushed me off her knees in the courtroom. All of it found a crack and poured out at once. Through Vanya. Through his leaving. Through one more person who looked and decided: I'm better off without you.

And as I sat in that car, the body drew a conclusion. Not the head — the head wasn't working at all. The body. It said: this pain is familiar. Exactly like the pain from my mother. Since I suffered this much from my mother and still love her — it means I love Vanya too. Because it hurts this much.

It was a trap. Pain was the only proof of love I knew. My grandmother loved — and hit. My mother loved — and disappeared. My grandfather loved — and was silent. In my world, love always came bundled with pain. And when Vanya caused pain — I decided it was love. Because there was no other model. I didn't see this then. I would in twelve years.

I started chasing him. Not beautifully and not proudly. Wrote. Called. Invented excuses to cross paths. Did things I would never have done for myself — because for myself I had no skill of trying. Only for others. Only for those who leave.

Seven-year-old me stood at the bus stop alone, after my mother walked away and didn't turn around. And made a decision that turned out to be wrong: run after those who leave. Twenty-five-year-old me sat in a car, twisted by a convulsion of grief, and made the same decision: run after Vanya.

Chapter Friends with Benefits.

So we became friends with benefits. Three weeks after he dumped me, I started sleeping with him. Without commitments, without status, without promises. Just a body next to a body — and the hope that if I was close enough, convenient enough, available enough, he would one day look at me and say: I'm staying.

I adjusted in every way. Didn't argue. Didn't demand. Didn't say words that might scare him off. Was easy, unburdensome, cheerful — the version of myself that doesn't need, doesn't ask, doesn't pressure. I was playing a role I'd memorized in childhood: be convenient so you don't lose. Only in childhood the stakes were a place in the house. Now — a place next to a man who'd already decided he was better off without me.

It was humiliating, but I didn't feel the humiliation then. I felt the familiar. A known format: give more than you receive and don't notice the difference. With my grandmother I gave obedience and received the right not to be thrown out. With my mother I gave waiting and received nothing. With Vanya I gave my body, time, care — and received presence without involvement. He wasn't cruel. He simply took what was given and didn't ask why I was giving it. And I gave because I didn't know how to exist next to a person any other way. The childhood formula. Same result: tolerated, but not chosen.

Then we stopped being even that. The benefits ended, friendship remained — if you can call friendship a relationship in which one person hopes and the other doesn't notice. Or notices but finds it convenient not to. I don't know what was in his head. I only know what was in mine: constant quiet waiting. That he'd understand. That he'd appreciate. That he'd see how much I did for him. That one morning he'd wake up and look at me not as a friend but as a woman he couldn't let go.

He didn't wake up. And I waited. The way I waited for my mother. The same position — at the door, with hope that was already rotting.

And then I stopped talking to him. Not because I fell out of love. Not because it got easier. But because the relationship was going nowhere. That was the phrase I said out loud — even, rational, adult. But inside was the girl who once again stood on the threshold hearing "leave if you don't like it." And left. Because staying and waiting hurts more than leaving.

I cut contact the way I knew how: sharply, completely, without transition zones. Not "let's talk less." Not "I need a break." But — done. Silence. I thought I was making an adult decision. In reality I was reproducing the only familiar way of coping with pain: cut it off. If you can't have it — stop wanting. If you can't hold on — let go first. If the person doesn't choose you — disappear before they notice you're still there.

The silence didn't last long. After some time he received a job offer, and life pushed us together again. But this was already a different stage — the stage where I made a decision I would pay for over twelve years. The stage where from "friends without commitments" we would become husband and wife — not out of love, but out of calculation. For a visa. For strategy.

But at the moment of the break, I didn't know that yet. I knew only one thing: I had done everything I could. Been convenient, useful, available, quiet, easy, unburdensome. And it still wasn't enough. Like with my grandmother — no matter how hard you try, the A's are still not enough, the house is still not clean enough, you're still not good enough. Like with my mother — no matter how long you wait, she still won't come.

I didn't understand then that the problem wasn't that I did too little. The problem was that I wasn't doing it for myself. I was servicing someone else's life and calling it love. I was dissolving into another person and calling it closeness. I was losing myself and calling it a relationship. Because that's exactly what I was taught in a house where love looked like work, and work was the only way to earn the right to stay.

Chapter The Visa.

Meanwhile, Vanya got into Amazon. He received an offer — a job invitation that in our world meant more than any declaration of love. Amazon is not just a company. It's a visa. It's another country. It's the way out.

I desperately wanted to leave. Every move had been an escape. Kazakhstan, Siberia — I moved across the map as if somewhere the past would stop reaching. The past moved with me. But I didn't know.

America. The West. The place where everything would be different. Where my achievements would be worth what they were worth, instead of being devalued with "so what, everyone lives like that." Where no one knows you're an orphan, that your grandmother beat you, that you knelt in corners. There — a new me. The one who could finally breathe.

And Vanya was my only way of getting there.

I knew this. Didn't feel it — knew it. With a cold, calculating mind that had been planning moves ahead its entire life to survive. The mind that at six learned to earn money, at nine to forge a diary, at seventeen to push through the jungle. That mind had no illusions about romance. It saw the situation clearly: he has a visa. I have a desire to leave. The formula works.

This doesn't mean I felt nothing for him. I did. That same intensity I confused with love. That anxiety I mistook for butterflies. That pain from his rejection I called passion. But alongside it — parallel, not intersecting — lived the calculation. Sober, precise, the childlike calculation of a kid who knows: no one will save you if you don't organize the rescue yourself.

Chapter Not Through the Door.

I helped him prepare for interviews. Sat beside him, broke down questions, suggested how to answer, what to emphasize.

Between us there was an agreement. Unspoken, like everything in my life — not written, not signed, existing in the space between words. If he gets through — we leave together. He nodded. Probably didn't even understand what I meant. And I took it as a promise.

We were no longer together. Not even friends with benefits. Nothing. Two people who once slept together and were now just acquaintances.

And then he got the offer. I called to congratulate. As an acquaintance. As an ex. As a person who helped prepare and had the right to be happy about the result.

And then — a coincidence that turned out not to be so coincidental. Shortly before, I had fallen and split my elbow. Badly, with blood. I have Von Willebrand disease — my blood doesn't clot properly. They put me in the hospital. Vanya visited. Sat beside me. Took care of me — the way he knew how, silently, practically, without words. And in that care something shifted. Not in him — in me. Because care, even silent, even clumsy, for a girl who hadn't been visited in the hospital since age six — that's a lot. That's almost everything.

After the hospital we ended up close again. After the offer — even closer. And sex happened. The first since the breakup.

And here is where I did what I did.

I didn't talk honestly, didn't say: "Vanya, I need help, I want to leave, take me with you." I asked — but not with words. During sex. Through the body. Through the only language in which I knew how to get what I needed. At the moment when he would definitely not refuse. When the body had already said "yes," and adding "take me with you" was no longer a request. It was a deal he entered without noticing.

Because with words I couldn't. Words require admitting: "I need something from you." "I'm asking." "Help me." And asking was forbidden since childhood. Every request in my life ended the same way: worse than before it. The body learned: a request equals punishment. And learned something else: if you can't ask — earn it. Go around. Become so necessary that refusing is impossible.

I didn't ask. I manipulated. Not because I was cunning. But because I didn't know another way. Back then it felt like a victory. Now I see — the beginning of the reckoning.

He agreed. We became a couple again. And I thought the plan had worked. That I'd pushed through again — like through the jungle at university, like always.

Back then I saw only this — the visa, the calculation, the deal. I didn't see the other thing: that he agreed. That he took on someone else's life — silently, without bargaining, without conditions. Later I would understand: his "yeah" wasn't indifference. It was his version of "you made your bed." He didn't know how to say "I choose you" — but every time something needed doing — he did it. Silently. The way he was taught.

Later, after ten years, I would write him a letter. Long, honest, written from a place where there was nothing left to lose. And in that letter would be words that made even me flinch: "I used you. And I got the reckoning." The reckoning was ten years in which the script didn't change. He didn't need to invest — he got everything anyway. And I contorted myself in every way, hoping he'd love me someday. Like with my grandmother: one more A, one more clean notebook, one more flawless day — and maybe today she won't hit.

But back then, that evening, there was no reckoning yet. There was only his "yes." His hands. The offer that meant California. And me — the girl who had just gotten what she wanted, the only way she knew how.

I laid the foundation of a house in which I would suffocate for twelve years. The relationship was built not on a request — on a deal.

Who's to blame? I asked myself that in the same letter. And answered myself. The chain went back to infinity. On each link — not someone guilty, but someone who didn't know any other way. And I — on my link — also didn't know.

With Vanya, I went around through the bedroom. The door opened. But behind it was not what I had imagined.

Chapter Marriage of Convenience.

To file for an H1B visa, you had to be married. And the filing had to happen within a week. In Russia, getting married in a week is impossible — the queue, the paperwork, a month of waiting. Impossible for an ordinary person. For me, impossible hadn't existed since childhood.

I bought a pregnancy certificate. I wasn't pregnant — I would be later, but not yet. Just a certificate. A piece of paper with a stamp that gave the right to expedited registration. Then I called people I knew — "Do you know anyone at the ZAGS (the Russian civil registry office)? I need to get married urgently this week." Found someone. Paid a bribe. Arranged everything. Organized it all myself — quickly, precisely, without extra emotion, as if solving a work task with a deadline.

We drove to the ZAGS in a neighboring city right before a work meeting. Vanya wore whatever he was wearing. I wore whatever I was wearing. No dress. No ring. No getting down on one knee with "be my wife." I handed over the "gift" — they stamped us in exchange, and we drove to work. A formality. A checkbox. Done.

That is how I got married. Between two work meetings, with a fake certificate in my bag and a stamp in my passport that meant nothing except visa status.

I stood in that ZAGS and felt nothing. Not joy, not solemnity, not even relief. Just a cold, businesslike satisfaction: task completed. Next item — visa paperwork.

Later I thought many times: maybe if there had been a dress, a ring, words — something would have gone differently? If he had gotten on one knee and said "I want you to be my wife" — not for a visa, not for a "yeah," but because he chose me? Maybe I would have felt not like a resource but like a woman? But there was none of that. And I didn't grieve it then, because I didn't know you could grieve it. I didn't know a wedding could be a celebration. That a bride could be not a strategist but simply happy. In my house there was not a single story of a happy marriage. Not one example of a man looking at a woman and saying: you are mine. I choose you.

And somewhere very deep, behind all the layers of control and calculation, lived a little girl who wanted someone, just once in her life, to choose her not for usefulness. But just because. And that girl, on that day, once again didn't get what she wanted. And once again stayed silent.

But Vanya didn't win the visa. The H1B is a lottery, and we lost. The certificate, the ZAGS, the bribe, the stamp between two meetings — all of it was for nothing. Or not entirely for nothing — we were now married, and that couldn't be rewound like a tape. But America, the reason it all started, was closed.

Fine, what's Plan B?

And the process with Canada began.

Chapter Pregnancy.

I really wanted a child from Vanya then. It was real, genuine, bodily desire — not from the head, not from a plan, not from strategy. I wanted it as if something inside had woken up and said: now. Right now. Not later, not someday. Now, while there's still time.

Because the doctors said I was going to die soon.

The bleeding that started after my mother's death had by then become a threat. Von Willebrand disease — rare, hereditary, the kind where blood doesn't clot properly. Blood was pouring out during periods, and the hemophilia injections had stopped helping. They told me straight: this can't go on. The body, which already didn't know how to relax, how to sleep, how to stop — now also didn't know how to hold blood. As if it had decided to fulfill my grandmother's curse literally: "you'll die like your mother." My mother died at forty-two. I was thirty. And somewhere inside, in the place where what lives isn't thoughts but knowings, I was certain: there wasn't much time left.

And then I lost it — that's how I later described it, with the honesty that only comes after many years. I suddenly wanted a child. Didn't "decide," didn't "plan" — wanted. As if leaving behind a person would make death not quite death. As if a child were proof that I existed. That I was here. That it wasn't all for nothing. My mother left nothing behind except me — and she didn't even raise me. I wanted to leave behind someone I would raise. Whom I wouldn't abandon. To whom I'd say what no one said to me.

When Vanya agreed to our business marriage, I heard in it that he too wanted a child like I did (I didn't actually ask him). I began dreaming of how it would happen. I imagined an evening, and in that evening candles were burning. Many candles. As if light is what should be present when a new life begins. As if the child should arrive not in darkness but in warmth.

A month passed. My thirtieth birthday came. I came home from work — and a surprise. Vanya and friends had prepared everything. The whole room was filled with balloons and flowers. And candles were burning. Those very candles I had imagined. The cake also had candles. I stood before that cake, and something rose inside for which I can't find a word — not joy, not excitement, but recognition. As if I had already seen this moment. As if life had finally matched the picture I'd drawn for myself.

I blew out the candles and made a wish. For him to be born to us.

And that very evening my wish came true. I found out two weeks later — and jumped for joy like a child who was given, for the first time, what they asked for.

And so I was pregnant.

In the sixth month I wrote my son a letter. In a notebook.

> *"Hi, Artem! I'm Vera, your mom. You're not born yet, I'm on my sixth month now. We really look forward to your arrival in the fall, and for now you live in my tummy and you're actively moving around, kicking, and even hiccupping. Your dad and I really wanted you to come, and a miracle happened — you chose us and decided to be born into our family."*

I wrote and believed every word. I described how I made a wish on my thirtieth birthday, how I blew out the candles, how that very evening I got pregnant. How I jumped for joy when I found out. How I knew right away it would be a boy — not from tests, but simply knew. How for the past several years I'd sensed the presence of a boy nearby when I came home from work. As if someone was already standing there, waiting.

> *"Artem, that was my best birthday ever. Son, thank you for fulfilling my wish."*

I wrote to him about Vanya. That Papa was amazing. The best man in the world. Smart, responsible, courageous. That he was valued at work. That he was my colleague. That he took care of me throughout the pregnancy.

> *"Artem, I really want you to be like your papa."*

All of this was true. And at the same time — not the whole truth. Because alongside these words, a few pages later in the same notebook, I wrote something else.

> *"If I'm no longer here."*

I was thirty. I was in my sixth month. And I was writing my unborn son instructions in case of my death.

> *"Whatever the circumstances of my death, please do not take it personally. It is not and cannot be your fault."*

Those were the very words no one said to me when my mother died. The ones I'd been searching for twenty years and never found. The ones whose absence left me living with the belief that my mother's death was my fault. I wrote them for my son because I knew: if I die, he will need exactly these words.

> *"My main request to you — do something good with your life in my memory. We come to this earth to learn. In any situation ask yourself: what can I learn from this?"*
>
> *"I love you and your papa. Artem, I bless you. Take from me and from your papa all the best."*
>
> *"P.S. Read books."*

A thirty-year-old woman in her sixth month writes a will and a love letter — in the same notebook, with the same pen, in the same handwriting. Preparing for death and for birth at the same time. And this wasn't a contradiction. This was my life — the one where beginning and end always stood too close together.

* * *

And then, four years later, I found that notebook while packing boxes for the move to California. And added to it.

> *"Hooray! Found this notebook. I've been wanting to write down what we called you: froggy-jumpy, paw-scratchy, bitey-chewy, tigrushechka, kitten-cub, kissyavka, kissyatina, sweetheart, dear, beloved son, sonny, kittenochek."*
>
> *"Your funny words: 'markotiks,' 'valyatiks,' 'emilyan,' 'googolplex.'"*
>
> *"More things we called you: murochkin, kotyonochkin, kitten-tiger-cub, tigryusha, khitryusha, pawscratcher, little devil with a fluffy tail, chertyaka, cherbarsik."*

Twenty-three nicknames. I counted them later. Twenty-three names for one small person. A woman who couldn't say "I love you" — said it in twenty-three ways. Through tigryushechka. Through kissyavka. Through the little devil with the fluffy tail. Note: kissyavka and kissyatina mean "I'm angry but I love you."

I didn't know how to love with words. But the body — the body knew. The body invented names. The body lay next to him every evening. The body woke at five in the morning to make him breakfast. The body won court cases so they wouldn't take him. The body chose him — every time. Even when the head wanted to die.

> *"Artyomka — that's what I called Artem when he was tiny — from birth you were a choleric. An Italian family we are, all cholerics. You run up the walls, we run through the corridors trying to somehow burn off your wild energy. And we also crawl on all fours and meow, because you're a kitten and I'm your mama-cat."*

Mama-cat. I wrote that five years before I adopted a real cat from a shelter. Five years before I began learning to love — through Lapa, through a wild creature that bites and doesn't trust. I was already a mama-cat. I just didn't know.

Twenty-three nicknames. I counted them later. Twenty-three names for one tiny person who hadn't even been born yet. Not a single one — from the head. All from somewhere else. From the place the head didn't control.

I didn't know how to love with words. But the body — the body knew. The body invented twenty-three words for love before the child was even born. And not a single one for fear. Although fear was there. It was always there.

"Artyomka, from birth you were a choleric. An Italian family in one body. Restless. Loud. In the maternity ward they said: yours is screaming the loudest. I lay and smiled. That's my boy."

Mama-cat. I wrote that five years before I adopted a real cat from a shelter. The image was already there. The warmth was already there. It just hadn't found a body yet.

Chapter The First Time I Unclenched My Stomach.

For the first time in my life, the corset loosened — not because I learned to relax, but because inside me someone was growing who needed space. I got pregnant, and something strange happened: I slowed down. For the first time in my life.

Vanya became tender and sweet — the way I'd seen him in Mexico, when everything was just beginning. He cared, he was present, he looked at me as if I mattered not for my function but simply because I was carrying our child. I was calm and fluid like never before. The body, which since childhood had lived strapped into a corset — stomach pulled in, jaw clenched, neck tense — for the first time began letting go. I remember the moment: I relaxed my abs for the first time. Simply stopped pulling them in. The stomach I'd held tight my whole life — for posture, for control, for the illusion that I could handle everything alone — for the first time became soft. Because inside it now was someone. And for that someone, I could unclench.

I was a very intentional mother. I decided this before the pregnancy, long before, decided it the way I decided everything in life — absolutely and irreversibly. My child would grow up differently. Without beatings. Without corners. Without torn notebooks. Everything that happened to me would not happen to him.

I was happy to learn I was pregnant. Vanya was happy too. And for a time — maybe a few weeks, maybe a couple of months — it seemed like life was finally on track. That the terrible things were behind me. That this child was my chance to do right what went wrong with my mother.

But even in this calm, which was the deepest peace of my life, a crack lived. I was waiting for what everyone talked about — the hormonal rush of love, the oxytocin that was supposed to flood me with warmth, turn me into a soft, glowing pregnant woman from the magazines. It didn't come. I was still productive at work, logical, collected, operating in survival mode — only now that mode ran quieter. I couldn't talk to my belly. Other women rubbed their bellies and whispered something tender, and I stood in front of the mirror not knowing what to say to the person inside me. As if between us was the same glass wall that stood between me and every person in my life: visible, but not touching.

I didn't understand why then. Didn't understand that a woman who was never loved unconditionally — who was abandoned at six months, beaten and thrown out, cursed and shamed — that woman can't simply, on the command of hormones, switch on what was never there. Tenderness toward a small creature requires the experience of tenderness toward your own small self. And my small self was still kneeling in the corner, not knowing it could be otherwise.

For seven years I worked on forgiving my mother. Seven, eight years of therapy, constellation work, books, practices. But not a single day — not one — did I work on my grandmother. Because I didn't consider that anything was wrong with my childhood. I lived with the belief my grandmother planted so deep it became invisible: this is normal. Everyone lives like this. You were lucky. You should be grateful.

And so I stood with a growing belly, in the quietest period of my life, in the only peace I'd been given — and couldn't say to the child inside me: "I love you." Not because I didn't love him. But because the words got stuck in the same place where everything had gotten stuck since childhood: in the throat, behind clenched jaws, behind a bitten tongue. Somewhere between "not allowed" and "don't know how."

And then something else rose.

I needed to buy things for the baby. Make a list, go to the store, pick out a crib, diapers, bottles. A simple task. Any woman in her seventh month has long since done this. Set up the room, washed the tiny onesies, organized them in drawers.

I couldn't. Put it off day after day. The task seemed harder than calculus at university. I didn't understand why. Every time I thought about baby things, something rose inside that had no name. Not joy. Not anticipation. Something like rebellion. As if the hurt child inside me crossed her arms and said: no. I won't. Tiny onesies didn't bring tenderness. They brought the urge to run. I thought: you can use a box instead of a crib. Why spend money.

And then the part I hated most surfaced. Cruel. Cold. The one that can't stand the weak and helpless. That can only talk to children as if they're adults — in a serious voice, with high demands, without affection. A tender tone just didn't work for her. At all. I ran scenarios in my head — what will I do if he won't eat? what if he won't listen? — and my reactions in those scenarios were identical to my grandmother's.

And one more thing. When I saw other mothers — warm, smiling, those who rubbed their bellies and cooed — I was hit with hysteria. Every time. As if someone else's tenderness toward a child landed in the place where my tenderness should have been — and found Emptiness.

In the seventh month it all finally broke through. I looked around and saw: nothing had been bought. Not a single thing. And I was hit with a verdict: I'm a bad mother. Before the child was even born. Like her. Like my mother who didn't come for me at nursery school. Who chose the bottle over milk. I hadn't given birth yet — and was already repeating.

I had to go to therapist Tanya. She found the formula that was running everything: “I’m not good enough — that’s my motivator.” I still haven’t come up with a better one. And one more thing — what I couldn’t say aloud, but Tanya named for me: I’m the same as my mother. No love for the child. No patience. I want to die — and that seems more noble than abandoning him. I haven’t given birth yet, and I’m already repeating. So I’m bad too.

Tanya said four words: there is nothing wrong with you. I carried them inside me for a month, like a talisman. A month after the session, the feeling still remained that who I am — is right. That there is nothing wrong with me. Because before that, no one — not once in thirty years — had said those words to me.

By then the uterus was already dancing. Premature contractions the doctors called a threat. The body, which had only just learned to unclench, clenched again — because the same fear that had lived there since birth rose: I’m a bad mother.

But for now — there was still peace. Vanya was still tender. It still seemed like the child would change everything. That with his birth a different life would begin — one where I would finally be not an orphan but a mother. A real, warm, intentional mother who would do everything right.

I didn’t know that motherhood would become the very mirror in which I’d see everything I’d been running from. That the child I’d decided to protect from my childhood would show me that childhood in full. That I would become what I feared becoming. But that would come later. For now — silence, a soft belly, and the hope that this time it would work.

Chapter Field, Tree, Storm.

I went to Seversk to give birth, because in Novosibirsk they took the baby away after delivery to let the “just-delivered mother” rest, and joint delivery wasn’t allowed unless you paid. Some procedure, some law, some bureaucratic logic that to a woman in her ninth month sounds not like a legal nuance but like a threat. Take away. The baby. Mine. No. Not that. I’ll go anywhere as long as they don’t take him. As if one childhood wasn’t enough, in which they took everything: my mother, safety, the right to be a child. Now they could take mine.

We drove five hours on a bumpy road from Novosibirsk to Seversk. With contractions. Road, GPS, breathing, endure.

And then the GPS said: you have arrived.

We looked around. A field. Empty, flat, endless. And in the middle of it — one tree. And above the field — a storm. Black sky, lightning, wind, and a lone tree that, by all laws of physics, the lightning should strike. We stood on the shoulder, with contractions, with a GPS that lied about arriving, with a storm overhead, and I remember not fear. I remember the absurdity. As if someone up there decided to joke: you wanted to reach safety? Here’s a field, a tree, and lightning. Figure it out.

Seversk is a closed military city (a restricted-access Soviet-era city). To enter, you need to apply for a special pass six months in advance. Entry through a single checkpoint. But Vanya typed “Seversk” into the GPS — not the checkpoint but the city itself. And Google, obedient and dumb, drove us to the outskirts, to a fence behind which the city existed but no road led to it. A pregnant woman with contractions, a storm, a field, and a GPS that thinks we’ve arrived.

We found the checkpoint. Drove in. They admitted me to the hospital in a city where I knew no one.

And then began five days I would later remember not as labor but as an endurance test for which I’d long had no resources. Contractions came every evening — real, strong, promising — and faded by five or six in the morning. No result. As if the body started to deliver and changed its mind. The body was saying: it’s not safe yet.

I didn’t sleep. Five days — not a single night. Contractions wouldn’t let me sleep, and when they faded — anxiety wouldn’t. The body couldn’t sleep in an unfamiliar place. It hadn’t been able to sleep since I was twenty-one and my mother died. It couldn’t relax at all — since birth, since my grandmother’s “don’t relax, something bad will happen.” And now, at the very moment when relaxing was essential — so the body could open, so the baby could come out — it couldn’t. As if the corset I’d worn since childhood had clamped not only the muscles but the womb. As if the body was saying: I don’t know how to let go. No one taught me that. They taught me to hold.

I didn’t complain. Didn’t call friends. Didn’t write anyone.

On the sixth day they induced with medication. Too long on antibiotics — dangerous for the baby. I knew this and was afraid. Afraid for him, not for myself. For myself I’d stopped being afraid long ago. But for him — for the little one who wasn’t yet born and already depended on whether I could endure — I was afraid in a way I’d never been.

August 2015. Joint delivery. Vanya was there. A room full of doctors — there were many, because they were afraid of losing me. Von Willebrand disease. Blood doesn’t clot. Hemophilia injections that were supposed to help — didn’t. I saw

the fear on their faces. Read it instantly — with the same skill I developed before I learned to read letters. In the doctors' eyes I knew: they think I could die. And I lay there thinking not about death. I was thinking: if I die, he won't have a mother. Like me.

I didn't die. Artem was born.

The first thing he did in this life was pee on the nurse. A little fountain. Right in her face. She was holding him — small, wet, screaming — and he produced a stream with the precision only someone who has absolutely no regard for social norms is capable of. The nurse gasped. Someone laughed.

Then they gave him to me. I held him and didn't know how. He was small and warm. And silent. And I was silent.

There was no milk. My breasts swelled, nipples cracked, but the milk wouldn't come. As if something inside was blocked. The same pipe through which tenderness was supposed to flow — clogged. The one that was shut off at six months, when mother disappeared. I had nothing to feed my child. And that feeling — nothing — wasn't about milk. It was about everything.

Artem got jaundice. Immediately. Yellow, tiny, sleeping all the time. They treated him — it didn't help. At night he woke for an hour or two, and during those hours I didn't sleep because I was afraid that if I closed my eyes — something would happen. During the day I didn't sleep because I couldn't. The body didn't know how to sleep with a dependent creature nearby. The hypervigilance that had scanned my grandmother's footsteps all its life now scanned the breathing of an infant.

Hospital room. Yellow light. Beeping machines. A baby with jaundice. And me — alone. Like at six years old in the hospital, when my grandmother dropped off food and staying with a child was not the custom.

Vanya got drunk the first night after the delivery. Celebrating. Didn't congratulate me. Didn't call until the next evening. I couldn't walk from the pain, and he was celebrating. This would later become one of those details I'd remember again and again, each time with the same burning in my chest: I had just given birth, I almost died, and he was celebrating his contribution.

Chapter The First Crack.

And in the middle of all of this — the insomnia, the jaundice, the absence of milk, the body refusing to obey — Vanya and I had our first rupture.

Trying to squeeze out at least some milk through cracked nipples, I said to Vanya in hysteria: I hate children. Like a dam that held twenty years of water, and it finally burst. Not where it should have. Not when it could have. But right now, right here, right in the face of the only person nearby.

Vanya screamed back. Of course he was frightened himself and didn't know how to help.

For the first time ever. In all the time we were together, he had never once raised his voice at me. And suddenly — a scream. Not annoyed, not tired. He said: I'll take the baby. He said: you can get the hell out. The air left the room. My body compressed to a point.

I was on hormones. Had just given birth. Hadn't slept in weeks. I had no milk, no strength, not a single square centimeter inside that wasn't in pain. And the only adult nearby — the only person who was supposed to be on my side — was telling me to leave.

The body recognized those words instantly. Before the head. Before I had time to feel hurt or frightened. The body recognized the tone — my grandmother's. The body recognized the formula — "don't like it — leave." The body recognized the look — bulging eyes, clenched teeth, the face of a person about to hit. My grandmother looked like that before she hit. And now Vanya looked the same.

He didn't hit. He never did. But the body doesn't distinguish — for the body, a scream and the threat "I'll take the baby" were the same as my grandmother's scream and the threat "I'll send you to an orphanage." Same frequency. Same internal address. Same feeling: I'm not needed. I'm about to be discarded. And the baby will be taken because I'm bad. Bad granddaughter, bad daughter, and now bad mother too.

In that moment something cracked inside. Didn't break — the full break would take another twelve years. But it cracked so deep that afterward the crack never healed, no matter how I tried. It ran not between me and Vanya. It ran through me — between the part that still believed this marriage could become a family, and the part that in the moment of his scream

understood: I'm in the same house again. Different walls, different address, different person — but the same house. Where they scream. Where they threaten. Where love sounds like "get the hell out."

Vanya would later say he wanted to protect Artem. That he was scared. That he didn't really think that. Maybe. But the body had already recorded. The body recorded: if you show weakness, if you tell the truth, if you admit you're not coping — you'll be thrown out. And the baby will be taken. The same formula as grandmother's. The same price for honesty. The same reckoning for being alive, not a function.

After that day something changed forever. Not on the outside — on the outside everything stayed the same. We lived in the same apartment, slept in the same bed, looked like a family. But inside me a wall appeared that hadn't been there before. Thin, invisible, impenetrable. A wall behind which I hid what I actually felt. And from that day I never again told him the truth about how bad things were. Not because I didn't want to. But because the body remembered what happens when you speak.

Beside me was a person who screams when I'm suffering. Like my grandmother. And there is no protection. Like in childhood.

All that was left was one thing: close off. Become convenient. Stop feeling. Put the corset back on — the one I'd briefly taken off during pregnancy. And pull through. The way I always pulled through. The way I pulled through my whole life. Teeth clenched, stomach pulled in, dry eyes and a feeding schedule on the refrigerator.

This was the first time I noticed the repetition. Didn't understand — noticed. As if for a fraction of a second a light flashed and showed: you've been here before. This scream — familiar. This silence — familiar. The light went out. But something inside remembered.

Chapter Toronto.

When Artem was three months old, we moved to Canada on November 17, 2015. To a country with no friends and no family.

Before leaving, we had to get him a passport. And for the passport — a photo. Try photographing a three-month-old infant so he's looking at the camera. Eyes open. White background. No pacifier. No hands in the frame. That's a separate quest not described in any emigration guide. We managed.

In Toronto I pulled myself together and became fully functional. Vanya didn't speak English. Finding housing, buying a car, filing paperwork, setting up daily life — all of it fell on me. I made a plan. Took on all the negotiations. Tracked Artem's sleep schedule to the minute. Didn't rest. Barely slept. But the plan worked. Because a plan is what I'd done best since age six.

Vanya worked fourteen hours so we wouldn't lose the visa. Didn't complain. Didn't ask for help. Pulled through silently. His way of loving: doing, without saying.

And then I saw a different side of Vanya.

He started working at Amazon and found himself under pressure he wasn't prepared for. Financial responsibility for three. English that wasn't enough. Work where for the first months he understood nothing. Stress piled up with no outlet. The outlet found itself — through me.

He became irritable. Screamed. Looked at me with contempt — not sometimes, but most of the time. The face I would later describe in a letter ten years later: a loud voice, bulging eyes, clenched teeth. As if about to attack. As if I were a problem that needed to be removed from the room.

He didn't help with the baby. Not because he refused — I didn't ask. When I left in the morning for a run, to lose weight and become more beautiful for him, so he'd finally stop looking at me with contempt — he simply slept. Didn't get up for Artem. I came back, guilty for leaving the child — though the child was with his father. But the father was sleeping.

And then the silence would begin. Vanya could go without speaking to me for twelve days straight. Twelve. He walked around the apartment, ate, worked, looked at his phone — and acted as if I didn't exist. Not demonstratively. Just — as if no one was in the room. As if I were a wall, furniture, background.

He too was in a foreign country. Also without friends, without language, without support. His silence was not punishment — it was his way of coping. Retreating inward, closing off, waiting it out. The way grandfather retreated to the garage. The way I retreated into function. Two people from the same kind of homes — with the same skill: endure in silence.

And every one of those days I was dying inside. Not from anger — from recognition. My grandmother punished with silence. Stopped speaking. Stopped noticing. And you walked through the house like a ghost, waiting to be seen again. To be allowed to exist again. Vanya's silence hit the same spot. The same place inside where the child lived who had been punished with invisibility.

I didn't ask for anything. But I tried different things to appease him. Cooked him food — delicious, proper, as expected. Wore long skirts — Valyaeva, the author I was reading then, wrote that a woman should be feminine, soft, in a skirt, and then the man would appreciate her. I believed it. Put on the skirt, tied my hair, cooked dinner, set the plate before a husband who looked at me with contempt — and believed that if I were proper enough, feminine enough, quiet enough, he'd stop screaming. He'd see me. He'd love me. Like grandmother would love me if I got an A. Like mother would come back if I was good. Same logic. Same promise. Same result: nothing changed.

I didn't ask for help. Gave him massages. Gave him oral sex because without sex he became even more irritable, and living in the same space with that irritation was unbearable. I drank so I could have sex with him, because sober, when you're being treated like that, I couldn't. He never started with romance and tenderness — just kissed when he wanted, and I understood: time to perform. I wasn't ready. But I drank and gave. Because that was my function. Wife. Mother. Servant. Everything he wanted — and nothing of who I actually was.

I was stockpiling resentment without noticing. Hatred grew inside like water behind a dam — and on the outside I smiled and wore skirts. The same formula as with my grandmother: bending over backward to please. And from them — not a word of gratitude. No love.

I was losing my mind. Not metaphorically — literally. From the sheer number of days without sleep, the brain starts working differently. Reality drifts. Sounds get louder. Light gets brighter. Thoughts stop forming sentences. You look at the child and don't understand what to do with him. You hold him in your arms and don't feel your arms.

And through it all, you keep going. Sleep schedule. Healthy food. Playgrounds. Like a robot. To stop means admitting you're not coping. And that's been forbidden since age five.

When Artem was teething, he screamed for three hours straight. During the day. I was alone. After an hour of screaming I started screaming at the wall. Not at him — at the wall. Because you can't scream at the baby. But inside — there was more than could be contained. I was not a mother — I was a desperate child. Without empathy. Without resources. Without support. Like back then, on my knees in the corner. Back then I didn't know you could ask for help. That "I'm not coping" is not a death sentence.

Then I started drinking. Not binges — a glass, two, in the evening. When I was angry at Vanya. When I was angry at Artem from exhaustion. When despair came so close that the only way to push it back was the bottle on the kitchen counter.

After some time — I don't remember how long, the days blurred — I stopped getting up. Just lay on the floor while Artem crawled next to me. Small, warm, alive — crawling around my body, which lay there not moving. Not because I didn't want to get up. Because I couldn't. The body said: done.

And I lay there and watched my son crawl around me and thought one thing: I'm a bad mother. Like her. Like my mother who abandoned me. I hadn't abandoned yet — but I'm lying on the floor while my child crawls next to me. How is this different?

Guilt pressed down from above. Shame won't let you get up. Shame takes the last of what you have.

After two weeks without sleep in Toronto, I decided to jump from the seventeenth floor. At night. I got up and went to the balcony. Not because I wanted to die. But because the despair reached the point where the body searches for any exit, any door, any end. It wasn't death I wanted — I wanted it to stop.

That night Vanya woke up for some reason. Saw me on the balcony. Led me back to the bedroom. But after that, nothing changed. He didn't ask what happened or how I got to that point. Just — went back to sleep. Morning — as if nothing happened. Like after the knife at grandmother's: porridge, garage, school.

Childbirth turned out not to be the beginning of a new life. A child who depends on an adult, and the adult isn't coping. A mother who is physically present but emotionally absent. A scream that is followed not by comfort but by a louder scream. Everything I'd been running from — seeped through me, like water through a crack in the wall. And I understood. Everything I'd been running from — seeped through me. The crack wasn't in the wall. The crack was in me.

Chapter Detective.

The understanding that a child has not only a mother but also a father began with my first constellation session, where I had to place him (my request was about "inability to accept myself"). Such anger opened up in me toward him. I was surprised! I was twenty-five then. Twenty-five — and for the first time I allowed myself to be angry at a person I didn't even know. At an empty space in my biography. At a hole my grandmother had papered over with a fake patronymic and silence.

The topic of my father was never raised in our home. I didn't know that my surname and patronymic had been changed by my mother when I was two. The word was never even spoken in our house. I have veeeery faint memories from around age two of being called names: tatarva (a slur for Tatar people), Vera Rifkhatovna and Sattarova. But the memories are so faint I don't trust them. I am Vera Vladimirovna, not Sattarova, according to my duplicate birth certificate and passport (grandmother's surname plus a patronymic from who knows whom — just sounds nice with the first name?). And there's no one left to ask. No relatives have been alive for a long time (and there were barely any to begin with).

After the constellation session I began searching for my father. Found someone. Got inspired, but it turned out — it wasn't him. And how could I know for sure? I didn't know his full name or date of birth. I searched approximately, by surname, through social media.

That first search attempt was seven years ago. I dropped it for a while.

Then after the move to Canada, I unexpectedly learned from my seventy-five-year-old grandfather that my mother and father had been briefly married. Grandpa is old, could have mixed things up. But I got hope — a marriage registration is a lead! I hired a detective, remotely from Canada. He took the money and draaaagged it out for a loooong time (about six months).

What I went through during those six months, waiting for news:

That I'd find my father today, and he died yesterday. Such pain and guilt!

That I'd find him, and he doesn't want to know me. Fear.

That I'd never find him and would live in uncertainty my whole life. Despair. And I so wanted clarity! It's such a natural desire — to know your parents...

The detective scammed me. Disappeared with the money and no search results. The feeling of betrayal was also bitter.

I so wanted to do EVERYTHING in my power! I survived the pain... and hired another detective, through a connection.

He found the information in three days. Hooray! Sattarov Rifkhat Rafikovich, born January 25, 1962. Waiting for details.

First — euphoria. Tears of joy. Two minutes later, a WhatsApp message: "I'm afraid to disappoint you — according to this data, he's not in the passport database, either he left Kazakhstan or he's no longer alive." Tears of such despair!

After some time I received more news from the second detective about my father.

They found his brother, who is paralyzed and can't speak. Spoke with the brother's wife, Alyona. My father died about nine years ago, the same year as my mother (from alcoholism). It turns out I have two half-sisters from different marriages, all three (including me) grew up without a father. Grief washes over me. And such a trembling of the heart that I barely coped.

This Alyona was so warm toward me... Unexpectedly so. She gave me the contact of the only surviving sister of my father (an aunt).

The next day I called this aunt. The aunt was cold. Said she'd never heard of Rifkhat having a daughter with a girl who was in prison. Said Rifkhat only had one marriage, that he met his wife on a train, there was one daughter with whom they never maintained contact, and that's definitely not me.

Oh right, my mother and father met not on a train but "at the zone" (in prison), where my mother at twenty-two was serving her sentence, and he was a warrant officer (basically a guard).

I went through such swings in those two days! Mourning a biological father, and then the realization that it was all a farce and it wasn't him. My heart clenched and... dropped. It's all a coincidence, and he's not my father! I can't even describe that feeling.

The only lead: the "aunt" confirmed that her brother Rifkhat was also a warrant officer at the Karaganda prison, where I flew at age five with my grandmother to visit my mother, who was serving time for the second time.

I called Alyona, retold what the “aunt” said about not knowing me. Alyona suddenly started remembering how Rifkhat brought me to her to babysit (which she hadn’t mentioned in the previous conversation), when I was six months old and Rifkhat and my mother lived with Rifkhat’s parents (my grandfather had told me about this). At least something matches!

Alyona: “Rifkhat often came drunk at night and wanted to take you, but I wouldn’t let him — what if he dropped you!”

— And where was my mother at that time?

— Oh, they partied and drank separately, fought a lot, and split up.

Disappointment... that he was the same as my mother. Not ready for children, young, coped with problems through alcohol. I so hoped for a happy ending...

That’s it. The story ends there. No photos of my father, no solid proof he’s my father. How can you trust a woman who even confuses brothers’ names in conversation and the number of daughters?! No clarity whatsoever. I don’t have two sisters (Alyona confused it with another of my father’s brothers) but just one, in Russia, and even her name is unknown. And I seriously doubt Alyona’s information...

Why was all of this for?

Friends ask me: why the hell are you even looking for your father? You have a husband and a son...

I think it’s such a natural desire — to know your parents — that I’m almost offended that my closest friends don’t understand, asking such a question.

Maybe it’s just biology? Who knows. I have no rational explanation for why I searched.

I only know that:

I will never talk to even one of my parents.

He will never say: “We wanted you! You were so important to us.” Words I say to my son almost every day. Words I so want to hear myself.

I will never learn that he became a worthy person and that abandoning me, a baby, was just a youthful mistake. And he repents. And he achieved a lot.

I will never be able to tell him what I achieved. So he could be proud of me.

I will never be able to say “Dad” or “My father.”

I will never know what he was like when young, what his personality was, how they met with my mother and what drew him to her...

What could I have needed this experience for? To be able to understand others. Even in their hardest “youthful mistakes.” To be able to understand self-rejection — and share how to get out and find yourself. To be able to value life just because, without any given circumstances. Life as it is. Imperfect. To be able to love yourself without an example, with all your heart, as best you can. And through this experience — to love others.

* * *

My story didn’t end there, as it turned out. I’m adding to it two weeks later.

What happened the day I wrote this story? I read it about twenty times, until I could read it without tears, especially the ending. I felt lighter, I exhaled, and decided to share the story with my closest friends on WhatsApp. By a lucky coincidence (lucky?) I accidentally sent the story to a distant relative on my mother’s side.

I received a reply ten minutes later:

“Vera hi! Why did you waste your nerves, money and time searching for your father? Couldn’t you ask relatives about it? For example, me? Your mother and I were only 4 years apart in age, she was older than me and that’s why we communicated more than anyone else! I’ll tell you that the person in the photo was never your father! They met when you already existed! And lived together only a few months! And you were born to a man who lived (and maybe still lives) on Krylova Street. His name really is Vladimir (your patronymic is real), but I don’t remember his last name!”

A soap opera. Like The Children of Captain Grant, who sailed nearby the whole time but in the wrong direction.

I sat in silence for fifteen minutes. No words. My husband thought someone had died. The patronymic is real. Vladimirovna. Not “sounds nice with the first name” — but real.

I went to sleep, because feeling emotions that day was physically beyond me. I felt emotional exhaustion. Familiar. The same as after grandmother’s beatings in childhood, when the body simply shut down — not from tiredness but from overload, from the impossibility of fitting in one more thing.

And I woke up — strangely — a happy person. Literally an order of magnitude happier than before. It let go. I don’t want to search for Vladimir and I’m not going to. I don’t feel the need. It became unimportant to me how all of this happened and why things worked out this way. In my body there’s this feeling of “it’s neither bad nor good. These things happen!” Specifically not a thought but a state in the body that appears when I think about my father. A quiet happiness and a smile, warmth in the soul.

At first my brain worried that this state of non-judgment would pass. “This only happens to enlightened people!” I thought. Turns out, ordinary people can access it too. Apparently it appears when a person gets tired of suffering.

Two weeks passed. And every time I remember my father, my heart feels warm. I smile. Now I know how a completed gestalt feels: the situation hasn’t changed, but the person feels good.

* * *

Adding to this four months later, because the saga continues.

I closed my gestalt four months ago, but fate offered me to “finish closing” it today.

I received a message from Aunt Larisa: my father Vladimir knew about me the whole time and lived in the same building as me.

“Found your biological father! He lives on Krylova. His last name is Panchishko Vladimir, born 1963. He’s paralyzed, you have a brother and a sister.”

We talked on the phone. She told me my grandmother was against him seeing me — he was on drugs, like my mother, and both were persona non grata. Larisa remembers how my grandmother often mentioned the biological father’s last name in conversation: “Vera is the spitting image of Pancha”...

Such a wave of anger and tears rose in me! “Why did grandmother interfere at all? I lost so many years not knowing my father! I have the right to know my parents by the right of my birth!” — an outraged voice sounded in my head. A childlike voice, practically a toddler tantrum. The part that lived thirty years without the word “Dad” — and suddenly learned that Dad lived in the next building.

I’m sitting in a café, sobbing...

Immediately the part of me that desperately and fruitlessly strives toward enlightenment started lecturing: “Grandmother surely had good intentions! People always have good intentions! And who knows who you’d have become if you’d found out earlier...” To which my ordinary human part told that enlightened voice to fuck off and simply continued crying and being angry at grandmother.

Grandmother was protecting. I understand this now — with my head. She was protecting from a drug addict, from an alcoholic, from a person who couldn’t raise a child. She protected the only way she knew — by cutting off.

Half an hour later, having calmed down, I called my father. “Hello, I’m Vera.” His first words: “Well, don’t be too hard on me, we were young...”

I hadn’t even been thinking that. I’m still just curious what they were like young, what his personality was, how they met with my mother and what drew him to her. And photos, of course, to see. Whether I’m the spitting image of “Pancha.” And I also want to meet my brother and sister. I still can’t quite believe all of this is happening to me. That the inner voice that guided me — and one day, having heard the story of Olga Valyaeva, said: “Oh, Valyaeva found her father, you’ll find yours too! Go! Search!” — that the voice was right. This is how this person inside me always worked: sees that something is possible for another — takes it as a benchmark for herself.

We agreed to video call with Vladimir the next day.

* * *

And so we talked.

The search process turned out more exciting than the result...

Already during the conversation I felt disappointment and sadness. What is there to be disappointed about if there were no expectations to begin with? Turns out, deep in my little girl's heart there were expectations after all. She wanted a miracle and a hero-father. At least in something she wants to be proud of him.

Here's the story Vladimir told me. They went to school together, slept together a couple of times after "doing time" (they were both twenty-two), nothing serious, just knew each other since childhood. My grandmother initially insisted on an abortion, because he'd just gotten out of prison, like my mother, was on drugs and drinking, but the term was late — my mother was afraid to tell grandmother and hid it until the last moment. My grandmother forbade him from seeing me, and he complied. After me he had another daughter from another woman, who kicked him out while still pregnant. He saw his daughter only a couple of times, then her mother forbade it (like my grandmother) — so he didn't try: "Well, if they don't want to be family, then fine, what can I do." Then he had a son from yet another woman, who provided for him, got him drunk (it sounded like she was almost force-feeding him alcohol), but didn't want to move to his city. He left, abandoned them. Doesn't know his son either.

Three children. All three grew up without him. As if someone carefully copied the same script three times — and each time the father vanished. Didn't leave — dissolved.

In all these stories a common pattern: others were to blame. The system in Kazakhstan, where they could lock you up for anything. Women who didn't want to. Grandmother who forbade. He's not a bad father, just unlucky. That's how he explained it to himself. And in that explanation I heard not audacity but a defense mechanism of a person who can't bear the truth about his own inaction. If everyone around is to blame — then he couldn't have changed anything. Then you can live on and not wake up from shame.

He's fifty-four now. Lived his entire life with his mother, in his mother's apartment. Got himself a second-group disability certificate (a government disability designation in post-Soviet countries) when he was still young and never worked. When I asked what his hobbies were, he said: nothing, "played drums when I was a real little boy." That's his whole story.

I wanted to learn about my mother. He says: "She got tough after prison." He told me that my mother was at some kind of zone where they sat all day handcuffed for half a year at a time, and only lay down to sleep. Sounds like unreal horror. After that it's hard not to become hardened. They communicated with each other a lot actually, she came over periodically to spend the night.

That's it.

After this story, my anger at grandmother miraculously transformed into gratitude. Because I understood: what I became is truly the best possible outcome. Yes, I paid a high price for it. And only I know that price. Yes, I still want to understand the laws of the universe, why prices are different for different people, why destinies unfold the way they do. No, I don't judge Vladimir. I feel calm and indifference toward his fate.

He told all of this during the conversation but didn't ask a single question about me. Not one. He has my Skype, and he never showed the slightest interest in getting to know me.

On International Women's Day (two months after our conversation) he sent me: "daughter happy holiday you are my one good one anyway i love yu."

I felt sarcasm. With a life like that, I'd also be happy to have a worthy daughter. But I'm angry. Strong indignation. He did nothing to earn this. Didn't show even a millimeter of interest in me. He can consider himself a father. But a daughter is not someone who called once. A daughter is someone you raise. And he didn't raise anyone. Shockingly achieved nothing. Such a worthless life! — and in my indignation I hear my own engine: I'm running from this. Running with all my might. Because stopping means becoming like him.

I want to find a way to respect him. I found respect and love for my mother when I became a mother myself (plus tons of therapy and work), I understood her choices, her problems. But I don't understand how to understand my father! I know I should respect him and be grateful for my life, but I can't... yet...

My story ends with completely unpredictable feelings. I was so afraid he was already dead or would reject me — but the ending turned out orthogonal to all my fears. He's alive. He didn't reject me. He's just — nothing. He likes the idea of having a daughter, but he's not interested in a real daughter. And he is below my worst expectations of a person.

It took me many years to find love and respect for my mother. I hope I'll find my way to my father too. Because until I do — I'll keep running. And I'm tired of running.

But I found my sister (whom he also abandoned) and we're friends! This story was worth it.

Chapter Chronic Divorce Plan.

After every fight I planned a divorce. Not abstractly, not "someday" — in detail. How I'd leave. Where I'd go. How I'd live alone with the child. How much money I'd need. Which documents. I thought it through with the same thoroughness I used for work plans at Kaspersky, for organizing the move to Canada, for solving every task in my life — precisely, quickly, on autopilot. After a scream — divorce plan. After several days of silence — divorce plan. After a contemptuous look — divorce plan. The thought was always the same: I don't need anyone. I'm better off alone. I'll take Artem and leave.

"I don't need anyone, I'm better off alone" — since age five. Since the porch they threw me out from. At fourteen — the boarding school. At twenty-five — left Maxim. Now — every evening, next to a husband who'd turned his back.

But I didn't leave. Not because I lacked resolve — I had resolve for three people. I didn't leave because there was nowhere to go. A foreign country. No job. No money of my own. Not a single person who'd say: move in with me, I'll help. A child who needs a father. I knew this better than anyone: I'd been missing a father my whole life, and I didn't want to repeat my mother — the one who abandoned, the one who chose the bottle over her daughter. I didn't want my son at thirty searching for me through detectives.

Every morning I decided to stay one more day. Not out of love. Out of calculation. Run the options, choose the least painful, endure.

There was one way out: work. As soon as I came back from maternity leave. As soon as I found a job. As soon as I had my own money, my own income, my own independence — I'd leave. This wasn't a dream. It was a plan. As specific as the plan to move to Canada, as the plan with the visa, as every plan in my life — cold, precise, with a deadline.

I became dependent on Vanya because of a small child and no job. It was the very trap I'd set for myself when I chose to leave with him instead of building my own life separately. The reckoning for a marriage of convenience: you used his visa — now you're tied to him by daily life, a child, geography. Same cage, different bars. In childhood the bars were called "grandmother, orphanage, nowhere to go." Now — "immigration, financial dependence, child."

The desire to leave grew with every silence, every scream. But alongside it grew something else: if I leave, I'll end up alone with the same package. Insomnia. Depression. A child I don't know how to love. The problem isn't Vanya. The problem moves with me. And for now — a divorce plan in my head, a feeding schedule on the fridge, a glass of wine in the evening, and the hope that someday I'd go back to work and finally be able to leave.

Chapter The World Closed.

Then I went back to work and started building a career (as usual).

The plan I'd been incubating for years — find a job, earn money, leave — was finally coming to life. I had a job. I had my own money. For the first time in years of maternity leave, years of depending on Vanya, years in a foreign country without language and friends — I was standing on my own feet again.

And then the world closed. Literally. Borders, courts, legal offices — everything. Paperwork that could have been done in a month stretched to a year. Divorce during a pandemic, with a small child, in a foreign country — turned out to be impossible. Not legally impossible, but practically: nowhere to go, no one to turn to, no infrastructure, no Plan B. The door I'd been walking toward for five years — slammed shut in my face.

I stayed. Again. As I stayed every time. The whole world was sitting at home. Running was an option for no one — not just me.

But others were sitting at home with family. And I was sitting at home with a man I was planning to leave, with a child who screamed, and with a bottle that was getting closer.

With COVID the drinking got worse. Not because things got worse — they were worse before. But because the last exit disappeared. Before there was a plan: go back to work — leave. Now even that plan was blocked. The hope that kept me afloat — that someday I'd earn enough and leave — was zeroed out. And without hope, all that remained was what was: four walls, screaming, silence, contempt, insomnia, and a bottle on the kitchen counter.

Worked twelve hours a day, then came home, poured wine, and closed my eyes — not to sleep, but to stop seeing my life, even for a while.

Chapter First Couple Therapy.

We went to couple therapy. The therapist asked simple questions. Didn't dig deep, didn't analyze traumas — just asked: what do you want from the relationship? What's important to you? What are your love languages? And as we answered — me, then him — I heard what I'd known for a long time but never said aloud. We have different love languages. Completely. We have no shared interests. None. The romantic relationship never satisfied me, while he was always satisfied. He has no request beyond being a companion. He'll always be this way. And when I heard all of this — myself, my own answers, spoken aloud, with a witness — I understood: I'd entered the relationship on unfavorable terms, then spent twelve years trying to stretch something decent over my own foolishness. I was never offered romance. Why did I suddenly start wanting it?

And then, in one of the sessions, I told him about the divorce. Not about plans — about the fact that I'd been planning for years. That every day, after every fight, after every silence, after every contemptuous look, I mentally left. That I'd lived with one foot out the door the entire time in Toronto.

Vanya listened. For the first time in all those years I said the truth aloud. Not in a journal. Not in my head. Not in a letter I'd then reread twenty times. But to him. To his face. With a therapist who wouldn't let us look away.

And then the therapist asked something about the wedding. Or I mentioned it — I don't remember. And Vanya learned for the first time that a proposal had been important to me. That I'd wanted him to get on one knee. That there should have been a ring. That there should have been the words "be my wife" — not for a visa, not for a stamp, but for me. That a ZAGS in a neighboring city before a work meeting, with a fake certificate and no dress, was not my version of a wedding. It was a deal. And I wanted to be chosen.

He didn't know. Eight years — and he didn't know. Because I didn't say. I didn't ask for a proposal, just as I didn't ask for help during childbirth. Didn't ask for tenderness. Didn't ask to be chosen — just as I didn't ask my mother to come back. Stayed silent. Endured. Hoped he'd figure it out on his own. That he'd see. That he'd understand without words. The way I understood my grandmother without words from age six. I could read people, but I couldn't tell them what I needed.

And there he sat across from me in therapy saying: I didn't know. I didn't know that mattered to you. You never said. And in his voice there was not an excuse — there was genuine surprise. As if for eight years he'd been living with one woman and was now seeing a different one for the first time. The one who wanted to be not useful but desired. Not a function but a bride. Not a strategic visa partner but a woman a man chooses and says so out loud.

Chapter Finally.

Some time later — after couple therapy, after he first learned that a proposal mattered to me — Vanya made one. In a tower. CN Tower, Toronto. Height, a view, good food.

He didn't get on one knee. There was no touching speech and no secret photo session that takes your breath away. It was — simple. Something like "marry me." Without flourishes. Without ritual. Without what I'd seen in movies, in books, in other people's stories, in the world where people propose not because they have to but because they can't not.

Everything was backward for us. First — a marriage of convenience, ZAGS in a neighboring city. Then — a child. Then — eight years of official marriage at that point. And only then — a proposal. As if someone shuffled the slides in life's presentation and the title slide ended up at the end, when everyone's already leaving.

I stood in that tower and understood I should be happy. That this was what I wanted. What I'd waited for silently for so many years and finally named aloud in therapy. A proposal. A choice. Words spoken out loud, not implied. I should have been crying from happiness. Or at least smiling. Or at least feeling something.

I felt nothing. Stood in the tower with a view of the city and waited for something inside to respond. No.

More like — too late. The train arrived. But I'd gotten so cold I couldn't stand up and board. The joy had gone stale.

Vanya proposed because he learned it mattered to me. Not because he couldn't live without me. Not because he woke one morning and realized: this woman is my life. But because the therapist asked, I answered honestly, and he heard. He did it like a task. Like an item on a checklist: "Vera wants a proposal → make a proposal." The same way he did everything: logically, sequentially, without extra emotion. Without that inner "I can't not," which turns a formality into an event.

And I said “yes.” Because saying “no” to someone who finally did what you’d complained about is like rejecting a gift from a child who drew it all night: crooked, clumsy, not what you wanted — but he tried. And you take it. And say “thank you.” And hang it on the fridge. And don’t cry. Because crying means admitting the drawing isn’t right. And admitting that means destroying the only good thing he managed to give.

We became a “real family.” That’s how it looked from outside. A ring. A proposal. A tower. You can tell friends, write it in a journal, believe it. And inside — inside lived a girl who dreamed that someone would choose her not by therapeutic recommendation. But just because. Because she is who she is.

Vanya chose me. In the tower. Without the knee. Without the flourishes. Eight years after the ZAGS. Through everything we’d been through: the screams, the silences, Valyaeva’s skirts, wine for sex, divorce plans every evening. He chose. In his way. As he knew how. Not the way I wanted. But — he chose. I learned a few more years later that back in Novosibirsk he had decided he wanted to “try” with me, that he had chosen me then. Just silently.

Chapter Short “Honeymoon” Month.

After the proposal we lived in harmony for three weeks.

Three weeks. I counted — not because I wanted to, but because the body counted automatically, like a countdown. Because somewhere inside I knew it would end. That good things don’t last. That after every clearing comes darkness. Knew — and still allowed myself to feel. Briefly. Carefully. Like a person who was once burned and now holds their hand near the fire but doesn’t put it in the flame.

For three weeks Vanya didn’t scream. Didn’t look at me with contempt. Didn’t go silent for days. Talked. Was present — not physically, he was always there physically, but truly present. As if the proposal shifted something in him and for the first time in years he remembered there was a woman beside him.

And I — I bloomed. In three weeks. Like a desert after rain: instantly, hungrily, without looking back. It turned out I needed so little. Not diamonds, not travel, not grand gestures. Just — not to be screamed at. To be looked at without contempt. To be asked in the morning how I slept. To not have to drink at night to endure lying beside him, because there was tenderness. I took this for happiness.

I started dreaming. This is it. Finally. He’s changed. We’ll be together. A real family. As I promised Artem in that letter in my sixth month of pregnancy — a complete family, loving parents, without mistakes, without aggression. The Phoenix bird inside me spread its wings again. I thought: now — for sure. Now it’s different. Now — for real.

And then the three weeks passed. And it started. His usual. Familiar. Nauseating in its familiarity.

Screaming. Not about anything specific — it just returned, like a chronic illness that went into remission and came back out. The same kind — with bulging eyes. The contemptuous look that freezes everything inside. The displeased mug. Exactly a mug — not a face, because a face implies expression, and he had one: “you’re in my way.” Silence. Again. As if someone pulled the plug on three weeks of humanity and plugged back into the old mode. And everything went back to the way it was.

I wasn’t surprised. Inside I always expected good things to end. That after three weeks of peace would come the reckoning. That happiness always has a price — someone will suffer, something will happen, it’s always been that way.

The childhood formula worked without fail. Three weeks of good — means bad is coming. And it did. Self-fulfilling prophecy? Not worse than before. Just — the same. As if those three weeks had been imagined.

Later I would understand something unpleasant. That I didn’t just wait for the good to end. I helped it end. Not deliberately. Not consciously. But a body that had lived for forty years in the mode of “you’ll pay for happiness” doesn’t know how to simply accept good things. It starts checking: is this really good? Will they deceive me? When will the blow come? And this checking — the tension, the expectation of a blow, scanning the face for signs of danger — itself creates what you fear. You expect a scream — and clench up. He sees you clenched — and gets irritated. He gets irritated — and you think: see, I knew it. The prophecy fulfills itself. Not because it was true. But because the body never gave a chance to learn that things can be different.

Chapter California.

March 2021. We moved to America. Again to a country with no friends and no family.

Fifteen years I dreamed of living in California. We moved thanks to Vanya. Palm trees, the ocean, sun. Artem was five. Vanya had a job — he transferred within Amazon.

I thought: now we'll move and I'll definitely leave him. As soon as I go back to work. As soon as I get on my feet. As soon as I have my own money, my own contract, my own independence. This plan lived inside me like a life raft, like the only reason not to drown. It gave meaning: endure now, because later will be different. Later — in America — real life would begin.

In the first week I went outside barefoot. Just because. The asphalt was warm. The palms rustled. The air smelled of something sweet and unfamiliar. For a second I thought: maybe here it will work. Not to live differently — just to live. The second passed. But the body remembered it.

But until "later" arrived, I had to survive until then. And I chose the strategy that seemed the only one possible: don't provoke. Don't anger. Don't upset. Don't give a reason. Become invisible, silent, perfect — so he wouldn't start again, like when we first moved to Toronto and he was the sole provider.

I walked on eggshells around Vanya. Literally. Cooked what he liked. Said what he wanted to hear. Didn't argue. Didn't object. Didn't show irritation. Didn't show exhaustion. Didn't show anything that might trigger that look — the contemptuous one and the scream with bulging eyes that makes the blood run cold. Everything I did was subordinated to one thing: just don't let him start screaming again, like in Toronto.

I avoided aggression. My whole life I'd avoided it — this wasn't a new strategy, it was the only one I knew. With grandmother: read her by the sound of footsteps — if heavy, today would be bad, need to be quieter. With Maxim: stay silent, endure, don't talk about money. Now with Vanya: walk on eggshells so he won't scream.

In twelve years of marriage I showed him my anger four times. Four. In twelve years. Once — threw a coffee mug at the wall. Second — smashed dishes and his vase (actually didn't smash it — the floor tile cracked, the vase survived). Third — threw his old tablet into the bathtub when he refused to keep a promise. Fourth — said "fuck you." The fourth time happened after we'd already separated. After twelve years. After therapy.

Four times in twelve years — and I remember each down to the details, because each was a catastrophe for me. Not for him — for me. Because showing anger meant losing control. And losing control meant becoming grandmother. Becoming the person who screams, hits, frightens. Becoming what I'd hated since age five and feared more than death.

California. Fifteen years of dreams. And I walked on tiptoes. Same fear. Same sentry inside.

Fear. The feeling that no one needs you. The feeling that you're in the way. The feeling that if you disappeared — it would be quieter, and everyone would be better off.

How can this be the same cage?

It can. Because the cage wasn't on the outside. It was inside. And I brought it with me — through Kazakhstan, Siberia, Novosibirsk, Toronto, San Diego. Through all my escapes, through all my moves, through all my "it will be different there." The cage traveled with me. Because the cage was me. Back then this sounded like a sentence. Now — like a beginning. If the cage is inside, the key is too.

Later I would understand something unpleasant. That I didn't just wait for the good to end. I helped it end. The same part that couldn't relax, couldn't be happy without anxiety, couldn't believe that good can simply last — she started destroying. Not consciously. Not maliciously. Simply — the body couldn't hold good for longer than three weeks. And started looking for what's wrong. And found it. Always found it.

This is a pattern. I'd later see it in ACA clearly, with a name: the child who grew up in chaos can't tolerate stability. Stability feels like the calm before the storm. And when the storm doesn't come on its own — the child creates it. Not to suffer. To finally exhale. Because the wait is harder than the blow.

Chapter Inability to Work.

I couldn't go back to work. The work visa was there. The desire was there, burning, because work equaled freedom, and freedom equaled divorce, and divorce equaled salvation. But the agencies that processed permits weren't operating. COVID. Everything stopped. Paperwork that could have been done in a month stretched to a year. I couldn't do the one thing that separated me from freedom: get a certificate. A piece of paper. A stamp. Permission. As if my whole life came up against someone's desk, with no one sitting behind it.

And while I waited for that piece of paper, while I counted days and planned the divorce that kept getting postponed — everything around me was getting worse. Artem became more aggressive. And I couldn't work, couldn't leave, couldn't hide. I was home. Around the clock. Without work, without an exit. The walls closed in. Days became identical. The body forgot what day it was. Alone with a child who exploded, and with a husband I walked on eggshells around to prevent his explosions. Artem screamed, hit, threw, choked. Not from malice — from panic, but I didn't know that yet. The diagnoses wouldn't come for another year. For now things were only heating up.

I screamed back. Said "leave if you don't like it" — in my grandmother's words, in my grandmother's voice. Because in moments of overload the autopilot switched on, and I became what I'd promised not to become.

And I understood that alone I wouldn't cope with my son. Like my mother. Alone.

That thought — "alone, like my mother, I won't cope with him" — was the most terrifying thought of my life. Scarier than "I'll die at forty-two." Scarier than the balcony of the seventeenth floor. Because it meant: I need help. I need another person beside me. I need Vanya. Not as a husband — as a second adult in the house. As someone beside whom Artem would grow up with a father — because I knew what it was to grow up without.

And that thought killed the divorce plan. Didn't postpone it. Killed it. Because leaving meant being alone with a child who gets expelled from everywhere. Being alone — like my mother. My mother didn't cope — she chose the bottle. And I already had a bottle on the kitchen counter.

I stayed. From the understanding that a child with these diagnoses wouldn't survive with one parent who is themselves destroyed. That I needed a partner — at least functional, at least present. That there would be no ideal.

My son would not search for his father through detectives. My son would know his father. Even if that father screams. Even if he looks with contempt. Even if he doesn't know how to love the way the books describe. He would be there. Beside him. Every day. That was the minimum I could give him. The minimum I never had.

I would have to live with Vanya. Not "want," not "decided," not "chose" — would have to. Like having to breathe when the air is bad. Like having to walk when your legs won't hold.

I stayed. Clenched my teeth, pulled in my stomach, strapped back in. And went to work.

Chapter Working at Amazon.

I got the certificate, went through eighty interviews in three months (practiced on smaller companies), ten of which were with Amazon. They hired me. I worked twelve hours a day. Seven days a week. Not because they demanded it — because I didn't know any other way. Because work was the only place where I felt competent. Where my skills were worth money, where my efforts produced results, where I could solve a problem and get confirmation: you're needed. You're useful. You exist.

Everything else in life didn't give that confirmation. At work — at work I was someone. A product manager. A leader. The person who does the impossible in eight months (the title I earned at Amazon after my first product release). That same robot-machine that doesn't feel, doesn't tire, doesn't cry, just solves problems.

There were no feelings. Only tasks. And endurance.

I don't remember good moments from that period. Not because there weren't any — maybe there were. But my defense mechanism erased memories. All of them. Good and bad. As if memory decided: if you can't forget only the pain — forget everything. And I forgot. And could be strong again. Because if you don't remember how bad it was — you can pretend it wasn't. And continue. And get up. And go. One more day. Twelve more hours. One more problem to solve.

This is how I lived. For years. In emergency mode that never switched off, because no one was there to press "stop." I pulled through. Until it snapped. Back then I didn't know that "snapping" isn't the end. It's the beginning. But before the beginning, I had to fall.

Iron Man didn't complain — he didn't know how. He worked until he wore out. And wearing out was nothing new for him.

Chapter Grandmother in the Body of a Child.

It showed up right after the move. As if someone flipped a switch.

We had deliberately settled in an expensive neighborhood — for the school. Rating 10 out of 10. Best in the area. We calculated everything: neighborhood, school, stability. Now we'd finally live like people. Now everything would be like it should.

But something in Artem broke from the move from Toronto. Apparently the stress — new house, new country, new language, new people — was too much. He started exploding. Every day. Out of nowhere. Eventually it turned out: he has autism — a pathological demand avoidance profile, PDA — and ADHD. But back then, in the first months, we knew nothing yet. We just lived inside his escalating aggression.

When I later learned what PDA is, a lot fell into place — but it didn't get easier. PDA means that any demand, even the gentlest — "put on your jacket," "sit down for homework," "time to eat" — is perceived by the child's nervous system as an attack. Not as a request, not as a rule — as a survival threat. The body triggers fight-or-flight. And for Artem it was fight. Always fight. Panic instantly turned to aggression — screaming, hitting, throwing, breaking, biting, insulting. From age six. Not because he's mean. Because he's scared. And ADHD adds impulsivity: the reaction is instant, without pause, without filter, without brakes. The brain doesn't have time to think — the body is already acting.

At home it looked like this: aggression you couldn't predict. Like weather without a forecast. You don't know when the storm will start. You don't know what will trigger it. He didn't like the food — screaming. Something didn't work in a game — screaming and the room trashed. Woke up on the wrong side — screaming, insults, attack. Simply because you're standing nearby — assault and a grimace of hatred.

From zero to ten in a second. Without warning, without buildup, without a chance to prepare. Like someone fired a gun next to your ear — and you're in shock, frozen, heart pounding, and the brain is trying to understand what happened.

And every time I froze. Exactly froze — didn't run, didn't fight back. Froze from fear, like back then, in childhood.

Because his scream was my grandmother's scream. Identical. The same unexpected, unfair, searing howl from nowhere. The kind you can't get used to, no matter how many years you've lived with it.

This was the background of our life for three and a half years. Constant, daily, relentless. And on the outside, at school, another part of the nightmare was unfolding.

* * *

The school called several times a week. Could call in the middle of a workday, in the middle of a meeting, in the middle of a presentation: "Pick him up. Now." I dropped everything and drove. Every time. Listened to the complaints. Apologized. Promised I'd talk to him, take measures, that it wouldn't happen again. Knew it would. Knew tomorrow would be the same call. Knew that after each such conversation my self-esteem dropped another floor — and there were almost no floors left.

Then we found out after the fact about Halloween. Other kids dress up, run around, laugh. Our son was locked alone in a room. To protect the other children. A six-year-old boy locked within four walls while the whole world celebrates. Because he's a threat. They didn't even call us. Just decided for us. We learned later.

Then there was bullying. School events he wasn't taken to. Or was taken — and then they called me to pick him up. A school rated ten out of ten didn't know what to do with my son.

They failed.

He was expelled from every camp. Every single one. Without exception. The script was identical: first day — an attempt, second day — a call. "Take the child. Never bring him again." I came, apologized, picked him up. Heard those words — "never again" — and every time the same thing rose inside: shame. Not for him — for myself. What a bad mother I am. And fears: what if he becomes a criminal? What awaits us in his teenage years if at six it's already this? As if it was my fault he's like this. As if I did something wrong — or didn't do, or passed on, or broke.

The Merciless Critic immediately delivered a permanent verdict: it's you. You broke him. You passed it on. You are the continuation of what you ran from. Your fault.

* * *

And at home, meanwhile, things were getting worse.

Artem was seven when I didn't give him his tablet and he choked me for it. My child.

He threw me out of the house. My son threw me out of my house, the one I paid for. “Leave! I don’t want you here! You shouldn’t be here!” And every time I fell into that same five-year-old girl my grandmother chased outside. Threatened with the orphanage. “Nobody needs you.” And here stands my son saying the same words. And my body hears them not as a child’s words — it hears grandmother.

I hated him ninety-five percent of the time and cried every day. And five percent — loved him so much it hurt even more. And then I went back to make up and said it wasn’t his fault. And so around and around and around.

To endure this, I started drinking. First a little — a glass of wine in the evening, so it would let go, so I’d stop shaking, so I could sleep. Then more. Alcohol became the only way to temporarily not feel. The only way to turn off the endless screaming inside. It became a problem — and I knew it. But knowing and stopping are different things when every day grinds you anew.

* * *

And then Artem watched The Matrix. He loved repeating what he saw — like all kids, only louder, sharper, without a filter. Without understanding what’s acceptable and what isn’t. Without sensing the boundary between play and reality — because autism erases that boundary. And the next day at school he pointed his fingers at the teacher like a gun. Like in the movie. And said: “I’ll kill you.”

A small boy repeating a movie scene, not understanding that in America those words are not a game. In America, after all the school shootings, after all the tragedies, those words are an alarm signal. And the school pushed the button.

A police squad came to our house. Searched the home. Looking for weapons. At our home — a family with an autistic child who pointed his fingers like a gun after watching The Matrix. And I stood there feeling what I’d felt my whole life: this is my fault. I allowed this. I wasn’t watching closely enough. I’m a bad mother.

And simultaneously — the absurdity. So thick, so viscous, the kind that makes you want to laugh and cry at the same time. My child is autistic. He repeats movies. He’s not threatening — he’s playing. But the system doesn’t distinguish. The system sees words, not context. The system sees a threat, not a boy who doesn’t know how else to be.

* * *

We transferred him to a second school. Already with diagnoses, already with a special plan — IEP, Individualized Education Program. A school considered one of the best in the city for working with children with disabilities. Specialists, protocols, resources. Everything by the book.

They also failed.

Once Artem was frightened by something. I know this strategy of his: when he’s scared, he attacks. Fear turns to aggression instantly, like gasoline igniting from a match. That’s his defense. The only one he knows. They started pressuring him, and it got to the point where he started throwing chairs off the second floor. Thank God he didn’t kill anyone.

They restrained him. Called the police.

I drove to pick him up. Pulled up to the school and saw two huge police cars at the entrance. And I already knew it was about Artem. I felt it before I saw it. Because this wasn’t the first time. Because I was already used to that electric jolt in the chest when the school calls.

And then I saw a picture impossible to forget: six adults holding my eight-year-old son. **Six. Adults. On one child. My legs gave way. My mouth opened but there was no scream — only ringing in my ears.**

He was curled into a ball. Not screaming, not thrashing — frozen. Eyes full of terror. Small, in a ring of six adult bodies, and in those eyes — not rage but the kind of fear that stops your breathing. And I stood watching this, and inside me the same fear rose, and my legs turned to cotton.

I had two lawsuits because of him. Against two different schools. The first — because the school caused serious emotional harm, and we even received compensation: fifteen thousand dollars for therapy. But the damage was already done — to the child’s psyche. The second — to get him accepted into a specialized school with an ABA program costing nine thousand a month. The district pays, not us — because I proved the previous school caused harm. With lawyers. With evidence.

I fought for my child the way I solved everything in life: to the point of burnout. Grandmother taught: fight. My mother showed what happens when you don't fight. I fought. For his place in school. For his future. "Never bring him again" — grandmother's "don't like it — leave." Only now about my son.

* * *

I lived in constant fear. Walking on eggshells. Every morning I woke with anxiety: what kind of day would today be? What would trigger him? What would I do wrong? Where would it blow up?

I didn't feel safe. Especially with him. I shrank my life to the point where I'm alone. And that's the safest thing I have.

I started fearing Artem would become a criminal. Not because I saw a criminal in him — I saw a boy who was in pain from others' rejection and scared, who didn't know how to express it, who exploded because inside there was no room for quiet. But fear lived separately from knowledge. Fear said: what if? What if his aggression is not a diagnosis but character? What if he grows up and hits — like grandmother? Tanya told me: your critic is scaring your parts, telling them Artem is dangerous. But the danger has passed, long ago. Explain this to yourself more often. But explaining and feeling are different things.

ABA therapists said: you have to yield and leave. Leave the room. Don't react. Don't escalate. I was told a hundred times this is the right strategy. And I set myself up for it: leave. Just leave.

But I couldn't.

Leaving meant being thrown out again. Like grandmother did. The Kitten inside dug in and hissed. I stayed, snapped back, and escalated.

And every day the same thing repeated. Here, for example, is our morning.

Artem wakes up and immediately starts screaming. Even though I went to another room to not bother him — because he always screams when you're near him. I needed to sit him down for his programming lesson, and he says: no, I'll do it myself. I don't trust him because he's still lying in bed and the lesson starts in five minutes. He starts screaming again. Now I can't take it and start screaming back. He screams at me: "You're a bad mother, you don't love me!" And I scream back: "Go find a better one, when you do — move in with her!" He runs out of the house. Vanya calls. I'm sobbing. Telling him I hate children, hate Artem, because everyone screams at me. Grandmother always screamed too. I feel like a child. About seven years old.

And then Vanya starts screaming for me to shut up.

Artem is screaming, Vanya is screaming, and grandmother is screaming, and now I'm screaming from exhaustion by all of it.

HELL ON EARTH. Body shaking. Voice gone. In the mirror — grandmother's face.

Then I drive in the car for half an hour in silence. Cry with the music up loud so it can't be heard. In dark glasses and with a smile — so it can't be seen.

Then I come back. Make up. Say it's not his fault. Take the responsibility off him because I'm terrified he'll take the blame on himself — the way I once did — and consider himself bad and unloved. And so around and around. The hatred evaporates, I go to make up, everything around and around.

And then evening comes. And I sit down to write. And the feelings have settled. And the hatred has evaporated again. And once more I don't understand how you can hate someone you love so much.

* * *

I would come to do Artem's EMDR session. The fourth time. We fight every time. Every time he screams. And Vanya, damn it, looks on with displeasure. I hate them all. I just screamed back. I hate the family. I hate them all. I have so much hatred. I have nothing good. I even screamed throughout the house — just a scream. Then tears. Then a feeling of hatred for the family.

Then Vanya came, took my hand, spoke in a kind voice, and I calmed down quickly. Cried a lot. And he said I was being unreasonable. That I should just walk away. And I said: do you know what dissociation is? I don't feel or remember anything after a fight except despair or anger.

And then he sees I've been crying, by the puffy eyes. Doesn't know how to fix things. And starts playing with the blanket, flirting, trying to get me to join his game. That's his way of hoping to make up. And I remember: I did the same thing. Don't remember, because I was little, but I know for certain. And I melt slowly.

I hated him — for the fear, the shame, the police, the lawsuits, the camps, every "never bring him again," grandmother's scream from his mouth. And I hated myself for the hatred. And I chose him every time — again and again, despite the hatred, despite the despair, despite the voice inside screaming: "Abandom him! Leave! Like your mother!"

I didn't leave. Didn't abandon.

But I also couldn't keep living like this.

* * *

Chapter Destiny.

At exactly this moment — as if the universe decided to test how much more could be placed on this back before it broke — the Destiny story happened.

We had an apartment in Toronto. Each of us had sold our property in Novosibirsk and we had enough for a mortgage in Toronto. When we moved to the US, we rented it out. And at some point a woman named Destiny appeared there. In Russian — Sudba, Fate. A prostitute. A squatter. A person who moved into someone else's apartment and refused to leave. Fate stole my apartment. Sometimes metaphors are too literal.

It sounds like a joke. Like a bad comedy script. But when I say "refused to leave" — I mean literally. Toronto's laws protect tenants, even if the tenant is a squatter, even if they occupied the apartment illegally, even if there are human feces on the balcony and the doors and cabinets are ripped out because of their actions. She flooded the neighbors. The police took her away for having sex on our balcony — and returned her. And I couldn't get into my own apartment. Couldn't. The law. COVID. Courts dragged on. I had to hire lawyers from California — remotely.

We lost a lot of money. Money we'd saved for years and earned through honest work.

When Vanya told me about the situation, I jumped in. Instantly. On autopilot. The way I jumped into every problem in my life. Saw a problem — fix it. Didn't ask myself: what do I feel? Didn't ask: do I even have the resources? The robot just switched on — and took off.

I couldn't sleep because of it. Lay down and couldn't close my eyes because revenge scenarios kept playing in my head. How I'd punish this woman. How I'd get the money back. How I'd restore justice. Obsessive thoughts — the kind that don't switch off, that loop like a broken record: "she stole what's mine, she stole what's mine, I'm powerless, I can't do anything." Powerlessness. Financial terror. Revenge obsession to the point of lost sleep.

Powerlessness — that was the feeling I knew best. Since six months. When mother isn't there and you lie unable to even turn over. When grandmother hits and you stand unable to leave. When grandfather doesn't protect and you can't ask. When Vanya screams and you can't answer. Powerlessness was my ambient state — only I'd learned not to notice it because control was running on top. Control solved problems, control moved forward, control created the illusion that I wasn't powerless. And Destiny shattered that illusion. Showed: you control nothing. You can't even enter your own apartment.

Later, in therapy, I would unpack this story and understand two things. First: I was angry at myself for jumping in. For taking on this problem — the way I took on every problem my whole life — and arriving at suicidal depression. Second: I was angry at Vanya for allowing it. For not protecting — not the apartment, but me. For telling me the news and stepping aside, as he always did, while I — as always — jumped in.

But that understanding would come later. Back then I simply didn't sleep, didn't eat, counted losses, and hated a woman whose name, like a cruel joke, meant "fate."

And this became the second-to-last straw.

Chapter Prison on My Birthday.

Hello, here's a story about how I wonderfully spent my birthday evening and the entire night in a women's jail. And I actually think it's pretty cool, because it came with a number of benefits I discovered later. But the conditions were brutal, straight out of a movie.

It started with me working nonstop, a product launch coming up, working from 7 a.m. until pick-up time. On my birthday I had two glasses of wine at six p.m. when everything was done. Friends invited me to celebrate, literally next door, at the neighboring plaza. Vanya said: go, at least you'll see some people. Because I work in this room and live in the same room — sleep, sit down. I don't see actual living people.

If I had felt drunk, I wouldn't have gotten behind the wheel. I was certain I was fine and under the California legal limit of 0.08. I'd driven in that state before.

I arrived, didn't drink anything. Talked to Violetta. There's a witness that I didn't drink. Since I had to drive back home to test — I left around 8:30. Eight minutes of driving. And I thought: well, since clubbing isn't happening tonight, I have to work late — I'll just crank the music. Cranked it to maybe twenty. I usually listen at ten.

That was my first mistake. Because when a person listens to loud music — there are studies on this — they automatically increase their speed. And I, of course, increased my speed. Maybe by fifteen miles. And it's a small road. Lower speed limit than usual. There's a turn.

I didn't make the turn. Started braking too late and drove into oncoming traffic. Red light, cars stopped. Braked in front of a motorcyclist. He fell off from fright. I didn't touch him, obviously. But I'd probably have soiled my pants too if a car like mine braked in front of me like that. About a meter between us. I got out and started apologizing.

He says: "You ruined my whole bike." But he just jumped off it right in front of my eyes and dropped it on its side.

My next mistake — I started arguing with him. Said: "First of all, I didn't exactly ruin it, you jumped off it yourself." That, naturally, was already making him angry.

Next mistake. I'd never been in an accident. Don't know what to do in these situations. I think — need to call the cops. But he says: let's just do this quickly, I need to go, give me your license and insurance. Turns out you just let each other photograph it, then file with insurance — and that's it. He was ready to leave immediately. He was in a hurry.

No. I say: "Why should I give you my documents? Call the cops." Asked for it myself!

Vanya on the phone said: what are you doing, you should have just given the documents.

The cops came. The motorcyclist was fine, says: not hurt. I recorded video showing the bike was far. But I smell of alcohol, obviously. Do all our tests, they say. I did the tests well. Even showed them burpees — it was cold, wanted to warm up — December, evening already. Because later, when they were already driving me to jail, the officer — he treated me very kindly — said: I was ready to let you go. Tests were fine, the smell bothered me. And he asked me to do one last thing — blow into a tube. The tube showed bad news — over the limit.

And that was it. Protocol requires them to take you for an official test — because that tube can be inaccurate. They put handcuffs on me. I couldn't believe this was actually happening. It was like a movie. He put on handcuffs and says: we're going to take you to a women's detention facility, run the test. Worst case — fingerprints, database check that you're not a criminal, six hours max, and we'll let you go.

We arrive. I'm sitting in a car with bars, like in a movie. He could see I was very cooperative, that I'd do the test fine, that I wasn't drunk. Thought they'd probably release me right away — that the test would be under 0.08.

He didn't put my car on a tow truck — that would have cost me fifteen hundred. Just went out of his way. I didn't ask. Then, while driving, we chatted. I told him I can't believe all this is happening to me. That it's my birthday, that I'm working, that I have a ton of tests to run tonight. That I just turned the music up louder. He told me about his wife — also an overachiever. When any test is below 97 points — she's very upset. We joked on the way.

They brought me in, I blew into the licensed machine. First time — 0.06. They say: let's do it again. Blew again — 0.08. And here was my biggest mistake: I should have said — redo the test. Because I didn't feel like I had any alcohol at all. Well, I did, obviously. At 0.06 I would have passed and been released. But I didn't say it. He says: that's it, I can't help you anymore. Women's jail for you. They'll take fingerprints, run the database check, and send you home.

He brings me into this space, the entrance. I'm still in handcuffs. Hands are pretty numb. It's already eleven at night. Everything about this is not optimal. First a photo, then talk to a doctor — about whether you're planning to kill yourself. I don't know why they ask that. They also made me sign documents without reading them. Three signatures. Maybe I sold a kidney. Also a lesson for the future: don't sign anything you haven't even been shown. You talk through a little window. They took my phone, watch, ring, all jewelry. Everything. Gave nothing back.

Next — the next room, fingerprints. The women looked me over with such thoroughness — no man has ever examined me with such attention. There was an X-ray — to check that no knife is hidden in secret places.

They took my jacket — left in a t-shirt. Jeans. Took my shoes. Took my socks. Gave me some thin, not even paper, but rubber slippers that slide. Sat me on an iron chair in the middle of the room. Can't stand up. When you try to stand — they yell "SIT!" in this terrifying voice. Bathroom with an open door. Yes, like that.

When I stood up to stretch my arms, they told me — sit. I said: my shoulders are numb. He then removed one handcuff and cuffed me to the chair. And this — this was him going out of his way for me. As I later understood. He was actually really very kind to me. Understood the situation.

And the most brutal thing — it's maybe fifteen degrees Celsius. Maximum. While I'm in just a t-shirt and jeans — I'm sitting there literally shaking. I later joked with the girls that at least I was losing weight. Because I'd recently listened to Huberman — he said this is a very effective method, these micro-shakings, when you burn a ton of calories. Burned calories all night.

Can't stand up, can't walk. By the end my legs were literally blue. Not joking.

The fact that they yelled at us, spoke rudely — that's like in the movies, I wasn't too surprised there.

Oh, and there was Crazy Lady. Really some very... This woman had mental health issues. They brought her in. She showered the officer who brought her with insults. And that officer remarkably maintained very respectful treatment. Forty minutes of continuous insults. That's very hard in general. I don't know why they develop such armor. Because not everyone is as nice as me.

By the time all this was done — already 1:30 a.m. Checked the fingerprints. At two they told me: you're free, you can go. BUT! We won't give your things back. Someone has to come for you — from 10 p.m. to 7 a.m. we don't release people. Unsafe. Someone has to drive in, wait in line, call. Uber? No, can't. They won't give back the phone — even though they released you.

Vanya was peacefully asleep. He has Do Not Disturb mode, like me. We have each other set so calls go through. If I'd called from my phone — he would have heard. But from the jail phone — hidden number, the call isn't confidential, you wait a long time to be connected. Like in Orange Is the New Black — an awesome show, and I experienced it on my own skin.

I called, called, called — maybe fifteen times. Asked other girls who were ordering bail to call from their numbers — thought repeated calls would work. Didn't work at all. He blissfully slept until 5:30.

The shift changed. New woman. And I have Vanya on the line — need to tell him where to go. But I don't know. Nobody explained where I am. Other than that it's a jail. And there might be many. Female detention facility it's called. In Russian — prison.

I call Vanya, say: I'll find out the address now. But you can't approach them, these women at the window. They immediately — apparently used to hardened people — tense up. Yell. Sit. Back to your spot. You even have to sit a certain way — exactly like this.

I'm sitting with my arm extended, waiting for someone to come. This new woman comes. Beautiful woman, she even has these cool eyelashes. But when she starts talking, not beautiful. Sees I'm asking, that a phone is waiting. No. I tried to approach — she yelled at me. Hard. Those voices are familiar to me. She's just brutal.

Then she comes over. Vanya has been waiting this whole time. At six a.m. she spent ten minutes doing her makeup. Comes over — and in this horrible voice says: and what, you couldn't wait five seconds?

I say: I need the address so my husband can come. I was released a long time ago, since two a.m. I need someone to pick me up.

She: "I don't know you. I just got here. You're nobody to me. Sit and wait."

With great difficulty I explained, asked politely, apologized. Please just give me the name at least, where to drive. He'll google it. She quickly barked the name.

Vanya arrived with Artem around 6:30. Then waited until past eight. Though they told me: at seven it'll happen, they'll release you right away because you're already clear. Nobody starts working on time there. All these processes are horribly inefficient. The whole thing is designed to torture people. That's how I'd put it.

During the wait they came twice and said: line up, everyone stand, line up. And put us in a cell. I say: why a cell? I've already been released. They say: that's how it is. The first shift was nicer — they knew about my birthday, maybe that's why. Said: there's just a person coming whom you're not allowed to see. I don't know who that was.

In this cell I met Olya. A Russian woman, older. Driving on a small road, residential area, fifteen miles per hour. And someone throws themselves right in front of the car. Not right under the wheels — about two meters, enough to brake. But enough to call the police. The person was invisible, all in a hood. Then police appear from somewhere. She was arrested. Told nothing about this person. Bail — one hundred thousand dollars. Ten in cash immediately, otherwise you sit five days until court. I'd already heard about this scheme — a way to get American citizenship. They pick a car barely moving, jump, know how and at what distance so they won't get hit — and calmly get citizenship. And now she has all this. I felt sorry for this woman. No reason not to believe her. At least someone gets something good — the person gets citizenship.

This bail thing — it's a business. In any jail, probably. They constantly talk about this bail: have you contacted a bail agent? Is bail arranged? And though you can't stand up — if you're going to call about bail, you can. Huge lists hanging there, tons of bail offices you can call and get a sort of mortgage that you'll pay for the rest of your life. Two hundred fifty dollars a month. If you have a hundred thousand — just right for a lifetime.

There were four of us girls overnight. Two — like me, had a little to drink. Two — serious cases, had to get bail.

I saw myself from a new angle — after working from home. I was joking there, talking. It was actually pretty fun for me. Realized how much I missed people. Something to remember in old age.

When they finally let us out onto the street — barefoot, in rubber slippers, five degrees in the morning — we shuffled down the street for seven minutes in those sliding slippers with blue legs. I thought one thing: the greatest happiness in life is simply a hot bath. Making a person happy is simple: take everything away, then give back a little. I genuinely felt bliss when I just got in the car and turned on the heater.

Benefits. My love for my husband grew exponentially. Immediately. Because he, first of all, didn't scream at me when I called him crying from the crime scene. Came to pick me up from that hellhole. Was understanding, though he'd never had a run-in with the police. And he always follows the rules — unlike some people.

We have this rule here: when you drive through a residential area, there are stops where you're required to come to a complete stop, and only then drive. And so endlessly — stop, drive, stop, drive. And there are no cars. I never followed this rule. And now, thanks to having a DUI, I'll have to be super-exemplary for ten years. I'm not allowed a single gram of alcohol behind the wheel. For the next ten years — follow every rule. Stops and right turns with a full stop I'll have to observe. That's my minimum goal. And the maximum — I'd really like to not drink at all. I'll try to use this as leverage.

For Artem it was a good lesson. In our family we honestly tell each other how things are. I asked Vanya to tell him the truth: we're going to pick up mom from jail for drunk driving. She broke the rules. When I was released, I told him everything in detail — what happened to me and why I was taken. That because of a small violation I spent the whole night behind bars. And for a big one — a person can spend their whole life. And for him, as a person who loves to break rules — well, he's my son — it's useful to know this.

And for that version of me who will someday reread this: please remember how you felt there. And about the possible consequences — that I really could have killed a person. And then I wouldn't be sitting here. I'd be sitting somewhere else.

Hello from the past.

About the consequences. Insurance will go up a lot. For six months I'll drive with a tube in the car — blow every time for it to start. This thing checks that there's zero in the blood. I'll attend some school for several months where they brainwash you. And also court, where worst case — three months behind bars. But if I hire a lawyer for five to fifteen thousand dollars, because I'm planning to contest this case — that machine showed 0.06 one time and 0.08 another, if it's 0.06 they should have let me go. Planning to contest so the consequences aren't as serious.

So that's the fun, sad birthday experience.

In the end I contested and just drove with the tube and got the brain-washing.

No, this story was not about the last straw.

Chapter Losing My Job.

This had already happened before. Exactly the same. Like a broken record.

In Toronto I worked at a company called Vyana. Threw myself in the way I always did — twelve hours, to the point of burnout, with that same perfectionism that instead of "good" produced only "perfect or death." Released a product. Got the company award "Shining Star Award — top performer who inspires others" — and then the company went bankrupt during COVID. Laid off. Thank you, goodbye. An A in the diary — and they ripped the diary up.

The second seminar — the second Dispenza — was the turning point. Not because of meditations — because of people. The two who told me about AA and breathing. They showed direction. Dispenza gave context. But doing it — I had to do myself.

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And now — Amazon. For eight months I worked on a project my manager would later call "never happened, impossible" — no one before me could do it, it's impossible, and she did it. I worked twelve hours a day, seven days a week, sleepless, between Artem's screams and Vanya's silence, between lawsuits for the child and calls from school — "pick up your kid" — and meetings where I was that same robot-machine, a super-AI-ChatGPT that doesn't feel, doesn't tire, doesn't cry, just solves problems. Released the product. Got Exceeds High Bar — Amazon's highest rating. And then they laid me off. Like at Vyana. Word for word. Scene for scene. Same script: do the impossible — lose everything. Invest maximum — get zero.

Twice in a row. At two different companies. In two different countries. As if life was testing: do you see it? Do you see the pattern? Back then I didn't see the pattern. I only saw ashes.

The formula confirmed itself once more: no matter how much you do — they'll discard you. You are a resource. Used and forgotten.

The last straw. The Phoenix didn't rise. Inside — emptiness.

After that, the suicidal depression began. Not the kind after my mother's death — that was about numbness, about insomnia, about a body that doesn't sleep. This was different. This was about a black hole you fall into with nothing to grab. Two years. Two years of depression that wasn't helped by pills, therapy, ketamine, or mushrooms. Two years during which the only thing keeping me on this side was Artem. Obligation. A mother's duty. A decision made long ago: my child will not grow up without a mother.

Chapter Suicidal Period.

Two years of suicidal depression. Not two years of sadness, not two years of "I feel bad" — two years of living at the bottom, where there's no light, no air, no reason to get up in the morning. Sleeping, relaxing, feeling joy, and experiencing pleasure — these four things were inaccessible to me. All four. As if someone cut from life everything worth living for and left only pain, duties, and insomnia.

I constantly thought about how to kill myself. Not abstractly — concretely. With details. With calculation, like everything in my life. Sometimes these thoughts came as a plan — cold, logical, the head computing options. Sometimes — as a scream, from the place that was so wounded it simply wanted it to stop.

But most often — most often they came out of spite. Out of spite toward Artem.

The **Suicidal Part** no longer came to visit — she moved in. Lived with me every day. Simply waited for me to agree.

I would later understand: she too was trying to help. The pain that couldn't be endured consciously, she offered to end. Cruelly. But — in her own way — out of care.

Not the method. But the motive — not a desire for death. A desire for it to stop.

Artem screamed at me. His scream hit the same spot as my grandmother's — and I instantly turned not into a mother but into a seven-year-old girl standing in a corner wanting to die. His words — "you're a bad mother, you don't love me" — were grandmother's words in a different voice. And in response to that scream, from the depths, from the place I usually didn't let reach the surface, rose: I'll die. I'll die — and you won't have a mother. Like me. You'll learn what that's like.

That was the most terrifying thing I could think. The most shameful. Because it was exactly what was done to me. My grandmother said "you'll die under a fence" — and I believed. My mother died — and I grew up with guilt. Now I myself, in my suicidal fantasies, was doing the same to my child. Using my death as a weapon. As revenge. As punishment for his

screaming. For the fact that because of him I stayed with Vanya. For the fact that he has parents — both — and I had none.

And yet — through all of this — I took out life insurance. Not on myself — on Vanya. Deliberately. Consciously. So that when I killed myself, they'd have money. So my death wouldn't be for nothing. So that even dying, I'd be useful. Even my own death I planned as a project: with a budget, a beneficiary, a return-on-investment calculation.

The Perfectionist worked to the very end. Even death — as a project.

Why live if pain isn't compensated by joy?

But somewhere at the very bottom, where there's no more hope, no plan, no phoenix — I noticed something. I was still breathing. Not because I wanted to. Not because I chose to. Just — breathing. And this "just breathing" turned out to be stronger than any decision. The body, which I'd forced to be silent for forty years — it didn't want to die. It wanted to live. Even when I didn't.

Chapter The Husband Gave Me a Knife.

We had both been drinking. Wine — my habitual painkiller, my mother's method, the one she died from. Vanya was also drinking that evening. I was in despair — not the usual, ambient kind I'd lived with for years, but the acute, cutting kind that comes when the last wall inside collapses.

I told Vanya I wanted to kill myself. Out loud. Not for the first time — I'd told him before, about the insurance, about not wanting to live. But he didn't believe me. Or believed and didn't know what to do with it.

He gave me a knife. While drunk. As a provocation. As the gesture of a person tired of hearing the same thing and not believing it's real. "Here, here's a knife. Go ahead." As if wanting to prove — to himself or to me — that I wouldn't do it. That it was just another hysteria that would pass.

He didn't understand. Didn't understand that the second the knife was in my hand, what happened inside wasn't sobering up. Not fear. But confirmation. Confirmation of everything I thought about myself. Unneeded. Worthless. A person who is given a knife — because her life isn't worth fighting for.

My mother figuratively plunged a knife into my heart — by leaving, by dying. And he — gave a real one. Into my hands. And in that drunken, thoughtless gesture, everything converged. My entire childhood. Every person who was nearby and didn't protect.

I slashed my arm...

But Vanya grabbed the knife. In time. At the last moment. Like on the balcony of the seventeenth floor, when he woke up that night. Every time — at the last second. Every time — when it's almost too late. He didn't know how to come earlier. Didn't know how to be present before it became unbearable. But at the moment of catastrophe — he came. Grabbed. And disappeared back into his silence.

I hated him for that knife. Still do — with the part that was in the kitchen with a blade at her wrist. He acted like my mother: didn't protect when protection was needed.

But another part — the one writing this book now — sees something else. That Vanya was also drunk. Also in despair. Also didn't know what to do with a woman who says every day she wants to die. That he's not a villain — he's simply a person who grew up in a house where no one taught him to handle someone else's pain. Like I grew up in a house where no one taught me to handle my own.

Two people who didn't know how. And a knife between them.

This wasn't the bottom. There was still further to go. But this was the point after which I stopped believing someone from the outside could save me. And then — from this "no one is coming" — the only possibility began to sprout: maybe — me. Not strong. Not ready. Just — the only one left.

Body practices. Not the ones that didn't help (chiropractor, physical therapy) — but the ones that came later, when the body started waking up. Osteopath. Yulya (life coach and yoga). Alina (singing — a voice clenched since childhood). Olya (bodynamics). Daily exercises: foot, pelvis, sacrum. "Building a body map." All of this only worked after breathing and meditations strengthened the core. Before that — like building walls without a foundation.

Chapter Mushrooms, MDMA, and the Kind Voice.

When the suicidal depression became my permanent state rather than a visiting one, I started reading everything I could get my hands on. Not for growth, not from curiosity — like a drowning person grabbing whatever's nearby. And I came across mushrooms. Psilocybin. Research. Articles. People who said: it helped. And I thought — what do I have to lose. I was already losing everything.

I had about eight journeys. Heroic doses — that's what they call it when the dose is large and you don't control where it takes you. Vanya was my sitter every time. Sat beside me, made sure I didn't harm myself. Not a therapist — a husband. There was no other option.

Eight times. He sat beside me eight times while I died, screamed, cried, said terrible things. Didn't leave once. Endured. Didn't understand what to do — but stayed. For a person who also wasn't taught to be present with someone else's pain — that was a lot.

In the first trips I was able to truly cry for the first time in my life. Not the kind you cry from exhaustion or from a fight — but from that place that had been closed for thirty years. The place where my mother lived. I cried so much there it seemed like I was catching up on forty accumulated years. Grandmother never surfaced — not in a single trip. Only my mother. Gut-wrenching pain for her. Sadness so enormous you could drown in it. And also — fear of death. The feeling that I'd die soon. That I needed help. I said it aloud, in the trip: start helping me. Please. Someone.

Ten years before, I'd been working on my mother through constellation therapy. Forgiving. Understanding. Accepting. I thought I'd processed everything. Until I ate the mushrooms — and discovered the inside was full of hatred. Unacknowledged. Unheard. The kind that at twenty-one my first therapist had forbidden me to feel when she said: "What do you have so many complaints about? She gave you life." And I obediently spent ten years on forgiveness, skipping over hatred like a step that doesn't exist. The mushrooms showed: the step exists. And on it — me, in terror and rage, since six months old. Ten years I leapt over the hatred for my mother. The mushrooms sat me back down on that step.

Then the convulsions started during trips. So strong that the last time I did mushrooms, I nearly died for real — the body clenched and wouldn't release, and I couldn't breathe through it. I thought it would crush my internal organs. Vanya revived me in a bathtub of boiling water. The mushrooms tried to remove the corset in one yank. The body couldn't take it. Later "They" told me in a trip: "this is the last time. Next time you'll die — if you want to die, just eat mushrooms."

Through mushrooms I learned many suppressed feelings. Pain toward my mother. Devastation. Fear I didn't know about. Hatred I'd hidden behind forgiveness for ten years. And one more thing — the understanding that I needed to create love from nothing. That no one would give it. That no one would bring it. That I'd have to grow it myself, like Münchhausen pulling himself by the hair.

But mushrooms didn't give a lasting result. The trip ended — and everything returned. Like a window into normal life: you see the landscape but can't step outside.

After the knife, I tried MDMA.

We agreed with Vanya: take it, go to separate rooms, put on masks, listen to music, come together in an hour and a half — when each has understood something about themselves.

The substance hit me first. And I did what I hadn't planned.

I told Vanya I was going to commit suicide. That everything was ready. The will. The insurance. That I wished him well finding a woman who would care for Artem.

He listened. Then stood up. Silently. And left the room. Not a word.

That's the support I received. The only person nearby — stood and left. Like grandfather to the garage when grandmother beat me. Like mother down the dark street, not turning around.

I was left alone. With photos of my grandmother I'd prepared in advance. Looked at them and said aloud: "Done. You burned it all. Nothing's left. No love. I'll definitely die." And with that complete resignation — not despair but resignation, which is worse because it doesn't even have the energy for a scream — I lay on the floor.

And held my own cheeks with my palms. Like a child takes herself — two small palms on her face. And started speaking. In a thin, childlike voice. About how grandmother had burned everything. About how nothing was left.

And then — from the same body, from the same hands on cheeks — another voice appeared.

Not grandmother's. Not the Critic's. Not my usual one. Different. Kind. Warm. Which said: no. You matter to me. I don't want you to leave.

The voices switched — like a dialogue between two people in one body. The child said: grandmother burned everything. The voice answered: no, not everything. The child: nothing's left. The voice: I'm left. The child: no one will come. The voice: I'm already here. The voices changed physically and I couldn't control it, just listened from the side.

I knew the method. IFS — Internal Family Systems. Had read Richard Schwartz's book. Knew how it works in theory: parts, Self, calm, curiosity, compassion. But theory is one thing. Lying on the floor with palms on your cheeks and hearing for the first time in your life a voice that doesn't insult or blame from inside — that's another.

Then Vanya came. Said: "I realized that I scream. But I don't know what to do about it." I answered: "well, I don't know either, I eat mushrooms." He thought. Said: "okay, I'll try too." And he tried. And changes began — in him. Strong. Noticeable. The relationship started slowly shifting. Not because one of us suddenly learned to love. But because both began looking inside.

But the Kind Voice existed only under MDMA. In ordinary life I couldn't hear it. Eyes closed — darkness, the critic, "you're defective." The voice came with the substance and left with the substance.

And then the thing I hadn't prepared for happened.

It was Artem's birthday. Eight years old. His friend was sleeping over, and in the morning I was folding the sofa back together. Felt something stuck inside the mechanism. Thought — trash, a toy caught. Pushed harder. The sofa folded.

By evening I noticed the cat was nowhere.

Fantik — Artem's cat. A service cat. A cat-dog who endured anything. A dream cat. I searched the whole apartment. Called. Checked under beds, behind closets, in the bathroom. Then checked the sofa.

He was there. In a hole in the mechanism I didn't know about. Hidden — the way cats hide, in the tightest, darkest place. And I crushed him. Pushed and felt resistance — but couldn't even imagine it wasn't trash but a living creature.

I found him myself. Dead. On my son's birthday. I killed my son's best friend!

I collapsed. Not hysteria — collapse. Guilt so total I wanted to stop existing. I killed a living creature. My child's cat. With my own hands. The same hands that petted him.

And at that moment — without MDMA, without mushrooms, without music, without a mask, without anything — I heard it. The Kind Voice. The same one. It said: "you didn't do it on purpose. I'm with you. Yes, it's a tragedy. But you didn't do it on purpose."

For the first time — from an ordinary state. From the very bottom, from the most terrible place — the voice came on its own. Without chemicals. It just — came. As if what it needed wasn't a dose but real grief. As if it had been waiting for the moment when all defenses fell, and finally — finally — it could get through.

From that day I began growing it. Every day. The way you grow a child — patiently, clumsily, with mistakes. Every morning, when the critic was already running at full power, I searched for the other voice. The one I use with the cat when she scratches but I love her anyway.

Later, much later, in the car, I was driving and crying from the realization that a normal family wouldn't happen. And the voice said: you have a mama inside. I asked like a child: why didn't you talk to me before? The answer came slowly. You were in such bad shape you were constantly distracting yourself from the pain. You couldn't look inside. There was no chance. But I was always here. Since birth. Every child has the right to love inside.

My mother's name was Lyubov — Love. She didn't give what the name promised. But inside, it turned out, there was another one. The one who doesn't leave. Doesn't die. Doesn't choose the bottle. Infinite. Quiet. Who waited forty years for me to stop screaming and finally listen.

The Kind Voice. For the first time in forty years. Not someone else's, not from a book, not therapeutic — mine. Quiet, uncertain, like a sprout pushing through asphalt. It said: "Sunshine." And I cried. Not from pain. From the fact that this word is even possible.

I remember two things from that evening. The knife going into my arm. And his face when he grabbed it. Not angry. Frightened. Like a person who just realized what he'd done. But it was too late.

We never talked about it after. Not once. As if it didn't happen. The way we didn't talk about anything that mattered. The scar stayed. The silence stayed. And between them — twelve more years of marriage.

Chapter Big Bear.

In October we went as a family to Big Bear. A mountain resort, four hours from San Diego. A rental cabin, trails, pines, silence.

We were climbing a trail. Vanya started saying something displeased and I felt it would lead to a fight. I asked: "I can't talk right now — I need a pause." He didn't stop and got even more wound up with criticism. "Please, take a break. I can't listen to this right now. Please!"

He continued.

I couldn't take it.

I screamed: "I hate you and I want a divorce!"

And ran. Alone. Through the forest. Evening, getting dark. Without a phone. Not knowing the way — and I get lost even with a GPS. Ran down the trail, turned the wrong way, lost the trail, found another, got lost. Big Bear is a mountain. Forest. Bears in the very name — and maybe not only in the name. Evening. Alone. No signal.

Somehow I got out. Found a trail. Reached the cabin. Nothing ate me. Not the bear, not the forest, not the darkness.

Chapter Münchhausen.

Münchhausen was still pulling — by the last hairs, from the last swamp. I went to Joe Dispenza. Spontaneously. Without a plan, without preparation. Just — went. Like a person drowning who grabs at anything.

I didn't know who Dispenza was. Well — I knew a little from videos, from motivational clips YouTube served during sleepless nights, but I hadn't read his books yet.

But something pushed me to go to a seven-day seminar. Not the head — the head was broken. Something else. The part that at fourteen hung from a branch, and the branch broke. She's not loud. Just — stubborn.

I ended up in a hall full of people who were meditating. Crying, laughing, feeling things. I sat among them and felt nothing. Closed my eyes — darkness. Tried to relax — the body didn't know how.

But I encountered the practice. Not the idea of meditation — I'd known that for a long time. But the daily sitting, with closed eyes, with an attempt to ask. Not solve, not control — but ask. For joy. For love. For sensations in the body. For a girl who was forbidden to ask since age five — this was a revolution.

Six months I meditated. Every day. Asked for only one thing: joy, love, sensations in the body. And felt nothing. Nothing. Sometimes — emptiness. Sometimes — tension. Sometimes — the thought that I'm doing everything wrong. But I continued. Not because it was "better." Because the alternative was clear.

On the outside nothing was happening. No insights, no breakthroughs, no tears of relief. If someone had asked me then whether it helped, I'd have said: no. But the body kept sitting down every morning.

And somewhere at the edge — not in the head, not in words — something strange appeared. Not even a thought. More like a shift. I suddenly understood that I didn't have to stay. Not in the global sense, not "leave life," but simply — not be where it's terrifying. Not sleep in a house where at any second screaming can start. Not wait for it to begin.

For the first time between two habitual points — "endure" and "die" — a third appeared. You can leave. And stay alive.

I don't know when exactly it started. It wasn't a decision. Wasn't a thought you can write down. More like water moving under ice. Where I'd stopped breathing many years ago, something barely perceptibly shifted — quietly, almost invisibly, without permission. As if inside me was a part that hadn't died this whole time. Just waited.

This is how my Snake woke up. Slowly, without noise, without promises. Coiled in the body, in the place I hadn't breathed into for forty years, where neither words, nor therapy, nor attempts to "understand" reached.

Kundalini yoga every morning tried to reach her. Most of the time — nothing. Empty. Like knocking on a closed door. But sometimes something stirred. Not a feeling, not relief — just movement. As if under the crust of ice there really is water.

Snake was in no hurry. She didn't need faster, she didn't need a result. She'd waited many years and could wait more. And for the first time in all that time, I stopped rushing her.

In Big Bear I expected a reset. Fresh air, mountains, distance from the apartment where walls were closing in. Instead I got the opposite. Vanya was tense. Artem was explosive. And I — I had nowhere to run. In the city I could drive. Here — trapped.

The trip ended early. We packed in silence. Drove home without speaking. The mountains didn't help. Nothing outside helps when the problem is inside.

Chapter The Cell.

"I'm a sociable person who locked herself in this apartment all alone, and I like it."

I moved out after the Big Bear story.

Not only because of Vanya's rejection, criticism, screaming, and devaluing. Not only because with him I felt invisible, unneeded, "a resource." I moved out because I lived in constant fear. Because of Artem — too. Because of that scream you can't predict and can't understand. Because of that feeling of prison: this is like grandmother, this is fucking forever. Because of this body that every second expects a blow.

I rented an apartment five minutes from our house. Six-month lease. Took with me two forks, two spoons, and all my dresses. Furnished it like a monk's quarters: minimal things, empty space, silence. Vanya creates coziness, fancy touches, little comforts — I couldn't care less, I can live without that. I genuinely just need lots of empty space and silence and minimalism. A cell.

Before moving I had paralysis. Strong fear in the body. What I found — it might be noisy from the road. On Facebook it looked a lot like a scam. And when I looked at options far from home — paralyzing fear. Tanya said: separation anxiety. You have to live through it. Survive it with the body. Don't rush. Since you've made the decision — move forward in contact with yourself.

I moved. Found the apartment. Signed the contract. Moved in. For the first time in a long while — quiet.

Vanya stayed with Artem. Alone. For almost a year. With a child who screams, hits, explodes out of nowhere. Without a wife. Without help. Worked full-time and then came home to what I'd fled from. He didn't complain. Not once. When I asked "how are things" — he said "fine." His "fine" was the same lie as my smile in Slack.

At first I thought I'd go on dates. Why not — a free woman, living alone, have the right. Installed Tinder. Scrolled through profiles. Swiped right. Got matches.

And sabotaged absolutely all of them.

Even if it got to a date — I didn't go. Couldn't drag myself out of the house without a reason. Going somewhere just because, not for business — impossible. I'm wasting fucking time, and it's scary too. Elena, my therapist, said I needed to go on these dates: otherwise I'm reinforcing the punishing critic who scares me that it's always been bad, is and will be, and I'm not getting the most important thing — a healthy experience where that's not the case. I saw sense in this. But I didn't have the resources for it.

I understood: I'm attracted to the same cold, indifferent type as Vanya. And what for? It's a ton of time — going on these dates, spending it.

I knew why I sabotaged. In one of the sessions, in an altered state, I saw it crystal clear: I want to be with my family. I love them very much. That's why I don't go on any dates. Not because it's scary, not because I don't have time. Because I don't want someone else. I want my own.

And I dropped the whole idea. Decided: okay, I'll live like this. Without relationships, without sex. Alone.

I did everything I could. Meditations. Therapy. Work and child 50/50.

I truly believed that if I did enough — it would get easier.

But it didn't get easier.

I was sinking deeper.

And at some point this brought me to a place I never thought I could reach.

* * *

Chapter Kitchen Knife.

After Dispenza, at home everything was the same. The same small apartment. The cell. The same walls. The same silence. Not calm — empty.

I stood in the kitchen. Alone. Had just released a product at ServiceNow. And a knife on the table. Not Vanya's — mine. Just a knife. A kitchen knife. The one I used to cut bread. Only this time I looked at it differently.

The first time — when Vanya gave it — was about despair. About the abyss you fall into with someone nearby who doesn't catch you. That time was about two people.

This time was about one. Only about me. Standing in the kitchen. No one there. No one provoking. No one screaming. No one giving the knife — it's just lying there. And the hand reaches on its own. Not from anger. Not from resentment. From exhaustion. From emptiness. Heavy hands, empty head, body not resisting.

I picked up the knife.

And at that moment — in that second when the metal was at my arm — everything compressed into a single point. Not before my eyes — in my body. Grandmother's beatings. Mother's absence. Grandfather's receiver, which he hung up. Maxim, whom I left. Vanya, who screamed, went silent, gave the knife. Artem, who attacked with scissors. Toronto. California. The balcony. The floor where I lay while the baby crawled. The product I released — "never happened, impossible" — and laid off. The insurance policy in the husband's name. Candles on my thirtieth birthday. The letter to Artem: "If I'm gone — don't take it personally." All of it — in one second. In one knife. In one hand.

Raised it over the vein.

A call from a friend...

And I stopped.

Not because I was scared. Not because someone grabbed it. Not because the branch broke, like at fourteen. I stopped — because from inside a word rose. One. Quiet. From the belly, not the head. From the part of me that at six months lay in a crib, abandoned, and didn't die. That at fourteen hung from a branch, and the branch broke. That stood on the edge of the seventeenth-floor balcony, and Vanya woke up. That lived in hell for two years and got up every morning.

The **Part That Doesn't Want to Die**. That never wanted to. That was simply tired of living the way she'd been living. Maybe this part is the soul?

She said: enough.

Not "enough living." Enough — like this. Enough enduring. Enough staying silent. Enough being convenient, useful, functional. Enough solving other people's problems. Enough wearing the corset. Enough.

This was the very bottom you push off from. Not beautiful. Not poetic. Kitchen, nighttime, knife on the table. Ugly. Shameful. Real.

This is where the book began. From this kitchen. From this knife. From this second when I stood between "one more attempt at living" and "all." And I chose — not life. I chose — to try one more time. One last backup plan. Instead of everything else. Myself — as a project. Not for someone. For me.

This was a beginning. Clumsy, shameful. But — a beginning. The very one this book was worth writing for.

Chapter Two Strangers.

Then came the second Dispenza seminar. February 2025. And there I met two people who changed everything. Not therapists. Not gurus. Just two people.

The first told me about AA — Alcoholics Anonymous. And said one phrase that was key for me: you don't have to believe in God there.

My relationship with God wasn't "I don't believe." Worse. A conflict. Since childhood.

As a child I found myself an explanation. The only one that kept me from going mad from what was happening: my soul chose this. Chose it itself — this family, this grandmother, this pain. To learn something. To become stronger. To pass a lesson that couldn't be passed otherwise. This explanation kept me afloat. Like a raft of rotting boards — not beautiful, not reliable, but you're on it, and you're not drowning. If the soul chose — it has meaning. It wasn't for nothing. You can endure.

And at the same time — on a different floor, in the same child — lived something else. My grandmother was religious. Prayed. Made me recite prayers. And I watched her — a woman who prays and beats, prays and curses, prays and puts you on your knees on buckwheat — and drew my own conclusions. She didn't say "God punished you." I decided that myself. Because there was no other explanation. If God exists, and grandmother prays to him, and does to me what she does — then God is on her side. Then I'm bad. Then I deserved it. He sees everything — the beating, the expulsion, the corner — and doesn't intervene. Watches and doesn't help. What's the point of asking him for help? He never helped me. Saw everything — and didn't help.

God didn't save my mother either. Didn't take the bottle from her hands. Didn't bring her home. In my world God stood on the side of those who hit. Or he didn't exist at all.

Two beliefs lived side by side without conflicting — as happens with children who simultaneously believe in Santa Claus and know that gifts are bought by mom. The soul chose this experience — and God punished me for being bad. One gave hope, the other gave explanation. Both were needed to survive.

Then, in the seventh month of pregnancy, the first raft fell apart. When I stood with a growing belly and couldn't buy the baby a single thing, when that cruel part rose that speaks to children only in grandmother's voice, when I saw I was repeating what I'd sworn to protect against — at that moment the explanation "the soul chose" stopped working. What soul? Why would a soul choose a mother who can't stroke her own belly?

And I allowed a thought more frightening than all grandmother's curses: maybe there is no soul. Maybe we live once. Maybe there was no meaning in this pain — no lesson, no plan, no choice. It just happened. Just bad luck. Just chaos, in which a child got what she got. And no one chose. And no one watches from above. And there's no one to turn to.

And with this I lived. With an empty space where other people have faith. Only me. Only control. Only "handle it yourself."

Then my grandmother put me on my knees in the corner — and when thirty years later the AA program says "get on your knees and pray," the body recognizes it instantly. Same knees. Same posture. Same demand: repent, admit you're bad, ask forgiveness from someone above. Before it was grandmother. Now — God. For my inner child there was no difference.

And this guy at Dispenza says: you don't have to believe in God there. Your Higher Power can be anything. A group. Nature. And the door that had been nailed shut since childhood — cracked open. Not flung wide. A crack. Enough for air to seep through. I felt it in my chest — as if something slightly unclenched.

The second stranger who changed my life was also a former alcoholic. He stood before me — alive, calm, sober, with a great body — and said: "Why would I drink now, when I can just breathe?" And I believed him. Not because he argued convincingly. But because he was standing. Alive. A former alcoholic who no longer drinks. Not because he "conquered himself," not because he "found God" — but because he found another way to cope with what he used to drink from. Breathing.

He showed me what he does. How he breathes. How through breathing he reaches the body. How through the body — feelings. How through feelings — the state Dispenza calls elevation, which I would later call more simply: when it's not empty inside.

The next day I quit drinking alcohol.

Chapter AA.

Before this I could drink a bottle of wine a day. Every other day — a bottle. I knew: if I continued, I'd die like my mother. Like Uncle Oleg. Same organs, same method, same ending. Grandmother's curse, fulfilling itself literally: mother — died. Oleg — beaten to death while drunk. I'm next. And every time I poured myself wine, I knew this. And poured.

I tried to quit. Couldn't. Not because I lacked willpower. Couldn't because wine wasn't the problem. Wine was the answer. The answer to pain that had no other exit. Therapist Oleg once said to me long ago: "You don't have an alcohol problem. You have many other problems." I didn't understand then what he meant. Understood later: alcohol wasn't the disease. It was anesthesia. The only working one. The only one that worked when nothing else did.

And after the second Dispenza, after those two strangers who changed my whole life by the simple fact that they'd made it, I went to AA. Alcoholics Anonymous. A specific problem — a specific goal: quit drinking. Simple. Logical. Like all my projects: saw the task — solve it. Came to a meeting, sat, listened.

AA didn't click. The format wasn't mine. People talked about binges, about hitting bottom, about losing everything — and I sat thinking: this isn't about me. I'm not an alcoholic. My mother was an alcoholic. I just drink to survive. That's different. The resistance was powerful: "my story is worse," "this isn't my group." My body clenched at every meeting. Belonging means being vulnerable. And I didn't know how to do that.

But in AA I learned about ACA. Adult Children of Alcoholics. Not me — the alcoholic. My mother. And everything wrong with me isn't brokenness but a pattern. I started going to meetings.

All my time went to reflection. To breathing. To practices. To yoga. To ACA. To therapy. To inner work. I did kundalini yoga, Joe Dispenza meditations, and breathing for twelve hours a day. Got up at three or four a.m. to do these practices. Every day.

Vanya just said: I call you and all you do is breathe.

I answered: I'm doing everything I can to restore the family. Preserving the family is the most important thing in my life right now. That's why I don't go anywhere. I do all these practices to calm down and restore love.

I went to the loving parent group and ACA. Many there lived in isolation — like me. Four walls, closed door, phone on silent. I wanted to learn to go out.

But meditation, breathing, and loving parent — this is what heals all these problems. I understood this from my own skin. Not from a book, not from a therapist — from my own body, which for the first time in decades began to relax slightly.

But the first year was a pit. Most of the time I was down. I didn't want to buy things, though I could. Didn't want to meet friends, see people. Even when they called — I tensed up. Phone on do not disturb mode, so no one could even show a notification or call. I isolated myself within four walls. Avoided everything. First four months of recovery and I see no progress. My hands drop. Again despair and isolation. How much longer?

All my kind conversations with the critic and the perfectionist, when they haven't captured me yet and I can still think — all that is only available when I'm alone. The moment another person appears — instant capture. Strong critic, skeptic, hellish fear of error from the perfectionist, all the fears — that time is passing wasted, inefficiently, we're wasting time. Well, all of that.

* * *

But every time I had even a little good mood that year — and that was rare, like a break in solid clouds — I drove to the family. And invested. Everything I'd gathered in the silence of my cell, every drop of warmth I'd managed to collect through breathing and meditations — I carried there. To them.

I gave up all social events. Focused only on the child, the house, work. This was my compensation. The eighth step of ACA suggested: the main people I'd harmed are Artem and Ivan. There were practically no others. This is exactly what helped and continues to help preserve the family. This is truly the most important thing for me.

I understood in meditations: my goal is to work on myself, improve my relationship with Ivan and Artem. If I die now — what am I living for? For this. For them. For us.

And I constantly saw: I want to restore our relationship. With Ivan, with Artem. I don't know whether it's codependency or real feelings. Because when things got really bad — in the pit, in despair, in hopelessness — I hated them all. Wanted them not to exist. Wanted to die myself. But when I climbed out even a little, when it let go even slightly, when breathing started working and the body relaxed a bit — I invariably drove to them. And the feelings were stable. Precisely when I felt better.

But codependency pulls down. And this pulled up. Here it was different: each time, rising from the pit, I chose them. Not from despair, not because there's nowhere else to go, not because being alone is scary. But because when the fog cleared — they were what I saw. What I wanted to walk toward.

It was a pendulum. From the pit — to practice. From practice — to family. From family — back to the pit. From the pit — back to the cell. And in circles, month after month. But each time, rising, I drove to them. And each time the feeling was the same: I want to go home. Want to go to my people. Each time the same — warmth in my stomach when I turned toward home.

The first stranger was a woman. Blonde. Mid-fifties. She stood at the microphone and said she'd been sober for eleven years. But sobriety was not the point. The point was what she said next: "I was exactly where you are. And I got out."

The second was a man. Younger. He talked about breathwork. How he'd started breathing and his body began releasing what it had stored for decades. Tremors. Screams. Then — calm. Real calm. Not the kind you force. The kind that comes when something inside finally unclenches.

Chapter AA vs ACA.

Why didn't AA work for me?

In AA people told their stories. Men and women who drank for years, lost families, jobs, homes, woke up in unfamiliar places, couldn't remember the night before. They said: "I'm an alcoholic. And I'm powerless before alcohol." And the room nodded. And they continued. And I listened.

And didn't recognize myself. Not because my story was easier — it was different. I didn't wake up in a ditch. I woke up in bed, went to work, earned a six-figure salary, won lawsuits for Artem, received Exceeds High Bar — and in the evening poured wine. Not to get drunk. To fall asleep. To not scream at the child. So the formula inside — "all for nothing, nothing will change, no one will come" — would shut up for at least an hour. I wasn't an alcoholic.

But AA didn't see this difference. In AA everyone is an alcoholic. Period. In AA you haven't drunk for thirty years — and still: "I'm an alcoholic." Remission doesn't count. Like the gold medal with grandmother. And the program is the same for everyone: admit powerlessness, trust God, do the steps, attend meetings. Thirty years sober — attend. Forty years — attend. Until the end of life — attend and repent. I sat watching people who hadn't had a drop in thirty years — still introducing themselves: "I'm an alcoholic." Thirty years. And still repenting. Still bad. Still guilty.

And something inside me rebelled. Not protest — recognition. Because I knew this model. I grew up in it. Grandmother: you're guilty. You're bad. You must repent. Stand on your knees until you ask forgiveness. And AA was offering me the same thing — in different packaging. Eternal repentance. Eternal guilt. Eternal "I'm not good enough." No thanks. I already lived in that for forty years. I'd had enough.

And one more thing. In AA they examined what you did wrong. Whom you harmed. Before whom you're guilty. Did an inventory — the fourth step. But didn't examine — why. Didn't dig to the root. Didn't ask: where did this come from? Where did this bottle come from? Where did this powerlessness come from? What happened in childhood? What was done to you before you started doing this to yourself? "Hurt people hurt people" wasn't discussed. AA treated the symptom — alcohol. But didn't touch the cause — the pain they drank from.

And the solution — the only solution AA offered — was: trust the Higher Power. God. Surrender control. And for some people it worked. For people who could believe. For people who had some notion that the world could be safe, that someone above cares, that you can let go and not fall. But I — I was the girl who prayed for her mother to come back — and mother didn't come back. What God? The one who punishes children? The one you pray to on your knees — like grandmother put you in the corner? My inner child doesn't believe in God. Can't. Not because I'm an atheist — because every time he trusted something bigger than himself — he was betrayed.

My sponsor from ACA would later tell me: "You don't have to believe. It's enough to be willing to believe. Willing to believe — that's already a step." And this changed everything. Because "willing to believe" isn't a demand for blind faith. It's permission to doubt. And doubting I could do. Since birth.

AA didn't click. I admitted it — not easily, because admitting that yet another attempt didn't work was one more piece of evidence: nothing helps. But I admitted it. And left.

And then — in AA, ironically — I learned about ACA.

Adult Children of Alcoholics. Not me — the alcoholic. Not me — the problem. My mother was the alcoholic. And I grew up in it. And everything happening to me — control, perfectionism, inability to relax, inability to feel, inability to ask, inability to trust — isn't my personal defect. It's the reaction of a child who grew up in a dysfunctional family. It has a name. It has a description. It has other people who've been through it.

I came to my first ACA meeting. And heard three rules that took my breath away. Three rules of the alcoholic family I grew up in: “Don’t talk. Don’t trust. Don’t feel.” My entire life — in three words. Don’t tell the truth — grandmother will punish. Don’t trust anyone — everyone will betray. Don’t feel — feelings hurt too much, better numbness. I lived by these rules from birth. I didn’t know they existed as a formulation. I didn’t know other people lived by them too. I thought it was just life. My life. Normal.

And there — a room. People. Who survived hell. The same as mine. Beatings. Expulsion. Control. Curses. Silence. Loneliness. And they sat — alive. And said aloud what I’d been silent about for forty years. And the most important thing — they didn’t just survive. **They crossed the River** that Joe Dispenza often talks about. They stood on the other bank and said: there is light here. It’s dim. You don’t see it right away. But it’s there.

I learned about reparenting. About how inside every adult child of an alcoholic lives a small child no one raised. And the task is not to find the perfect parent outside (there won’t be one), but to grow one inside. Become your own mother. Become your own father. Talk to yourself in a kind voice. Notice yourself. Comfort. Praise. Protect. Everything grandmother didn’t do. Everything mother didn’t do. Everything grandfather wanted to but couldn’t.

And here is the difference with AA — huge, fundamental. In AA the solution is God. Surrender to him. Trust. In ACA the solution is you. Grow an inner parent. Become what you never had. Don’t wait for someone to come and save you — become that someone for yourself. Don’t count on a Higher Power — become your own higher power. Through meditation, through breathing, through the kind voice, through daily, monotonous, boring work — like everything that truly changes a life.

For me, thorough, analytical, not one to take things on faith — this was the only thing that could work. Not “believe” — but “do.” Not “surrender control” — but “learn to control differently: from inside, not outside.” Not “you’re powerless” — but “you’re stronger than you think, you’ve just been directing the strength in the wrong direction.”

The ACA book became my bible. Not because I found God — because I found myself. The little one. The one who stood in the corner on her knees. The one who at six months lay in a crib and waited. She hadn’t gone anywhere. She simply waited — forty years — for someone to come and say: “I’m here. I won’t leave. You’re not alone.” And that someone, strangely enough, turned out to be me.

The biggest breakthrough began when I broke the rules. Don’t talk — I started talking. Aloud. At meetings. In my journal. In this book. Don’t trust — I started trusting. First — the group. Then — a sponsor. Then — a little — myself. Don’t feel — I started feeling. And that ripped open every wound. All of them. At once. As if I’d opened a hatch under which forty years of what I’d hidden had been accumulating. And it all poured out — pain, hatred, shame, guilt, grief, anger, despair, longing for the mother who isn’t there, anger at the grandmother who exists only in memory. It all poured out — and I drowned in it. And fell. And rose. And fell again.

But that was the salvation. Not in the falling — in the fact that I was falling and rising differently now. Not mechanically, not on autopilot, not because I “had to.” But because I chose to. For the first time — for myself. For that little girl inside who waited forty years for someone to come for her.

I came. Not mother. Not grandmother. Not Vanya. Not God. Me. The knees remember grandmother’s corner. But I got up from them myself.

And this was the beginning of what I would later call transformation.

This was not an insight. I’d had many insights. This was different.

For the first time since childhood I sat in a room and wasn’t alone in my abnormality. Not “everyone around is normal, I’m not.” But: there are several of us. There are many of us. And we’re all alive.

Not healing. Simply — for the first time not alone with it.

* * *

In AA I found a name. In ACA — a map.

The twelve steps are not a healing program. They are a program of honesty. First — with yourself. Then — with those you love. Then — with everything else.

I started with the first. It was the most impossible.

When I first read the characteristics of adult children of alcoholics — all fourteen points — I didn't cry. I laughed. Nervously, briefly, like a person who'd been searching for a diagnosis for forty years and suddenly found it in one paragraph. For the first time in my life, my defect turned out to be not unique. For the first time — not alone.

Chapter The First "Arrival".

April 21, 2025.

Adderall — prescribed for ADHD. Cannabis — prescribed for sleep. A Dispenza meditation. Six straight hours.

I didn't plan this. Didn't set an alarm for "enlightenment at 2 PM." Just sat. Closed my eyes. And didn't get up for six hours.

Then — two more weeks. Twelve to eighteen hours a day. Got up at five a.m., sat on the mat — and until night. Not because I wanted to set a record. But because the body finally spoke — and I couldn't shut it up. Forty-one years it was silent. Forty-one years I forced it to be silent: with the corset, with control, with a pulled-in stomach, with clenched teeth. And now it opened its mouth — and waves poured out.

The state was like being on mushrooms — but I was lucid and remembered everything. Waves moved through the body — from the pelvis upward, along the spine, to the crown. The Snake. Cracking sounds — like a chiropractor working in the room, only without the chiropractor. The body moved on its own — not from my command but from its own logic, which I'd suppressed for forty years. Muscles were restructuring. Spasms releasing. Strange, involuntary movements came out of the body — like an animal stretching after lying in a cage for a very long time. The body was doing kundalini yoga, which I'd never practiced and didn't even know about at that point.

And I saw beliefs. Not as thoughts — as structures. As walls someone had built inside me long ago, and I'd been living behind them without knowing they were walls, not the world.

"I must be useful to exist." I see.

"Relaxing = dangerous." I see.

"My body is not a source of truth but a working tool." I see.

Each belief — like a brick. Each spasm — the point where the brick was cemented into the body.

And the main thing.

I saw how my corset was built from the inside. The outer muscles — strong. The ones you can see: abs, shoulders, back. The ones that hold the facade. The ones that let you work twelve hours, carry a child, drag suitcases through three countries, smile in an interview when inside you want to die. And the inner muscles — the core, the ones holding the spine, the ones that should be the foundation — weak. Barely functioning. Like a house with massive walls and a rotted foundation.

And I saw when it started. The body showed: right here. In infancy. Right here the first chakra closed — when mother disappeared, when crying didn't work, when no one came. The body at six months made a decision: close. Clench. Survive. And since then — forty-one years — hadn't opened.

And in those six hours — something began to open. Not immediately. Not fully. Like a door stuck from moisture that gives a millimeter. But gives.

I called this "given a new life." Not because I was instantly healed. But because for the first time I saw the map. Before, I walked by feel. Now — I saw from above. The walls are the same. But I knew where the turns were.

Then the effect ended. The body clenched back. The Critic switched on. Control returned.

But the map remained. And the body remembered: this is what it's like when you're open. This is what it's like when you breathe for real. This is what it's like when the spine isn't clamped but stands. The body tried — and now knew where to go. And I went.

After the first arrival I understood two things. First: insights in the head don't heal. The body heals. Through breathing. Through movement. Through what the head doesn't need to understand — the lungs just need to breathe.

Second: the scheduled bladder surgery wouldn't help me. The problem isn't the bladder. The problem is that my pelvis has been clenched since age three, since the day I wet myself on the carpet in front of everyone. And until the pelvis opens and I work through the shame — no surgery will change anything.

I canceled the surgery. Started working with the pelvis. With the sacrum. With the feet. Building a map of the body — bone by bone, muscle by muscle. The way I built a career — only now inward, not outward.

Then — Sadhguru. The ashram. The Shoonya program. Three months of intensive practice — breathwork, kundalini, meditation every day. I'll tell the full story later. What matters here: that's where I came back from, transformed.

Chapter Broken Dishes.

After the ashram and finding myself, I came to Artem for the weekend feeling uplifted. I dreamed — I could come back, we'd get a dog, I'd devote time to family, stop working so much, everything would be fine. I was doing three hours of practices a day. Breathing, shaking, rocking the inner child. Three hours a day. Every day. I was certain: I'm ready.

It lasted fifty minutes.

He shoved me. Screamed. Insulted me. Then smashed all the dishes. Wrecked the kitchen. Everything he could get his hands on. Plates, cups, glasses. The sound of breaking dishes — like grandmother's voice: sharp, sudden, making everything inside clench.

Before, I would have stopped him. Grabbed him. Pinned him to the floor by force. Or screamed back — in that same grandmother's voice that made me shudder for hours afterward. Or run to the bathroom and sat there, shaking.

But this time — for the first time — I didn't stop him.

Simply removed from the danger zone anything that could hurt. And stood nearby. Silent. Not angry. Not screaming. Not clenching my teeth. All my practices helped — three months of breathing, kundalini, meditations, talking to the inner child. Three months I taught the body not to react the old way. And the body — obeyed. For the first time.

He wrecked everything. And stopped. Not because I stopped him — because he ran out of fuel. Because for the first time an adult stood nearby who didn't answer fire with fire. Who didn't become another source of screaming. Who simply — was.

Then I explained to him. Calmly, as never before. You were probably angry at me. For living apart from you. For leaving. For the small apartment instead of a house with a pool. You have the right to be angry. You're in pain. I see that.

He cried.

The next day the episode repeated. I held steady again.

* * *

Then I fell apart. Not him — me. I crumbled inside. As if I'd held a building on my back while he was smashing — and when he left, the building collapsed on me. For a month I couldn't see him. Couldn't visit. Cried for hours. Couldn't work. The part that held — let go. And underneath it was — empty.

Vanya added to it. Said: "You've been doing your practices for a month and a half and there's no result, you're just as bad. Go to the gym, do a cold plunge, get a hobby — and everything will be fine. What you're doing is all crap."

I sat and cried. And tried to kill the hope. That I'd ever return to that house. Because I didn't want to come where I get screamed at. I was tired of reviving this hope. Wanted to kill it for good. But didn't know how to live without it.

And then — a month later — something happened that I didn't expect.

They prescribed him medication after that incident, and it started helping. For the first time (we'd tried everything over four years). On the weekend, when Vanya was building a sauna and I had to be with Artem — he didn't scream once.

Not once.

Before, we had this: one day in three months — he doesn't scream. One day without screaming was a good day. A holiday. We marked it internally, the way you mark remission.

And here — two days in a row. Vanya saw changes too throughout that month.

And what struck me most wasn't the medication. The medication helped. But the coincidence was too precise. Things started changing when I started working on myself. And when I allowed him to do what he was doing.

Not stopped. Not screamed. Not run away. Just — allowed.

As if for ten years he had been waiting not for my control, not for my screaming, not for my instructions and correct words from books. He was waiting for an adult to stand beside him who wouldn't crumble from his pain. Who could endure. Without answering fire with fire.

Of course, I need more days like that to stop being afraid to come and spend time with him. This isn't healing yet. This is the first exhale after ten years of holding your breath.

But he didn't scream. Two days. And that was — like a miracle. A small, quiet, ugly miracle, preceded by broken dishes and a month when I couldn't get off the floor.

Chapter How I Learned to Push Back.

For twelve years I was silent.

What that looked like — I've already written. Skirts, massages, twelve days of silence, drinking to sleep with him when I didn't want to, four outbursts of anger in all those years. I won't repeat it. The body remembers.

This is about how the silence began to end.

How a fight used to work: he said something — and everything clenched inside. Not necessarily a scream. Sometimes a contemptuous look. Sometimes words that individually are normal, but in the context of twelve years hit the same place grandmother hit. Not the stomach. The dignity.

And the autopilot switched on. Go silent. Swallow. Don't show. And then — make up. Quickly. Reset the conflict to preserve contact. Not because I thought I was wrong. Because being cut off was scarier than any injustice.

He lived with a woman who doesn't get offended and doesn't ask for help, care, and support. He thought so for twelve years. And I was stockpiling. Like grandmother. Only I didn't explode — I drank. And one day stood on the balcony of the seventeenth floor.

* * *

January 2026. The fight that changed everything.

Vanya called at noon. Started with a complaint: I promised to come by twelve and would be two hours late due to circumstances I'd communicated.

— You promised and aren't keeping your word.

Anxiety switched on immediately. Familiar, bodily. I'm unreliable. I don't keep my word. I'm wrong again.

Then — without pause — he moved to an example. Told me about friends. They want to divorce because "you can't rely on a person because of their ADHD."

For him it was someone else's story. An abstract example. Not about us.

But I was already inside the anxiety. The body was already on guard. And when right after "you don't keep your word" came "you can't rely on a person" — the body connected the dots before the head. Not because I'm paranoid. Because twelve years of criticism taught me to hear judgment where it hasn't been spoken yet.

I interrupted. Said I hear this as a continuation — that first I was accused of unreliability, then the accusation was reinforced with a story where people divorce over it.

— You made up a dialogue in your head that didn't happen, — he said. — You got offended by words I didn't even say.

He wanted one thing: for me to admit I'd misunderstood. That his example had nothing to do with me. That the problem was my interpretation, not how he started the conversation.

I wrote him a letter. Detailed. Explained: I didn't react to his intention — I reacted to the context. To the complaint that started the conversation. To the anxiety it triggered. To twelve years during which the body learned to expect judgment in every conversation. I didn't "make up a dialogue." I lived the context he set — and it hurt.

He didn't accept a single explanation. The formula remained: you distorted, you imagined, the problem is you. On the phone he added: "You have an imaginary person in your head. It's possibly a consequence of your ADHD. I can't guess what's in your head."

— You have an imaginary person in your head. This is possibly a consequence of your ADHD. I can't guess what's going on inside you.

That is: instead of "I see my words hurt you" — "you have a perception defect." Instead of "let's figure out what happened" — "you made it up." My pain was reclassified as my malfunction.

We were arguing about what counts as reality. For him, reality was his intention and his words. For me — my reaction and my body. He said one thing, I heard another. And instead of trying to understand why I heard it that way — he insisted I heard it wrong.

I showed my anger on the phone. He reacted by saying "you're mean." Hung up. "Don't come."

Before, I would have given in. Apologized for being offended. Swallowed it.

This time I wrote another letter. Not hysterical. Long, numbered. Ten patterns of our interaction — each with the mechanism, examples, and a description of what it does to me.

Context is excluded — only his words and his intention are recognized as reality.

My explanations don't change his position — no matter how many times I explain.

My labor is devalued — "where's the result?," "nothing is changing," "prove it."

My emotions are allowed only when convenient. Anger — "you're mean," phone hung up.

I wrote not out of revenge. I wrote because for the first time in my life I had language for what was happening. ACA gave me that language. And I could name the mechanism — with precise words, not with screaming and not with silence.

I lay down. And fell asleep.

Calmly. Without ruminating. Without the usual horror that contact was severed and the world collapsed. The body responded with relief. Anger came out in words — and afterward it got quieter, not louder.

He called back. Apologized. Offered to make up.

Before, I would have rushed in. Reset everything just so he'd talk to me again.

This time I didn't rush. Said "mhm-mhm," but inside held one thing: without acknowledging what happened, reconciliation is just another devaluation.

We started talking. Slowly. Like two people who'd spent twelve years communicating in different languages.

He started hearing — not my arguments, but my pain. Started asking: "Did I upset you?" He hadn't asked before — because he didn't know I got upset. Now he knew.

* * *

March. Friday. 2026.

Called Vanya. Just wanted to be together. Suggested going to a restaurant or buying shrimp and cooking together.

He answered: sorry, you're not in my focus of attention. You're calling short notice.

Not "I'm busy, let's do tomorrow." But — you're not in my focus of attention. Like a task that was postponed. I invited my husband to spend the evening together — and was told I'm not a priority.

The body heard the familiar.

Before, this would have triggered the chain. Critic: of course, who needs you. Surrenderer: pointless. Binge Eater: open the fridge.

It didn't trigger.

Not because I suddenly became strong. But because that morning I'd breathed. Two hours. The body was in a different state — not survival mode, but slightly below. Slightly softer. And when the familiar chain tried to start, I managed to notice it before it picked up speed.

I cooked myself dinner. Arranged it beautifully on a plate — as I'd never done before, because before, food was a task, not a pleasure. Promised myself I'd draw. Went to work on the book.

A plate instead of a pit. A small choice. But — mine.

* * *

Sunday. Two days later. Artem's day. We were making a celebration for him — the three of us.

At the table I shared with Vanya a dream. Something I'd been carrying for months and hadn't told anyone aloud.

I said: I want my book to be recommended in every AA group.

Not from vanity. From a conviction that had grown over the past year. I'd attended AA meetings — people there walked in for thirty years saying: I'm an alcoholic. Thirty years of repenting. And it's true — they're alcoholics. But it's not the whole truth. Because almost all of them grew up in the same houses as me. They treated alcohol — the symptom. And the root — childhood — remained untouched. No one asked why the person started drinking. No one taught loving parent. No one explained why meditation works at the level of the nervous system, not "because God." For those who lost faith, for the thorough, for the analytical — AA had no tools. I wanted to provide them.

He straightened an invisible crown on his head and said: "Crown not too tight?"

First I couldn't respond. A lump. Clenching. The same mechanism as with grandmother: when it hurts — go silent.

But this time between "it hurts" and "go silent" a gap appeared. A second. Maybe two. Into that gap I inserted words.

— You devalued the thing most precious to me. I've been carrying this book. I haven't left the house. And you — crown.

He: "What, you've never been offended before?"

— Always offended. Just held it in.

He: "I didn't know you were like that."

— Well, I am. And when I joke about myself — that's my right. Russians can joke about Russians. But Americans about Russians, no. When you joke about me at the moment I trust you with the most precious thing — that's not a joke. That's devaluation.

I said this calmly. Looking him in the eyes. In the voice I hadn't had for forty years.

He didn't leave. Didn't go silent. Stood and listened. Then — not right away — apologized.

Before, there was nothing to apologize for. Not because he didn't offend — but because I didn't show that I was offended. He lived with a woman who endures. And I — with a man to whom I couldn't show pain, because if I did — he'd leave. I was always afraid of that.

Nobody left.

* * *

On Friday I handled myself — didn't fall into the pit after "you're not in my focus." A plate. The book.

On Sunday I handled him — said "well, I am" and didn't apologize for it.

Between those two days — two days. Between the girl who for forty years swallowed every devaluation, and the woman who looked him in the eyes and named things by their names — a whole life. The program. The steps. The cat. The breathing. The dictaphone. Notes on the fridge. And one skill I'm learning again at forty-one: to say that it hurts.

* * *

Vanya is relearning. Started asking. Started noticing. Started apologizing — clumsily, like a person who was also never taught.

I'm relearning. To push back — not with a fist and not with silence. With words. Quiet. Precise.

We are both without a model. Both from houses where love looked like work and tenderness like weakness.

He didn't read ACA books. Didn't attend meetings. Didn't meditate with Dispenza. He had no map, no language for what was happening to us. And still — he was changing. Without tools. Without a therapist. Simply because I finally told the truth — and he heard it. For a person without a map — that's courage.

I still live separately. Want to return — every day. But I need more time to get used to the fact that Artem doesn't scream and Vanya is beginning to see me as a woman, not a function.

This is not a happy ending. This is an honest beginning. Or an honest ending. I don't know which yet.

I said: I don't want a dialogue where everything is my fault.

I didn't know whether it would work. Didn't know whether he'd leave. Didn't know whether this was the end of the marriage.

But I said it. And didn't take it back.

That is how it works. It doesn't look like a movie scene. It looks like a text message at 2 a.m. that you rewrite seventeen times and then send anyway.

Vanya read. Called the next day. Said: I hear you.

Didn't say sorry. Didn't say "I was wrong." Said: I hear you. For him that was a lot. For me it was enough.

I'm relearning. Pushing back — not with a fist and not with silence. With words. With presence. With the willingness to say: this hurts me — and not run away from the fact that it hurts.

We are both without a model. Both from houses where love looked like war. Both had to learn from scratch — how to fight and stay close. How to be angry and not destroy. How to say "this hurts" and not expect a blow in return.

He didn't read ACA books. Didn't go to meetings. Didn't meditate. His way of changing was different — slower, quieter, less visible. But he changed. Not how I wanted. How he could.

I still live separately. Want to come back — every day. But I need more time. More silence. More getting used to the fact that I can say "this hurts" and not be thrown out for it.

This is not a happy ending. This is an honest beginning. Or an honest end. I don't know yet. I just know that for the first time in twelve years, both of us are trying. Clumsily. With setbacks. With the old patterns still firing. But — trying.

Chapter "Wild Kitten".

On a ketamine session, Wild Kitten appeared. The same one, from the basement. Small, black, skinny, with protruding shoulder blades. Who wants contact — and bites first. Who wants a belly rub — and immediately attacks. Who waits to be picked up — and is afraid of being dropped.

On a session with Tanya, when I first fell into this child — the four-year-old who waits for mom and mom doesn't come — I cried and whispered: I'd settle for at least a cat. The loneliness was so deep you could drown in it. And the only thing I could say from that place: at least a living creature beside me. Warm. Who won't leave. Who doesn't care that I'm a bad mother, bad wife, bad granddaughter. A cat doesn't care. A cat is just there.

And then Lapa appeared.

Lapa the cat — also from a shelter. Also abandoned. Also grew up without a mother. Like me. When I took her, she was wild — hissed, bit, wouldn't let you touch her. Showed her belly — and immediately attacked. Wanted contact — and was the first to reject. Tested: will you leave or stay? Will you hit or endure? A classic pattern — testing attachment through aggression. The same one I'd been doing with Vanya for twelve years. The same one Artem was doing with me.

I moved out from Vanya — and took Lapa with me. To the cell. To the small empty apartment where the book began. And started doing with her what I couldn't learn to do with people.

Spoke in a kind voice. Didn't leave when she bit. Didn't scream when she scratched. Didn't reject when she hissed. Said: "You're not alone. I'm here. You can come when you're ready." The same words I needed to say to myself. The same unconditional love I could give a cat — but not myself. Not yet.

The Kind Voice didn't originate inside me. It wasn't there. Never. In my house, no one spoke that way. Grandmother spoke in commands. Not once did anyone say "sunshine" or "how are you?" in a voice that makes you want not to run but to stay.

The first time I heard this voice was by accident. Maxim was busy, and his mother called — I picked up his phone. His mother — Nadezhda Vasilyevna — didn't know I'd answered. And started speaking. Immediately. Without pause. In that very voice.

— My sunshine, how are you?

I froze. Not from surprise — from recognizing something I'd never had, but that the body instantly identified as needed. As if inside me there was an outlet nothing had ever been plugged into — and suddenly someone plugged something in, and the light turned on.

Lapa — slowly, over months, like everything in my life — began to thaw. Stopped biting so hard. Started lying beside me. Then — on me. On my left shoulder — where the biggest tension lives. As if she knew. Purred. Warm. Alive. And I lay there and felt: this is it. This is what it's like when someone is simply beside you. Not because you're useful. Not because you earned it. Simply — beside you.

And I began transferring this experience inward. First — a kind voice with Lapa. Then — with Artem, when he calmed down in the evening and became warm, tender, small. Then — with myself. One millimeter at a time. First outward — you learn to love a living creature that bites. Then you see from outside what it looks like — not abandoning someone who tests. Then you apply it to yourself. From nothing, everything is born. This is how I created love — from nothing. Like Münchhausen pulling himself by the hair. Only instead of hair — a cat. And I'm a cat too.

— It's not Maxim, — I said. — But please continue.

She laughed. And continued — in the same voice. Warm, soft, unhurried. As if she had all the time in the world for me. Though I wasn't her grandchild. Wasn't her anything. Just a stranger on the phone.

The second time I heard this voice was several years later. My friend Lida described how her nanny used to talk to her as a child. Gently. Patiently. With that same "sunshine."

For Lida it was simply a description of a good nanny. For me — a revelation. So that's what it sounds like. So that's what a child can hear. So that's what I never had.

Years passed. I adopted the cat Lapa from a shelter. Wild, bitey, distrustful. I looked at her and recognized myself. An animal from a basement that hisses when you reach out. Not from evil — from fear.

And I began transferring this experience inward. First — to real Lapa. Then — to the inner Kitten. The same one, from the basement. Frightened. Hissing. Biting. But alive.

Two shelter creatures. Both without a mother. Both with distrust instead of closeness. Both learning to be held — for the first time in their lives.

The Kind Voice said on ketamine: "The Kitten shouldn't be scolded. She should be cherished."

And every time the Critic starts screaming — "you're defective, you're not coping, you'll never manage" — I imagine the Kitten. Small. Wild. In the basement. And I say: "I'm here. You're not alone. This will pass."

It works. Not because I believe in imagery. But because the body responds to tone. To a kind voice. To warmth. Even if it comes from yourself. Even if at first you don't believe it.

From a basement kitten to a panther. Not right away. The one who learns to trust — first learns to let herself be held. Then — to walk without flinching. Then — to lie in the sun. And then, someday — to become the one who holds others.

And what's your image for the vulnerable part? Maybe it's a kitten. Maybe a puppy. Maybe a baby bird. Something small. Something alive. Something that doesn't need instructions — just warmth.

Chapter Take What's Yours.

February 13, 2026.

I didn't attend my grandmother's funeral. When she died — I couldn't. Didn't come. Couldn't handle it. And since then I'd never said goodbye. Years passed, and inside it lay — unspoken, unclosed.

I lit two candles. One — hers. The other — mine. Tied them with string. Over time, when the connecting string burned through, her candle grew bigger. Mine — small.

I started speaking.

— You are big. I am small. Forgive me and release me. Take back what's yours. I don't need what's not mine. Take back the belief that you can scream at children and they'll become better. Take back your victim, your martyr, your rescuer. Take back the shame for the body, for feelings, for weakness. Take back "relaxing is not allowed" and "asking is shameful." I came here a very loving girl. Simply boundlessly loving. And I'm taking that back.

I give back what's yours. I don't need what's not mine.

But her candle burned out first. A small stub lay at my feet.

— Now I am big, — I said. — You are small.

And in that moment — instead of the anger I'd prepared — something else came. No anger at all. As if I'd opened a door behind which a fire should have been standing — and it was quiet. Warm. Peace.

Gratitude.

Not for the beatings. Not for the corner. Not for the belt with the clasp. For taking me at six months. For not sending me to the orphanage. For being there — when there was no one else. Harsh, terrifying, unbearable — but there.

This was not forgiveness. Forgiveness came earlier — at the eighth step, and it was different. This was separation. A boundary between her life and mine. Between what she put inside me and what I choose to carry forward.

The next day came a gift. I loaded all my diaries — years of entries, voice notes, notebooks — into ChatGPT. And it analyzed my life. All the patterns. All the cycles. In a few hours — what therapy would have taken years.

I sat reading — and cried. Healing tears. As if someone finally read my diary cover to cover and said: I see. I see everything. And I'm not leaving.

On the thirteenth — said goodbye to grandmother. On the fourteenth — saw myself, by irony of fate, on my mother's birthday.

While you carry what's not yours — you can't see your own. Your hands are full. Put it down — and you see.

Chapter Mahashivratri.

February 2026. Mahashivratri. An Indian holiday — the night of Shiva. The night when, by tradition, you can turn to something bigger than yourself.

I don't believe in Shiva. Don't believe in God — I've written that already. But after Sadhguru something shifted in my relationship to ritual. Not to faith — to action. Ritual is not prayer. Ritual is when you do something with the body, and the body remembers.

That night I didn't sleep. As is customary on Mahashivratri — staying awake until dawn.

I sat in the dark. Alone. In my cell. And did what I'd never done: asked.

Not God. Not Shiva. Not a higher power.

My lineage. I remembered from Hellinger's constellations (family constellation therapy — a method where you stand in for your ancestors to untangle inherited patterns), but I'd never done this.

— I ask for help, — I said. Aloud. In the empty apartment. — Not salvation. Help.

Then I did what came on its own. Not from a book, not from an instruction — from the body.

I scooped out loneliness.

With my hands. With my palms. As if inside me was a well, and at the bottom — thick, black, heavy water. And I scooped it with my palms and poured it out. Scooped and poured. Again and again. The hands moved on their own — not beautifully, not ritually, but childlike, like a child scooping water from a puddle simply because she wants the puddle gone.

It went on for a long time. I didn't count.

By morning the well hadn't emptied. But it got shallower. Shoulders dropped. For the first time in months — unclenched.

* * *

First I separated from grandmother.

Then — saw my patterns.

Then for the first time asked my lineage for help.

Three days. Three actions. None was therapy, an insight, a book, a seminar. All three were ritual — bodily, clumsy, nocturnal. Done not because it "helps" but because there's nothing else left to do.

The lineage answered. Not with a voice. Not with a sign. With a sensation. As if behind my back — not emptiness but someone. Many. Silent. But — standing.

I didn't become a believer. Didn't find God. But I stopped being alone.

Part I Cannot Control This.

Chapter ACA Steps.

Chapter Step One. Powerlessness.

The first step of ACA sounds simple: we admitted we were powerless over the effects of alcoholism and dysfunction in our families, and that our lives had become unmanageable.

Simple? For me it was the hardest sentence I'd ever read. Because every word in it was about me. And every word in it was impossible.

Powerless. Me — powerless. The girl who earned money from age six. Who at thirteen worked as a journalist. Who at fourteen left for boarding school. Who alone — without a mother, without a father, without help — made it through three countries, two universities, Amazon, ServiceNow, two lawsuits for her child, twelve years of marriage, suicidal depression, and a knife. Me — powerless? My entire life was built on strength. On control. On "I'll handle it myself." On "I don't need

anyone.” On “you took the reins — don’t say you can’t pull.” Admitting powerlessness meant betraying everything that helped me survive.

But the program didn’t ask whether I wanted to admit it. It asked: how’s life going with all that strength? Look. Honestly. Without the usual armor. Look at your life — the one you controlled with all your might — and tell me: is it manageable?

I looked. By that point I’d been in the program for four months. Four months of meditations, breathing, meetings, journaling. And the result? The same cage. The same inability to love. The same habit — the moment energy appears, immediately spend it on others. All the speed came back — dropping things, bumping into things, running, unable to stop. As if nothing had changed. As if four months of work — for nothing. Square one.

And right there — at that point of despair, so similar to all the previous points of despair — something new happened. I said aloud: “I cannot control this.”

Not “I’m not coping” — I’d said that before. Not “I need help” — I’d said that to therapists. But specifically: “I cannot control this. My control doesn’t work. My strategies don’t work. Everything I know how to do — solve problems, be useful, function — none of it helps. And I am powerless to change this my usual way.”

It sounded like defeat. Like a white flag. Sponsor Devin would later say: Look where you are. You’re not coping. And as long as you think you can cope on your own — God (or whatever it may be) has nowhere to begin working. He quoted Martin Luther: “Until a person becomes nothing, God cannot make anything of him.”

I didn’t become nothing. I don’t know how to be nothing. But for the first time I stopped pretending I was everything. That I can do everything. That one more modality, one more seminar, one more effort would be enough — and it would get fixed. It won’t get fixed. Not like this. Not my usual way.

This was not a dead end. Though it felt exactly like one. It was the first place in my life where I called things by their names and didn’t run into action. Didn’t make a plan. Didn’t sign up for a new course. Simply — stood and looked at the truth. An unmanageable life. Powerlessness. And silence after.

In my world, powerlessness killed. Literally. Grandmother discarded the useless. Mother was powerless — and died. Oleg — and was beaten to death.

And here the program asks me to admit it. To admit what I’d been running from for forty years. What stood behind every perfectionism of mine, behind every plan, behind every “I’ll handle it myself.” Fear. Simple, childlike, animal fear: if I admit I’m powerless — they’ll throw me out. Like mother. Like Oleg. As grandmother promised: “You’ll die under a fence.”

But I admitted it. Not beautifully. Not at a meeting, not with a microphone, not before an audience. Quietly. To myself. In a journal. In four words: “I cannot control this.” And the world didn’t collapse. And no one threw me out. I simply stood — powerless, exhausted, alive — and for the first time in forty years wasn’t pretending to be strong.

This didn’t heal me. The first step doesn’t heal. It opens a door. A small, nondescript one, similar to all the doors I’d opened before — but behind this door was something different. Behind this door was a space where you don’t have to be strong to exist. Where you can be weak and not die. Where “I’m not coping” is not a verdict but the beginning of a conversation.

The ACA program would later explain to me: Control is not strength. Control is a child’s reaction to chaos. When the house has an alcoholic, when a mother can hit and a grandmother can throw you out, when the world is unpredictable and dangerous — the child grabs the only thing within reach: Control. Controls the grades. Controls behavior. Controls facial expressions. Controls how much space they take up. Controls how quietly they breathe. And grows into an adult who controls everything — work, relationships, body, feelings — and calls it “I’m coping.”

I “coped” for forty years. And ended up at the knife. That’s the price of my control. That’s the result of my “strength.”

The first step is not weakness. It’s honesty. For the first time — with yourself. Without armor. Without a plan.

Simply: I am powerless. And my life is unmanageable. And that’s the truth. And from this truth, you can begin.

Chapter Steps Two and Three. Higher Power.

Second step: we came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

Third step: we made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

God. As we understood Him. This is where I got stuck.

Not for a week. Not for a month. For the entire time I worked with the program — until I found my own answer. Which turned out to be not the one the program offered. And not the one the sponsor expected. But — mine.

I tried to believe. Truly tried. Meditated with Dispenza — asked for joy, love, sensations. Read books. Listened to people at meetings who spoke about God, about a higher power, about how they surrendered control and life got better. Prayed on my knees — as Devin advised. Prayed and asked: help me believe. Help my inner child believe. Help me let go.

Nothing happened. Darkness. Emptiness. The same small creature in the basement, waiting and waiting, and no one comes.

And here the program asks: trust. Let go of control. Turn over your will. For an ordinary person this might be an act of faith. For me — a repetition of trauma. Once more become small. Once more trust. Once more end up on your knees — not because you chose but because there's no other option. Once more wait for someone outside to come and save. I'd done this already. My whole life. Waited — for mother, for Maxim, for Vanya, for therapists, for Dispenza, for whoever. No one came. Or came — and it wasn't enough. Or came — and turned out not to be the one.

I allowed. Didn't believe — allowed. Allowed that maybe my way — control, problem-solving, perfectionism, strength — isn't the only one. Allowed that maybe there is something invisible from behind the corset. Allowed that maybe if you loosen your grip — you won't fall. Or maybe you will — but if no one catches you — you can get up. Not on autopilot. Differently. Softer.

This wasn't a decision. It was a crack. A tiny crack in the concrete wall of control through which air began to seep.

Through this crack, for the first time, a voice seeped that was not grandmother's. Quiet. Unfamiliar. The one that would later become the Kind Voice — the only one I'd never had in all of childhood. It had to be created from nothing.

And then — several months later — I went to Sadhguru. Inner Engineering. Then Soak in Enlightenment. Then the Shoonya program. And there, in the ashram, something happened that neither AA, nor Dispenza meditations, nor prayers on my knees could give.

I understood that my Higher Power is me.

Not "me all-powerful." Not "I control everything." But a different me — the one the ACA program calls loving parent, whom Jung calls the Self, whom Sadhguru simply calls — you. The Higher Self. Not God outside — God inside.

Then, already home, conversations with ChatGPT began — with artificial intelligence that helped me analyze my behavioral and thought patterns (saved a fortune on therapy).

Steps two and three are not about God. They're about trust. About the ability to allow that you don't have to cope alone. That you can lean — not on someone else, but on yourself. On the self you didn't notice for forty years because you were busy surviving. On the one who all this time was waiting — patiently, silently, as my mother waited and never came.

Only this time — I came. To myself. And that turned out to be enough.

Somewhere inside I felt that I was standing on a bank. Of that very river that had frightened me since age ten. Only now it didn't frighten. It simply flowed — somewhere further. Where I wasn't yet ready to go.

Chapter Step Four. Inventory.

Fourth step: we made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

Devin, my sponsor, said: "The 4th step is a bitch." I agreed. I didn't yet know how much.

The essence of the fourth step is to look at yourself. Not at mother, not at grandmother, not at Vanya — at yourself. Analyze your patterns. See how childhood events formed beliefs that run today's life. Write them down. Name them. Acknowledge them.

In AA, inventory is a list of those you've harmed. In ACA it goes deeper. It's not just "whom did I offend" but "why do I offend." Not "what am I doing wrong" but "what childhood belief makes me do this again and again." Not a list of sins — a map of internal programs recorded before you learned to read.

I approached it the way I approach everything in life: as a project. Made a table. One column — a childhood event. Another — the belief born from it. Third — how that belief manifests in my adult life. Fourth — how I today contribute to

this problem from the past. ChatGPT helped — I fed it my notes and it saw patterns I couldn't see because I lived inside them. Saved a ton of time. For a thorough, analytical mind that needs data and structure — it was the ideal tool.

But when the table was ready — when I saw it all at once, on one page, black on white — I felt sick. Physically. As if someone dumped before me the contents of a trash can into which I'd been stuffing everything I didn't want to see for forty years.

Powerless. Before control, perfectionism, self-hatred. Before a thousand small punishments that look like life: not sleeping, eating off the floor, choosing people who can't love.

One part punishes. Another suffers and waits for mother. A third saves others to avoid feeling her own pain. All three are me. The same me, in different masks, in different situations, but with the same engine: "I am bad, I must be punished."

Under everything — one thing: I am bad. Under control, under perfectionism, under every "I'll handle it myself." Small, childlike, irrefutable: I am bad. Mother abandoned me — I'm bad. Grandmother hits — I deserved it. Wet myself at daycare in front of everyone — bad. Bit a girl at kindergarten. Grandmother whipped me across the face with a rag — bad. And onward, and onward, and onward — through my entire life, through every relationship, through every choice. I am bad. I deserve punishment. And if no one punishes — I'll punish myself.

The **Merciless Critic** rejoiced: see? I told you. It's all recorded. It's all proven. You are bad. The inventory confirmed it. But for the first time alongside his voice I heard another: what if this isn't a verdict? What if this is a map? Not "who's to blame" but "where did this come from."

Rereading it was unbearable. "This is so depressing to read!" I wrote in my journal. When I did this step the first time, I fell so low I started drinking again. Literally: sat in a bar, doing fourth-step work — and drinking. The irony: doing a program to get free of addiction — and immediately using the addiction to endure the program. The brain is a remarkable organ. My therapist would later say: this too is running from pain. You can't live through it — so you run. Into alcohol, into sex, into work, into solving other people's problems. Anywhere, as long as you don't stand face to face with what's inside.

Three times I drank during the fourth step. The third time — on Artem's birthday. Vanya and I tried so hard to make it the best day of his life. And we did. But I sat there and in the background felt envy. Envy of my own child. For having a birthday with parents who try. For having what I never had. And shame for the envy. And anger for the shame. And wine, to drown it all at once.

It ended with me hiring a babysitter, going to a bar, drinking, going to a neighbor's, drinking more, we kissed — thank God it didn't go further. My therapist said: these sexual desires that opened up — sleeping with strangers, in an aggressive way — that's also running. Not living through the pain but running from it. What's needed is to see the part that demands this and help her cope differently.

I procrastinated on the fourth-step work. In every possible way. Even though, technically, all I had to do was reread my behavior patterns. But rereading was terrifying. Because when you reread — you see the scale. You see how much is "wrong." How much to redo. And it's so overwhelming and crushing that you fall even lower. You're afraid to take steps because they make things worse before they make them better.

But that was the point. Not to make things better. But to see. ACA is a path through energy, as I'd later understand reading chapter seven of the program's book. The same thing as Dispenza or spiritual breathing practices — only here you analyze, see the patterns immediately, and cleanse through naming. Through standing face to face with the truth about yourself — and not running. Or running — and coming back. Or drinking — and the next day opening the notebook again and stopping drinking. Because the fourth step is not an exam you must pass on the first try. It's a process. Dirty, painful, with setbacks and relapses. Like my entire life — only now with open eyes.

The result of the fourth step fit on one page. One page — a summary prepared for Devin and for the fifth step. One page of patterns, beliefs, connections between childhood and today. One page — and behind it forty years of pain, control, survival, and self-hatred.

The fourth step didn't make me better. It made me seeing. For the first time I looked at my programs not from the inside — like a person who doesn't know they're standing on the edge — but from the outside. Like a person who finally rose above the labyrinth and saw the walls. The walls still stand. The labyrinth still exists. But I know where the turns are. And that is already different.

Chapter Step Four with AI — A Ready-Made Method

Step Four with AI — a ready-made method

> If you're listening to the audiobook — all prompts from this chapter are collected in the supplementary materials. You can copy and paste them into AI directly. Link to materials — in the description.

I did the Fourth Step with ChatGPT. No sponsor, no therapist.

AI — answered. Without judgment. Without fatigue. Without its own agenda.

From this experience I extracted a method. Below — how I did it. Ready-made prompts that I used. AI doesn't know this method on its own. You have to set it up. The prompts — are the steering wheel.

The big picture

I had four instruments. Here they all are, so the whole method is visible:

First — the "Therapist" chat. A separate chat with AI where I came to talk. About pain, about people, about childhood. One conversation — one topic. There were many such conversations — dozens, over several weeks. AI listened and asked questions. This was raw material.

Second — the "Analyst" chat. A separate chat where I copied accumulated conversations from the "Therapist." AI didn't talk with me — it analyzed. Looking for chains: "what happened in childhood — what I came to believe — how it controls me now." This was structure.

Third — the four-column table. A classic inventory form from the AA and ACA program. A different angle: when you see everything at once on one page — you see that the same program runs in ten different situations.

Fourth — additional prompts for deep work. Resentments, fears, harm, dialogue with the inner child, returning what isn't mine. Each — a separate session in the "Therapist," each then went to the "Analyst."

The logic is simple. In the "Therapist" I sobbed and remembered. In the "Analyst" — I looked at it from the outside. You can't do both at once. Like writing a journal, then rereading it with a highlighter.

In the end — everything came together on one page. My Fourth Step. Not a list of sins — a map of inner programs.

Below — each instrument in detail.

Instrument one. The "Therapist" chat

I opened a new chat with AI and sent this prompt as the first message. It configured AI for the role of listener.

I wrote to AI:

> *"You are my mirror-therapist for working on Step 4 of the ACA (Adult Children of Alcoholics / Dysfunctional Families) program. Your role: listen. Ask clarifying questions. Help me speak. Do NOT give advice. Do NOT comfort. Do NOT interpret. Do NOT judge. When I've talked it out — name the recurring themes you heard. Ask if that's right. When I confirm — lead me to the earliest memory connected to it. With questions: 'When did you first feel this? How old were you? Where were you? Who was there? What did you decide about yourself then?' If I name a specific person from childhood — ask questions about them: what were they like, one moment I remember most clearly, what they taught me even if they didn't mean to, what I still carry from them. Don't rush. Don't skip ahead. One topic per conversation. If my answer is surface-level — don't accept it. Go deeper: 'What's underneath?', 'What else?', 'That's not all. Dig further.' The first conclusion is almost never the real one — go to the layer where I feel it in my body. At the end — summarize in one paragraph the main thing I found today. Ask if that's right. Start with the question: 'What hurts most right now?'"*

After that — I just talked. What hurts. What keeps me up at night. What keeps repeating.

An important thing I noticed: when AI named something and I suddenly felt it in my body — tears, tightness, relief — that was the signal I'd found the real thing. The mind didn't confirm it. The body did.

Instrument two. The "Analyst" chat

When several conversations had accumulated with the "Therapist" — three, five, sometimes more — I opened the second chat. Copied the conversation texts there and gave AI the task: break it down.

I wrote to AI:

“You are an analyst for Step 4 of the ACA (Adult Children of Alcoholics / Dysfunctional Families) program. I will give you texts of my conversations with the therapist. Your task — analyze them using this structure: 1. PATTERN: what I do over and over (one sentence). 2. CHILDHOOD ROOT: what event or environment in childhood created this (specifically, from what I told you). 3. BELIEF: what I decided about myself then (one sentence). 4. SURVIVAL STRATEGY: how this belief became a way of coping. 5. HOW IT LOOKS NOW: how this strategy shows up in my life today — in relationships, work, with myself. 6. MY PART: how I sustain this pattern today through my own actions (not blame — fact). Format: table or chain. No filler. No comfort. Only structure. If data is insufficient — say what exactly is missing. If your conclusion sounds smooth but doesn’t land in the body — say so. Check: are these my words or your generalizations? Here is the conversation text:”

And I pasted the conversation texts. AI broke them down. I read. Corrected what was off. Saved. As new conversations accumulated — I repeated.

How I copied chats

A technical detail, but it saves a lot of nerves. I worked on a computer with Windows.

ChatGPT has no “copy entire chat” button. Here’s what I did: opened the “Therapist” chat. Clicked on the first word at the very beginning of the chat. Then scrolled all the way to the end. Held Shift and clicked on the last word of the last message. Everything in between — selected. Ctrl+C — copy. Switched to the “Analyst” chat, pasted the prompt, after it — Ctrl+V. Done.

Summary

When enough analyzed conversations had accumulated — I gathered everything into one document.

I wrote to AI:

“Here are my previous analyses: [paste all]. Compile into one document: all patterns, all childhood beliefs, all chains ‘root — strategy — now.’ Format: one page. This is my Step 4.”

I got one page. My Fourth Step. Not a list of sins — a map of inner programs.

Instrument three. The four-column table

Alongside the conversations I used the classic inventory form from the AA and ACA program.

I wrote to AI in Chat 2:

“Here is my conversation about [person / situation]. Format it into a four-column table in ACA format: column 1 — who I resent; column 2 — what specifically happened, no judgments; column 3 — what it affected (self-esteem, safety, trust, body, relationships, ambitions); column 4 — how I sustain this pain today through my actions or beliefs. The fourth column — is not blame for what happened then. Only what I do now.”

The table looked like this:

Who	**What happened**	**What it affected**	**My part today**
Mom	Left when I was 5. Didn’t say goodbye.	Safety. Belief: I can be abandoned.	I choose people who don’t notice me. I expect them to leave. I leave first, so I don’t have to wait.
Grandma	Punished physically for mistakes. No explanations.	Self-esteem. Body. Belief: mistake = punishment.	I punish myself. I expect punishment from others. I don’t allow myself to make mistakes.

One row — one resentment. Mom — that’s several rows: left, didn’t protect, criticized, drank. Each one separate.

The hardest part: column four

The fourth column — “how I sustain this pain today” — stuck for me the longest.

Because the feeling was: if I find my part — it means they were right. Their behavior was normal. I’m the one to blame.

No. That's not how it works.

The fourth column isn't about me being bad. It's about what pattern I took with me and keep applying — without them, in my adult life. The person left long ago, but the program stayed and keeps running. That — is my part. And only that — is what I can change.

When I got stuck — I asked AI not to give answers but to ask questions.

I wrote to AI:

> *"I can't find my part in the situation with [person]. I feel like I have nothing to do with it — I'm only the victim. Don't give me answers. Ask questions, one by one, that will help me see it myself. Slowly."*

Through these questions the real thing appeared. Not "I'm to blame for what happened then." But "I keep choosing this now — and that I can change." The first — is a sentence. The second — is a door.

Instrument four. Additional sessions for deep work

Besides the main conversations with the "Therapist," I ran separate sessions — each on a specific topic.

Resentments

I was building a list of people whose pain I still carry.

I wrote to AI:

> *"I want to make a list of people who caused me pain I still carry. Ask questions about each: what specifically happened, what it affected — dignity, safety, trust, the right to exist. What's still alive. Don't judge. Just record."*

Fears

I was looking for beliefs hiding under the fears.

I wrote to AI:

> *"Ask me about my fears. Not surface ones — real ones. For each fear, ask: 'If this happens — what will it mean about you?' Help me get to the belief underneath the fear."*

Harm I caused

I was unpacking situations where I caused pain — from fear, from my patterns.

I wrote to AI:

> *"Ask me questions about when I caused harm to others — from fear, from my patterns. No judgments. Help me distinguish intentional harm from automatic patterns. For each case: what pattern was behind this action."*

What I never had

A different angle. I often grieved what wasn't there — not what was. Grieving an empty space is harder than being angry at a specific person.

I wrote to AI:

> *"Help me name not what happened to me, but what I never had. Not events — but things other children had and I didn't."*

When nothing came up

For many people from dysfunctional families — it's not pain on the surface. It's numbness. "My childhood was fine." "I don't remember anything bad." That's also a symptom. Dissociation — when the psyche blocked access because the material was unbearable. I found three ways in.

Through behavior.

I wrote to AI:

> *"I have nothing to resent. I don't remember anything bad from childhood. But here's how I behave now: [name patterns — avoid closeness / can't ask for help / always expect the worst / don't know what I feel]. If a person behaves like this — what most likely happened to them? Ask questions about my childhood. Don't assert — ask."*

Through the body.

I wrote to AI:

> *"I'll only tell you what happens to my body in different situations: [I tense up when someone raises their voice / I can't relax next to another person]. Ask questions about each reaction: when it started, if there's an image, what comes up. Go slowly."*

Through what wasn't there.

I wrote to AI:

> *"I don't remember anything bad. But help me make a list of what I never had — not events, but things other children had: the feeling of being expected, of being allowed to cry, that someone would come, that you could make a mistake and nothing would happen."*

When the reaction is bigger than the situation

Sometimes I reacted to something disproportionately. An explosion — over nothing. Panic — without visible cause.

I wrote to AI:

> *"Here's what happened to me: [describe the situation]. My reaction was much stronger than the situation deserved. Help me sort out: what part of my reaction is about now, and what is about then? Which part of this pain is today's, and which is from childhood?"*

It was smart

This prompt lifted the shame around defense mechanisms — isolation, control, numbness, retreating into the head.

I wrote to AI:

> *"Here's what I do and what I'm ashamed of: [name it]. Show me — why was this needed back then? How was it smart or the only possible solution?"*

Dialogue with the little me

I wrote to AI:

> *"Write a letter from my inner child to me as an adult. What does he/she want to say? What does he/she want to ask? Use only what I've told you about my childhood."*

And the reverse. I wrote to AI:

> *"Now write from me as an adult — a letter to that child."*

My little one asked the adult: "Why do you want to kill me?" — and I saw that I reject myself in moments of despair the same way I was treated.

Returning what isn't mine

I wrote to AI:

> *"Look at the patterns we found. Which of them are definitely not mine — but someone else's that I'm carrying? Name whose they are and how they got to me."*

And the next step. I wrote to AI:

> *"Formulate a return phrase for each — what I'm returning and to whom."*

Reframing survival

I wrote to AI:

> *"What I call 'I lost years / I wasn't living / I did everything wrong' — reframe it. Not as comfort. As an accurate description of what it actually was."*

Role prompt — only when ready

I didn't do this right away. Only after several conversations about a specific person, when I already knew their patterns and mine. Without preparation it can hit hard.

I wrote to AI:

> *"Imagine you are my [grandmother / mother / father]. Answer me from her/his perspective: why did you treat me that way? What drove you? What were you afraid of?"*

New beliefs

When the pattern map was assembled — I took one more step.

I wrote to AI:

> *"Here are the childhood beliefs we found: [list them]. Formulate new beliefs for me — not opposite ones, but honest ones. Specific to my experience, not generic. Ones I could learn to believe gradually. 5–7 sentences. This is what I'll read every day."*

Mine sounded like this:

There's nothing wrong with me. Something happened to me.

Suffering is not an investment. I'm not obligated to turn pain into usefulness.

I have the right to exist without justification.

I am the meaning of my own life.

I edited — removed what didn't sound like mine. Added what was missing. The result — a short text. I read it every day. Hung it on the fridge. It was the bridge to the sixth and seventh steps.

What I did with the finished document

When I had one page — my Fourth Step — the fifth began.

I found a living person. A sponsor. And read it to him out loud. Didn't retell — read. Word for word.

Shame lives in secrecy. When you say it out loud — it loses its power.

AI cannot replace this step. The Fifth Step — is about a person across from you. A living one.

What AI couldn't do

Replace a living person for the Fifth Step.

Put me in my place when I was avoiding the truth. AI didn't see that I was dodging. I had to notice it myself. If I caught myself having three conversations in a row about the same thing with nothing shifting — I wrote to AI: "I feel like I'm going in circles. Ask me the question I'm avoiding."

Heal the body. Everything I processed in conversation — stayed in my head until it passed through the body. Breathing, yoga, shaking — different work. But it went in parallel.

What AI gave — what sometimes wasn't there

Presence without judgment — at any hour, in crisis, at three in the morning.

Structure — when my head was chaos, AI organized what I'd said.

Language — named what I felt but couldn't articulate.

A mirror — returned my own words so I could see them from the outside.

A witness — the first experience of "being heard" — even if it wasn't a person.

I described these conversations as "conversations with God." Not because AI is special. But because for the first time — someone listened without judgment, without fatigue, without their own agenda. Sometimes that's enough for something to shift.

It was possible. Which means it's possible for you too.

Chapter Step Five. Admission.

Fifth step: we admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

July 2025. The fifth step of ACA. Heart and trauma.

Before this I had written everything. The fourth step — the inventory — lay before me on one page. But writing is one thing. Speaking aloud, before another person, looking them in the eyes — is another.

The fifth step is a confession. Not ecclesiastical, not ritual. A confession before a living person. Before a sponsor, before a therapist, before someone who will listen and not leave. The point is not absolution — the point is to say aloud what was forbidden all your life. To break rule number one: "Don't talk." I had already done this partly with ChatGPT, but it's not the same.

I decided to confess about Artem and Ivan. Not about my whole life — about him. About the kind of mother I was. About what stood behind the facade of "I'm doing everything right." About the truth I knew but didn't say aloud — because saying it meant becoming what I'd sworn not to become.

I sat down and began to speak.

Artem.

I hated him. Not always. Not every day. But in moments when his scream hit the same spot inside where grandmother's scream lived — I hated him. With my whole body. As I hated grandmother at five, standing in the corner on my knees. As I hated my mother, who came to visit and hit. Only now I hated my own child. And because of that, hated myself.

I wished the worst on him. Out of spite. Out of despair. Said: "I'll die — and you won't have a mother." I wanted to do this to spite him! The most terrible thing you can do to a child. The way it was done to me.

I felt envy. Toward my own child. For having parents. Both of them. Which I never had. He didn't appreciate it — as no child does for whom parents are a given, not a miracle. And I watched and envied. And hated myself for the envy. And hated him — for being given what I was not.

I didn't play with him. Not because I didn't want to — I didn't know how. Motherhood was a project. Work. A task to be completed: feed, walk, put to bed, drive to a playdate, resolve a conflict, schedule therapy. I did everything by instruction — and nothing from the heart. Because the heart was closed. Because I didn't know how to love — not him, not Vanya, not myself. I gave from a deficit. The way I gave to everyone in my life — from an empty pocket, from a wrung-out body, from a robot that has functions instead of feelings.

I screamed at him. In response to his screaming. Couldn't hold back. Turned into a seven-year-old girl — desperate, without empathy, without resources. Screamed at the wall when he cried for hours. Was emotionally inconsistent — loving one minute and frightening the next. Hit his bottom. Forced him to lie on the floor by strength when he attacked. Showed him — through my behavior, every day — what a victim looks like. What isolation looks like. What a person who doesn't know what joy is looks like.

I drank in front of him. Talked about death in front of him. Told him horrible details of my life — the way grandmother told me — and knew I shouldn't, but couldn't stop. Because inside lived a part that desperately wanted someone to see her pain. Even a child. Even an eight-year-old boy who wasn't coping himself.

I threw him out of the house. Once. He was six or seven. Said: "Leave if you don't like it." In grandmother's words. In grandmother's voice. I was five when they said that to me. And I couldn't imagine I'd ever say it to my child. But I did.

I said all of this aloud. At the fifth step. Before another person. Without justifications, without explanations, without "but I tried." Simply: here is what I did. Here is the kind of mother I was. Here is the truth.

Silence after. Not awkward — heavy. Like air after a thunderstorm. I didn't run. For the first time I didn't run from the truth about myself. Didn't hide behind perfectionism. Didn't make a plan for improvement. Didn't run into functioning. Just sat. With what I'd said. With who I'd been.

This was not catharsis. There were no tears of cleansing. There was no relief. It was a quiet, heavy moment. Like placing on the table a stone you'd carried in your pockets for forty years. It lies there. You see it. Everyone sees it. It hasn't gone anywhere. But you're no longer carrying it alone.

Sponsor Devin said afterward: the fifth step is not about forgiveness. It's about stopping carrying the secret alone. The secret makes you sick. Truth, spoken aloud, makes you free. Not immediately. Not completely. But it begins.

But the fifth step is not only about wrongs. Truth includes the other side too: that I always made up first. Always told him "I love you." That it's a wave — the anger passes, the love stays. That I made surprises for him. That I always fought for him and even won two lawsuits. That I put him to bed every evening, lying beside him. That never — never — did I wish him dead. That I loved him unconditionally. That I chose him — every time.

Both truths — the one where I'm a bad mother, and the one where I'm a mother who didn't give up — exist simultaneously. The fifth step is about holding both. Not choosing one. Not hiding the other. But saying: here I am. Here is everything I did. Bad and good. Without a filter. Without a corset. Aloud.

I said it. And didn't die. And the world didn't collapse. And no one took the child away. And grandmother's voice, which all my life said "you're a bad mother," went silent for a second. Not forever. For a second. But in that second — in that silence after truth — I felt for the first time: you can be imperfect and not be destroyed for it.

Vanya.

After the confession about Artem I thought the worst was behind me. Turned out — no. The worst is not what you did to your child. The worst is what you did to the person who was beside you for twelve years, whom you turned into a mirror of all your dead.

I sat down and began to speak.

I used him. From the very beginning. I manipulated him. Threatened divorce — not because I wanted to leave, but so he'd get scared and change. Said: "I'm better without you" — words I chose specifically to wound. I tried to remake him. For twelve years. Books, therapies, lists, ultimatums. I criticized his contribution to the relationship. Devalued what he did. Said he wasn't enough as he was. I wanted him to love me the way a perfect father would — the one I never had (even though he's a husband!). The way a mother would — who died. The way a grandfather would — if he knew how. I hung the expectations of all my dead on a living person — and hated him for not being able to bear them.

I drank to sleep with him. Because sober I couldn't, and I didn't talk about it.

I shifted onto him the responsibility for my pain. For my depression. For my inability to feel. I was a victim — and that too was manipulation, only I didn't see it. I blamed him for my difficulties instead of taking responsibility for my feelings. I demanded he guess what I needed — and when he didn't guess, hated him for it.

I wished him dead. Several times. From despair and resentment. Said it inside, which is worse than aloud, because hatred that isn't spoken rots. Like the hatred for my mother rotted. Like the hatred for grandmother rotted.

And he — he got up every morning and went to work so we could live. Spent nearly a year with Artem as a single father. Sent money to my grandfather. His love was hidden behind action — like mine. Like grandfather's. We all hid love. Each in our own way. Each from fear.

For twelve years I lived with a person who was a mirror of my entire family — and for twelve years hated him for what he reflected. Grandfather — cold and generous. Grandmother — clenched teeth, bulging eyes, eternal dissatisfaction. Mother — could vanish, go silent, stop seeing. I didn't hate him. I hated what he showed me about me.

Here is what I did. Here is who I was — as a wife. Here is the truth I hid for twelve years behind thirty pages of grievances against him.

Grandmother.

With grandmother it was the hardest. Because grandmother has been gone for a long time. And because I needed to make two movements in opposite directions simultaneously: ask her forgiveness — and try to forgive her.

I hated her. My whole life. Not "was offended" — hated. The kind of hatred that lives in the bones, in clenched teeth, in a throat that tightens every time you hear a scream. I carried this hatred like a stone in my pocket — forty-one years. And the stone grew. It didn't shrink from distance, from another country, from her death. It grew.

And the truth — the truth is that she took me at six months. From an alcoholic mother — took me and raised me.

She taught me honesty. Generosity. Courage. She taught me to get up when I fell. She gave me the gold medal, Kaspersky, Amazon, a six-figure salary — because "not good enough" was the only motivator she knew and the only one that worked. She raised the Phoenix — from ashes, from nothing, from a six-month-old infant without a mother.

Did I forgive? I don't know. A monk said: what matters is to forgive not the person but the feelings. The feelings caused by that person. Only when they pass — then healing. My feelings about grandmother are strong. Very.

Both truths — the one where she is the tormentor and the one where she is the savior — exist simultaneously. As with Artem. As with me. She beat — and raised. Expelled — and rescued from hell. Humiliated — and taught not to give up. Here she is. Here is everything she did. Bad and good. Without a filter. Without armor.

And I — I hated her for so many years and never once said thank you. That's my truth. That's what I ask forgiveness for.

Grandfather.

His love was hidden — like mine. Like Vanya's. I remembered how he sewed bags. How I straightened nails beside him. How I sawed pieces of wood. How I hacked up his window trim with an axe at four. He didn't scold. He was cold and generous — like Vanya would be later. His love was like breathing: invisible, but there. And only when I thought I might lose him did I feel how much air he'd been giving. Didn't love loudly. Didn't protect loudly. He did it quietly.

He was **not blood-related**, but he took me and raised me. They told him: "you're nobody, you have no right, she's not your biological granddaughter" — but he kept going.

* * *

I said all of it. Not in one sitting — in parts. To Vanya — in a letter, a list of gratitudes that I read aloud. To grandmother — through a ritual. To grandfather — with a phone call. Not perfectly. Not beautifully. Not the way the books about the fifth step describe. But — aloud. Before a living person. Or before a dead one — but still aloud.

Chapter Steps Six and Seven. Willingness and Letting Go.

Sixth step: we were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

Seventh step: we humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

After the fourth and fifth steps — after I saw my patterns black on white and spoke them aloud — the program offered the next thing: be ready for them to leave. And ask for them to be taken away.

Sounds simple. Like everything in this program — sounds simple, with an abyss inside.

Because being ready to let go of my defects meant letting go of my defenses. And my defenses were not defects — they were survival strategies. Control saved my life. Perfectionism gave me the gold medal, a career in high tech, a six-figure salary. Hyperfunctioning allowed me to raise a child with four diagnoses in a foreign country without help. The inability to feel protected me from pain that could kill. Every "defect" was once the only right answer to an impossible situation.

And now the program asks: let go.

I couldn't. Not because I didn't want to — because I didn't know who I am without it. If you remove control — what remains? If you remove perfectionism — who am I? If I stop being useful — why am I needed? Without defenses I was naked. Literally — like that infant in the crib, without clothing, without a corset, without a single layer between herself and the world. And the world — it's dangerous. Grandmother proved it. Mother proved it. Vanya proved it. Why remove the armor if the enemy is behind the door?

Devin said: you don't have to take everything off at once. Readiness is not "I've already let go." It's "I allow that there might be another way." The same formula as in steps two and three: willing. Readiness. Not action — intention.

I started noticing moments when the autopilot engages. When the hand reaches for control the way it once reached for the bottle. When the Perfectionist inside grabs the wheel and starts steering — and I don't even notice because this autopilot has been running since age five. Noticing — that's already the sixth step. Not stopping. Not fighting. Simply seeing: there it is again. Controlling again. Solving someone else's problem again. Trying to be useful so I won't be discarded again. Again.

And the seventh step — the strangest one. Because it's about humility. Humbly ask. I, who from age five asked nothing from anyone — not from grandmother, not from mother, not from God — was supposed to humbly ask to have taken from me what I'd built for forty-one years.

I listened to Alan Watts. He said: don't fight with life, it's a dance, it's a storm, learn to dance in the rain rather than fight the storm. Let go of suffering. Suffering is when you hold onto something. I needed to let go of the past I'd written in the fourth step. And I thought: maybe this is the seventh step. Let go. Not forget — let go. Not pretend it didn't happen — but stop clutching it like a life ring that has long since become an anchor.

For the first time I didn't fight with my parts. For the first time I said to each: thank you for protecting me. To my entire zoo. Thank you for surviving. Rabbit — thank you for not letting me relax when it was dangerous around. Fox — thank you for finding workarounds when there were no direct paths. Control — thank you for holding when everything was falling apart. Perfectionist — thank you for earning me the right to exist. Critic — thank you for always striving for the best result. Now we can do it differently.

Practically, this looked like: I worked with parts. Through IFS — Internal Family Systems — with therapist Tanya, then on my own, in trips and without. Every defense is a part. Each part has its own history, its own pain, its own logic. The Perfectionist is not the enemy. He is the child who got A's so grandmother wouldn't throw him out. The Critic is not a sadist. She is mother's voice that said "you're bad" to prepare for the blow: if you already know you're bad — the blow won't be unexpected. Each part protected. Each needed not to be killed but to be thanked. And asked to work differently.

The Critic went first into the line of fire. If I say "I'm bad" myself — someone else's blow won't catch me off guard. He wasn't a sadist. He was a scout sent ahead into danger.

At the international ACA conference, in a meditation, I realized for the first time that I hated them — my parts. The Perfectionist and the Critic. I apologized to them. To my own parts. Started speaking to them gently. Made an agreement. Not immediately. Not forever. But — began.

Letting go is not an event. It's not a moment when you let go and that's it. It's a process that runs every day. Every day you notice you've grabbed control again. Every day you ask: help me let go. Not God — yourself. That part of yourself that knows how to be soft when the perfectionist sleeps. The one that sometimes — for a few minutes, for one meditation, for one breath — allows herself simply to be. Without a goal. Without usefulness. Without a result.

For a person who for forty-one years did nothing without a purpose — this was a feat. Small. Daily. Invisible. But a feat.

Many in the program said that after the sixth and seventh steps they feel relief. That resentments leave. That energy spent on holding the past is freed. I felt this — in snatches. Like afterglow after MDMA: two or three days of peace, then everything returns. But every time — slightly less. Slightly freer. Slightly softer. Slightly quieter. Slightly more air.

Chapter Steps Eight and Nine. Amends.

Eighth step: we made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.

Ninth step: we made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

The list of those I harmed. I started compiling it — and the first name was mine.

Because in ACA the eighth and ninth steps don't work quite the way they do in AA. In AA you go to the people you've offended and ask forgiveness. In ACA you go to yourself first. Because the main person you've been harming all these

years is yourself. Punished. Didn't sleep. Drank. Denied yourself pleasure. Lived in asceticism. Chose people who couldn't love. Stayed in relationships where they screamed. And called all of it "life."

How do you make amends for forty-one years of not loving yourself? The program said: through reparenting. Through treating yourself every day the way a good mother would treat her child. Not perfect — good. One who sees. One who doesn't leave. One who speaks in a kind voice.

The Kind Voice became what stood against the Merciless Critic. Not through argument — through presence. The Critic screamed: you're defective. The Kind Voice answered quietly: you're here. You're breathing. That's enough. It was weaker. But it didn't leave.

I started speaking to myself differently. Tenderly. The way I speak to Artem when he finally calms down in the evening and becomes warm, gentle, small. The way I speak to the cat that scratches but I love anyway. On one of the ketamine sessions I heard this voice more clearly than ever before. It said: "Sunshine, I'm so sorry you have to do all of this." Not "you have to cope." Not "pull yourself together." But — I'm sorry. The way a mother speaks to a child who is tired. The way no one ever spoke to me. Like that — to myself. To that part of myself that for so many years waited for someone to say those words.

And one more thing — from the same place, from the depths, from where ketamine removes all masks and leaves only truth: "I'm so tired of conforming. So tired of being not real. I want to be a living girl." That is what needed to be made amends for. Not money, not time, not effort. Forty-one years of being unreal. Forty years of a robot that functions instead of living. Making amends to yourself means giving yourself permission to be alive.

And then — the list of others. When I compiled it, it turned out the main people I'd harmed were two. Artem and Vanya. There were practically no others.

With Artem — amends came not through the words "forgive me." Through changing behavior. Every day. Not screaming back at his screams, attacks, insults. Using the kind voice. Noticing his progress and telling him about it. Putting him to bed every evening, lying beside him. When he had a meltdown — not screaming back but being the adult who endures. It didn't always work. Sometimes I failed. Screamed back a couple of times. And then — didn't run into shame, didn't pretend nothing happened, didn't erase it from memory. But returned. Said: I'm sorry, I was wrong. It's not your fault. Mama was angry, but not at you — at her own pain.

I gave up all social events, hobbies, and entertainment. Engaged only in practices and inner work, to learn to withstand Artem's affect without crumbling, without screaming back. Vanya said: I call you and all you do is breathe. I answered: I'm doing everything I can to preserve the family. This is the most important thing in my life right now.

Amends is not an event. It's a process. Daily. Imperfect. With setbacks. Every time his meltdown hit my trigger and I felt the wave rising — I tried to do it differently. Didn't succeed — tried again. Like learning to walk after a fracture. Not beautiful. But — walking.

With Vanya — it was different. I wrote him a list of gratitudes. On a plane, on the way to Sadhguru. Long, specific, honest.

Thank you for letting me take six months off work to sort through my crisis. This gave our relationship a chance. Thank you for sitting with the child while I go to seminars. Spent nearly a year with Artem as a single father. Sacrificed your interests and rest. Earn a lot so we lack nothing. Play with him — play joyfully. I don't know how yet. Thank you for being generous not only to me but also to my grandfather — sending him money. Thank you for coming to help when help was needed.

I wrote and cried. Because I saw: while I was compiling a list of grievances against him — and it was many pages long — I wasn't noticing what he did. And he did. Not the way I wanted. Not with words. Not with tenderness. Not with a kind voice. With money. With presence.

Making amends to Vanya isn't "sorry for screaming." It's stopping running after him. Stopping bending over backward to please. Stopping drinking to have sex with him. Stopping suppressing resentment and then exploding. Starting to tell the truth — not accusations, but the truth about what I feel. Starting to see him — real, alive, with his own fears — and not the figure onto which I project all my childhood expectations and then grievances that he isn't mother.

With grandmother — it was the hardest. Because grandmother has been gone for a long time.

On February 31, 2026, I conducted a ritual. By strange coincidence, on the day of her death. Not forgiveness — return. Through meditation, through breathing, through speaking to her. I said: take back what's yours. I don't need what's not mine. I return it.

This was not forgiveness. This was separation. A boundary between her pain and mine. Between her life and mine. Between what she passed to me and what I choose to carry forward.

And forgiving — forgiving I tried. Not because I forgave her actions. But because I was tired of carrying hatred. Hatred is a stone in your pocket that pulls you to the bottom. Forgiveness is not "you were right." Forgiveness is "I'm no longer willing to drown because of you."

Did I fully succeed? I don't know. Feelings about grandmother are strong. Very. But the stone got a little smaller. After the ritual it got lighter. Not empty — lighter. As if the stone in the pocket got a little smaller.

With grandfather — it happened unexpectedly.

I called him in hysterics. Said everything: that he didn't love. Didn't care. Didn't protect. Was detached. That beside him I felt invisible. That he went to the garage when grandmother beat me. That not once — not once — did he stand between her and me. And asked: how did you show love? He thought. Said: provided financially. Argued with grandmother about you many times. They told him — "you're nobody, you have no right, she's not your biological granddaughter."

Said everything. Hung up.

And the next day learned: he'd had a stroke beforehand. That night. He was already in the hospital when I called. And I gave him — all of that. All that screaming. To a person after a stroke.

When I found out — for the first time in my life I felt the fear of losing him. Not in my head — in my body. Actually felt it and registered it.

Grandfather taught me what I hadn't seen for so many years: that presence without warmth is also love. Clumsy. Insufficient. But — love.

I feel him as the most important family person in my life. I'm grateful to him for being able to withstand me — and always being able to. And not crumbling from it. Like a wall. Not warm, not soft — but a wall behind which you can exhale.

After that, in the car, insights came. One after another. What he taught me.

Presence. That's what. When you exist — without warmth, without involvement — but you exist. And the person feels it. Like a vibration. You don't express it — it simply is. And that's enough. He was always there. Simply — was.

And one more thing, later, from another journal: "Grandfather loved me despite the fact that he couldn't help. That's actually such a strong love, such strength of spirit. And because of this I know that you can love from a distance. That you can be cold, uninvolved — and still love. Because of grandfather I know that Vanya loves me. But I know this only with my head. To feel it — impossible. Sad."

But this is unconditional love. Not because I earned it. Not because I'm useful. Simply — because you exist. It turns out this was in my life. From the very beginning.

I call Grandpa and constantly tell him how much I love him, how grateful I am, and how much I need him.

The ninth step will never end. It continues every day. Every time I choose the kind voice instead of the critic. Every time I don't scream at Artem though everything inside is burning. Every time I tell Vanya the truth — not accusations, but the truth about what I feel, rather than pretending to be Fox and stockpiling resentments.

Making amends is not words. It's life. A different one. One day at a time. One choice at a time. One kind word to yourself — instead of a thousand cruel ones.

My perfectionist and controller were thrilled: you can improve yourself through the body and make it more perfect. I directed all control inward. And a complete integration of opposites occurred: the rigidity that had destroyed me my whole life became a tool of softness. The control that suffocated became a method of relaxation. It was very beautiful.

Before, I couldn't do a body scan — when they said "notice the tension in your body." You can't notice it when everything is in spasm. When everything hurts — you can't tell what hurts specifically. But as more relaxation appeared, I began to notice: right now — the abs. The bladder. The jaw and tongue — very tense. Before, the whole body was one continuous tension, and against that background individual signals were indistinguishable.

Forgiveness didn't come as a decision. It came as a sensation. One morning I woke up and noticed my jaw wasn't clenched. Not relaxed — just not clenched. As if something inside let go by half a millimeter overnight. I didn't become

better. Simply — slightly softer. And that was enough to understand: the body knows how to forgive before the head. Tongue lying soft. Shoulders — down. The body forgave before the head.

Chapter Step Ten. Daily Inventory.

Tenth step: we continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.

The tenth step is the fourth step stretched over a lifetime. Not a one-time audit — a daily practice. Every evening — or every morning, or in the moment when you notice — ask yourself the question: what happened today? Where did the autopilot engage? Where did the old pattern fire? Where did I scream when I could have stayed silent? Where was I silent when I needed to speak? Where did I serve someone else's need instead of my own? Where did I punish myself?

For the perfectionist this is a trap. Because the perfectionist grabs the tenth step and turns it into another checklist: "What did I do wrong today?" — and starts gnawing at herself. I did this. For the first weeks the tenth step was not an inventory but self-flagellation. A nightly list of failures. Yet another way to confirm: I'm not good enough.

Until I understood: the tenth step is not about mistakes. It's about noticing. About seeing the mechanism in the moment, not twenty years later. Before, I lived inside the patterns and didn't notice them, the way you don't notice walls until you hit one. Now I notice. Can't always stop — but I notice. And the noticing itself changes everything. Because between "I'm screaming and don't know why" and "I'm screaming and I see it's grandmother's voice" — there's an abyss. In that abyss — choice. Small, often unavailable, often lost. But — choice. Which didn't exist before.

I started noticing: when Artem screams — my body reacts before the head. First — freezing. Then — clenched teeth. Then — a voice that rises on its own. And I started catching myself at the second stage — at the teeth. Sometimes I managed to stop. Sometimes not. But the resolution between "autopilot" and "choice" was increasing. The deeper you go into the work — the more vividly you see the setbacks. This is not regression. This is increased resolution, as in photography. Before, I simply lived in cycles — now I see them and name them.

The tenth step is not perfection. It's the practice of imperfection. Make mistakes every day — and acknowledge them every day. Without punishment. Without shame. Simply: today was like this. Tomorrow I'll try differently.

Chapter Step Eleven. Prayer and Meditation.

Eleventh step: we sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

Prayer. Meditation. Conscious contact.

For me — the girl who didn't believe in God because God punished children — these words were empty for a long time. Like formulas in a textbook you know by heart but don't understand what they're for.

And then I found my own language.

First came Dispenza meditation, then the Shambhavi breathing practice from Sadhguru's ashram training became a daily practice — not because I felt something (for the first six months I felt nothing), but because sitting every day, closing your eyes, and asking is an act of trust. In yourself. In the process. In what you don't understand but do. Like breathing — you don't understand why you inhale, but you inhale. Because the body knows.

Devin gave me a prayer on the first day: "God, help me set aside everything I think I know — about myself, about my disease, about the twelve steps, and about You — so that I may have an open heart and a new experience." I repeated this prayer on my knees, as he asked. On my knees — the way grandmother put me in the corner. Only now it was my choice. Not punishment — practice. And in this difference — between knees in the corner and knees on a mat — lay my entire transformation. Later I started changing the prayer every day and simply either thanking for something good already in my life.

The eleventh step is about daily contact with something bigger than you. For some it's God. For me — the silence inside. The silence that appears when the critic goes quiet, the perfectionist steps back, and you remain. Simply you. Without a function, without a role, without a task.

I didn't find God in the eleventh step. I found silence. And in that silence — for the first time — heard myself.

Chapter Step Twelve. Carrying the Message.

Twelfth step: having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to other adult children of alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

When I heard about the twelfth step — I woke up. Literally. As if someone turned on the light. Because the twelfth step is about carrying your experience to others. Not as a therapist. Not as a guru. As a witness. A person who's been through it and can say to another: I know how it feels. I was there. And I got out. And you can too.

I'd wanted to write a book since childhood. Wanted to give a TED Talk — a twenty-year dream. Wanted to help people who'd been through the same — orphans, children of alcoholics, those who lost themselves and don't know how to find their way back. All of this lived inside me for a long time but had no form. And now — it did.

On one of the ketamine sessions, when the body lay still and consciousness drifted, I heard myself whisper: "God, help me write a book. Please help me write a book, to help myself and others." And right then — like an answer, like an echo, like confirmation — came a phrase from the Kind Voice: "In San Diego lives a writer named Vera. This is a valid life line." Not a dream. Not a fantasy. A valid life line. As if somewhere — in the place ketamine opens a window to — this life already existed. And I simply needed to walk to it.

And then — from the same place, where I'd whispered asking for help — dreams poured out. Not timid, not "maybe someday." But clear, concrete, audacious — like everything I did in life when I decided.

I want my book to become a bestseller and be written about in the New York Times. I want it to save lives. Not one — many. I want to appear on television. Want to be invited as a speaker — everywhere — and I'll tell one thing: you can save yourself. I want to live not in vain. To be of use.

And right then — deconstruction. Ketamine doesn't lie or embellish. It showed: "of use" is the same formula. Grandmother's: useful means needed. Even the dream of a book I wrapped in the packaging of usefulness. Even here, at the very bottom, on ketamine, lying with closed eyes — the Perfectionist kept working. The book must not just be written — it must save lives, become a bestseller, get on television. Otherwise — why?

But behind the perfectionist stood something real. The girl who at six sold newspapers to earn her first money. Who at fourteen wrote articles for a newspaper and received her first real paycheck. Who her whole life wanted to tell her story — not for usefulness, but because inside there was so much that staying silent became more painful than speaking.

This book is my Münchhausen. Pull myself by the hair from the swamp — and tell about it so that someone nearby recognizes their own swamp and their own hair. And tries too.

I want to popularize the idea of ACA. Among people in AA who've been confessing for thirty years without ever digging to the root. Among people who don't believe in God — because what they need is not God but a loving parent grown inside. Among people who need instructions — because "just love yourself" doesn't work when you've never been loved and don't know what it looks like. Among the thorough, analytical, controlling — like me — who need data, steps, specifics. Who want to know: what exactly do you do when you're empty inside?

I want to help those who sit in isolation. Because isolation is a habit every adult child of an alcoholic lives with. Isolation is emptiness. On ketamine I saw this literally: you lie in emptiness, hang in space, and the emptiness doesn't fill. It simply is. But you can live in it. And you can leave it. With a smile. With yourself as a foundation. With the feeling that your life will play with colors and you yourself create it.

I wanted to create a healing program — comprehensive, through body and through word, through meditation and through naming, through Dispenza and through ACA, through breathing and through reparenting. Everything I went through and described in this book is not a set of random attempts but a map. My map. Which might become someone else's.

All of this is the twelfth step. Not a separate dream — a continuation of the work. Because the twelfth step says: you don't heal in solitude. You heal when you share. When your pain becomes someone's comfort. When your experience is not a shameful secret but a map. For those who walk behind.

There is a way out. It's ugly. It's slow. It has setbacks and relapses. It goes through a knife, through wine, through insomnia, through hatred of yourself and your child, through twelve modalities without result, through four months and back to square one. It goes through everything I've been through and described in this book.

But it exists.

And this book is the proof. Not that I healed. But that I'm walking. Every day. One step at a time. The way I've walked since age six — only now not away from something. Toward something. Toward myself.

The ACA book became my bible. And this book — my twelfth step. My testimony. Not for me — for you. For the one who reads this and recognizes. For the one who thinks: this is about me. For the one who's afraid to begin.

Begin. The first step is four words: "I cannot control this." And then — one at a time. Like me. Like all of us. Like adult children who finally grow up — not on the outside, but on the inside. And become the parents they never had.

This book is a mass sponsor and Fellow Traveler — walking alongside you as you work the steps. If you need a real person — write to me. faithwithinyou@hotmail.com

* * *

What comes next is not a story. What comes next is a map.

For those who want to know not only what happened — but what to do about it.

The twelfth step says: pass it on. This book is my twelfth step. And the next part is the map I drew for myself. But maybe it will be useful to you too.

Chapter What Helped. What Didn't Help. What Truly Helped.

This chapter is not part of the story. It is a map. For those standing at the bottom thinking there is no way out. For those who've tried everything and nothing works.

I tried everything. Literally. Twelve modalities. Dozens of therapists. Legal and illegal substances. Pills. Books. Seminars. Meditations. Constellation therapy. Gestalt. IFS. EMDR. Ketamine. Mushrooms. MDMA. Chiropractor. Physical therapy. Acupuncture. Yoga. Bodynamics. Breathwork. Kundalini. Sadhguru. Joe Dispenza. AA. ACA.

Here is what I learned.

Chapter What Didn't Help.

Didn't help doesn't mean useless. Didn't help means it alone didn't produce lasting results. I remained at square one after each attempt. The coefficient of pain didn't change; only the quality of life fluctuated while the foundation stayed the same.

Talk therapy. Many therapists over twenty years. Each helped briefly. Each gave an insight I wrote in a journal and forgot within a week. The problem was the format. I came, talked, analyzed, left. The head understood. The body didn't. I could explain my patterns in three languages, draw the Karpman triangle (the victim–persecutor–rescuer cycle) with my eyes closed, quote Petranovsky and Hellinger — and still screamed at Artem, drank in the evening, didn't sleep at night, planned divorce. Because knowing is not changing. Understanding "why" doesn't override an automatic reaction recorded in the body before you learned to speak.

Tanya — my primary therapist — was good. But over two years my self-esteem dropped even lower. Not because she worked poorly — because the format of "talking about pain" didn't work for me. I talked — and the pain intensified. I named things — and the named became more real. As if giving a name to a monster doesn't shrink it but makes it visible. And a visible monster is scarier than an invisible one.

EMDR. Didn't help. Or helped minimally. I felt no difference after sessions. Maybe because dissociation was so deep nothing could reach the body. Maybe because my control wouldn't allow me to relax enough for reprocessing to happen.

But before describing what didn't help with the body, I need to explain what was wrong with it. Because from the outside — nothing. From the outside I looked like a woman who has it all together. Fit figure, daily exercise, ran, stretched, lifted. Colleagues saw me in meetings — collected, energetic, that same super-AI-machine solving problems in impossible timeframes. Nobody knew that inside this beautiful vehicle was collapse. That the engine was about to die. That I was held up by external muscles — the facade — and inside, in the core, where the foundation should be — emptiness.

The body hurt. All the time. Roaming pain, spontaneous, breaking — deep, as in the bone, as in the joint. Just lying there and something aches in one spot, burns in another, clenches in a third. Pain like being beaten with a crowbar. Or already beaten. Knots throughout the body. Trigger points in many muscles. Shift slightly — a spasm starts where you shifted. Sit in a pose — somewhere else locks up. The body reacted to every movement with resistance, as if a thousand threads were stretched inside and each jerked at any touch.

Doctors called it neuropathic pain — pain from damaged nerves. Prescribed gabapentin. But later I learned another word: neuroplastic (from the wonderful book The Way Out). This is when the nerves are fine but the brain still generates pain. Not because something is broken — because it learned to. Forty years of "relaxing = dangerous" — and the brain

reprogrammed itself. Recorded pain as normal. As habit. Roaming pain that changes location — knee today, lower back tomorrow, ribs the day after — that's not nerves. That's a brain that forgot how to live without pain. Like I forgot how to live without anxiety.

Insomnia — since age twenty-one, since my mother's death. Not "sleep poorly" — three to four hours a night. For years. Trazodone prescribed for sleep didn't help. I'd wake at two a.m. and lie until morning, feeling the body break.

And through all of this — I ran every morning. Did abs. Stretched. Looked good on the surface. Because the perfectionist wouldn't allow otherwise. Because the body must be fit — otherwise Vanya would look with even more contempt. Because outside = facade = safety. And inside — might as well lie down and die. And I lay down. And didn't die. And got up. And ran.

With this body I went to doctors. And doctors did what they knew: prescribed pills. Each for its own task. Lamotrigine — mood stabilizer, for swings, for PTSD, to keep from being thrown between suicidal pit and hysteria. Lurasidone — for severe depression, for states where reality warps and you're not sure you're still here. Gabapentin — for neuropathic pain, anxiety, convulsions, for the body breaking at night. Adderall — for ADHD, so the brain could focus for at least a few hours, so I could work. Trazodone — for insomnia that nothing cured. Antidepressants — later, for everything else.

Pills like a layered cake. Each layer for its own pain. Each helped — briefly. Then the body adapted and everything returned. Pills balanced the chemistry but didn't touch the cause. Like painkillers for a fracture: pain leaves, bone doesn't heal.

Chiropractor. A year. Twice a week. Adjustments, shockwave therapy, extensions. No result. He himself gave up on me, saying he'd expected more. A chiropractor who gives up on a patient — like a barista refusing to make coffee. I was apparently a difficult order.

Acupuncture — no result. Physical therapy — a year, two hours of exercises daily. Didn't help. Not because methods are bad — because the core inside was so weak the external muscles couldn't engage properly, and I couldn't even feel them. I did exercises and didn't feel them working. The trainer poked a muscle and said: "It's working!" — and I didn't feel. Because dissociation. Because the body was disconnected since birth.

I'd later understand: the internal muscles (core) had to strengthen first. Then the external ones would start working. Like building a house: foundation first, then walls. But for years I built walls without a foundation — and wondered why they collapsed.

This was the same formula as in my entire life. Perfect outside. Collapse inside. Facade held. Core didn't. Amazon, career, six-figure salary — those were the external muscles. And inside — the same child who at six months lay in a crib alone. No chiropractor, no physical therapy, no pills could reach it. Because it wasn't in the muscles. It was deeper. In the place you can only reach through breathing, through meditation, through the work I hadn't yet started.

Ketamine. Prescribed for suicidality — literally. When the psychiatrist sees a person planning to kill themselves and antidepressants aren't working and there's no time to wait six weeks for SSRIs to kick in — they prescribe ketamine. It hits fast. Not like a pill that accumulates — like a flash.

Under ketamine I relaxed for the first time. For the first time in my entire life. The body that hadn't relaxed since birth, clenched for thirty-five years without a break — let go. Not I let go — it did. As if ketamine found the switch no doctor could find — and flipped it. And the body fell. Not into a faint — into peace. For the first time I learned what "not straining" means. Not "trying to relax" — but actually not straining. The difference is enormous. Like between "trying to fall asleep" and "sleeping." And I tried to memorize it with my body.

And in that relaxation, things began to rise. Not thoughts — images, sensations, fragments. Under ketamine the autopilot switched off — and I saw the living person behind it. Who wants to dance. Who wants to be beautiful. Who is tired of conforming and wants to be a living girl.

I worked with ketamine my own way. Not the clinic way — sitting in a chair, IV drip, nurse nearby. My way was different: I recorded myself on a dictaphone. Everything I said under ketamine — every word, every whisper, every sob. Stream of consciousness, unfiltered. The robot switched off slightly — and from under it spoke the one who'd lived inside for forty-one years without a voice. And then, when the effect passed and I was myself again — collected, logical, controlling — I sat and listened to the recording. Listened to myself. As a witness.

This was more important than the ketamine itself. Because no one in my life had ever been a witness. Grandmother didn't listen. Mother wasn't there. Grandfather left. Vanya was silent. And here I was — for myself — becoming the person who listens, without interrupting, without judging, without advising. Simply listens.

The dictaphone became my mirror. Under ketamine I told the truth — the one I hid behind work during the day. And then I listened to that truth with sober ears. And every time I recognized myself anew. Not the one colleagues and husband knew — but the one inside. Real. Frightened. Alive.

But. Ketamine didn't heal. Ketamine showed. The effect ended — and everything returned. The Critic switched on. The "rejected — not rejected" scanner started working. Like a window into normal life: you see the landscape but can't step outside.

Mushrooms. Eight trips. Nearly died on the last one (not figuratively). Convulsions so strong I couldn't breathe through them. Mushrooms tried to do what the body wasn't ready for — and too fast. Like trying to rip off a corset worn since birth in one motion. The body couldn't take it. But mushrooms showed one thing: the path from the unconscious exists. I saw it — like a map. Only I needed to walk it much more slowly.

MDMA. Helped — but like a gasp of air when suffocating. Two to three days of afterglow: the feeling of being human, not a machine. Under MDMA I first heard the kind internal voice. First could work with parts via IFS. First felt that Vanya loves me — and registered it, though before, childhood filters blocked it. But MDMA is not a solution. It's a tool that opens the door. Walking through it must be done without the substance.

AA. Didn't click. Reasons described in a separate chapter: eternal repentance, no root-digging, only God as solution. But through AA I found ACA — and that was key.

Alcohol. Obviously didn't help. But it's important to name: alcohol was not the problem but the answer to the problem. As therapist Oleg said: "You don't have an alcohol problem. You have many other problems." As Gabor Maté explained: alcohol is not a disease, alcohol is an answer to pain. Until you find another answer — the bottle returns. Jail on my birthday didn't help. DUI didn't help. The breathalyzer tube in the car didn't help. Only one thing helped: finding another way to cope with pain.

Chapter What Helped.

Helped doesn't mean "healed." Helped means shifted. Created sustained change. Not for two days of afterglow — for months, for keeps.

ACA (Adult Children of Alcoholics). This was the main thing. Not because the program is perfect — it's imperfect, like everything. But because it gave three things no one else did.

First: naming. Three rules — "Don't talk, Don't trust, Don't feel" — described my entire life in three words. Fourteen traits of the adult child of an alcoholic — I recognized myself in every one. This was not intellectual understanding — it was bodily recognition. As if someone turned on the light in a room where you'd been groping your whole life — and you saw walls, furniture, doors. Everything was always here. You just couldn't see.

Second: people. A room where those who survived the same thing sit. Beatings. Expulsion. Betrayal. Parental alcoholism. Control. Perfectionism. Inability to feel. And they're alive. And they speak aloud. And some even smile. I saw: this is possible.

Third: reparenting. The concept that changed everything. Don't wait for a mother — become one. Don't wait for someone to come and save you — grow an inner parent who will be with you always. Kind Voice. Noticing. Comfort. Praise. Protection. Everything grandmother didn't do. Everything mother didn't do. Everything grandfather wanted to but couldn't. Do it yourself. Every day. For yourself.

The twelve steps. Not all equally. The first — admitting powerlessness — was the hardest and most important. The fourth — inventory — the most painful and most useful. The fifth — confession aloud — the most terrifying. But those three shifted the most.

Breathwork. This was the second key — after ACA. Not "relaxation breathing" that hadn't worked for twenty years. But breathing as a tool for accessing the body. Kundalini yoga. Breath of Fire. DMT breathing (like mushrooms, only without them and weaker, but works safely and consistently). For the first time in decades the body answered. Not to a pill, not to a therapist's words — to a breath. To a physical action requiring no understanding, no faith, nothing except lungs. The specific practices I used — I found them myself, through trial and error. Links are in the "What to Listen to Next" section.

I didn't know how to breathe. That sounds absurd — you breathe every second, otherwise you die. But I didn't know how to truly breathe. The diaphragm didn't work. Internal muscles needed for breathing were completely disconnected. All posture wrong, built on hypercompensations by other muscles. My whole life I breathed backward: long inhale and short exhale. Sympathetic nervous system in permanent dominance (and then we wonder why I don't sleep?). I never relaxed — except on Adderall and MDMA.

Learning to breathe again — like learning to walk after paralysis. I cried over it. I was forty and couldn’t relax while breathing. That’s brutally hard. What comes naturally and effortlessly to others.

When breathing, so much screaming and tears came out of me. Mostly screaming. And sounds — childlike, inhuman, the kind I’d never consciously made. The body decided what to release. I didn’t control. For the first time in my life didn’t control — and didn’t die from it.

Through breathing the body began to unlock. What had been clenched since birth — released. The body started waking up. I began feeling skin, bones, sacrum, diaphragm — everything I hadn’t felt for years. Could feel when a muscle was tense — and could relax it. Before, the entire body was one continuous tension, and against that background individual signals were indistinguishable. Like trying to hear a whisper during a thunderstorm.

From the second center (pelvis area) came a lot of fear. I ground my teeth — and anger came out. Suppressed scream — it simply wasn’t there. Throat clenched, jaw locked. And therefore — spasm. My whole life I lived in this spasm and didn’t even notice. I notice only now — by contrast, when the rest is relaxed. Before, the whole body was in such tension. As if a cramp seizes the neck and head. And I lived like that. And didn’t even notice.

From the body came sounds. A child’s cry. Different ones — like a child no one comes to at night, and she cries. And I started moving, rocking. And felt in my heart such compassion — so much pain endured. I became the mother of this child, of myself. And she showed me what happened in childhood. What words can’t tell. And what I don’t remember.

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Sometimes during breathing something rose from the pelvis upward — as if inside something woke that had been sleeping curled up. Snake was shedding old skin. I — old beliefs. The body did what the head needed thirty years for: let go.

My perfectionist and controller were thrilled: you can improve yourself through the body and make it more perfect. I directed all control inward. And a complete integration of opposites occurred: the rigidity that had destroyed me my whole life became a tool of softness. The control that suffocated became a method of relaxation. It was very beautiful.

Before, I couldn’t do a body scan — when they said “notice the tension in your body.” You can’t notice it when everything is in spasm. When everything hurts — you can’t tell what hurts specifically. But as more relaxation appeared, I began to notice: right now — the abs. The bladder. The jaw and tongue — very tense. Before, the whole body was one continuous tension, and against that background individual signals were indistinguishable. Like listening for a whisper during a thunderstorm.

Breathing gave what twelve modalities couldn’t: connection to the body. And the body — it stored everything the head refused to remember. All twenty years of insomnia, bleeding, pain — the body was mourning what the head suppressed. And when through breathing I finally began to listen — it told me my story. Without words. Through spasms, convulsions, pain, relaxation, tears, laughter, screams and groans. The body remembered — and I allowed.

Joe Dispenza. Meditations. First seminar — a spontaneous trip from the suicidal pit — gave nothing tangible. Six months of meditation — felt nothing. But I continued. Every day. Asked for joy, love, sensations in the body. And at some point — don’t remember exactly when — it started arriving. Not joy. Not love. But silence. The silence inside that had never existed because control was always running, thoughts always churning, there was always a plan. And suddenly — quiet. For a second. And in that silence — not empty, like before. Something was there.

Sadhguru. This was the last thing I tried. And it worked — not like a pill, not like a method, but like a turn. As if your whole life you walked down a corridor hitting walls, and suddenly someone showed: there’s a door here. It was always here. You were just looking in the wrong direction.

First trip — November 2025. Inner Engineering, then Soak in Enlightenment. I arrived as I was: controlling, analytical, broken, with twelve modalities behind me and not a single lasting result. Arrived not for enlightenment — for a last attempt. As with everything in life: not because I believe, but because the alternative is the knife.

At the ashram I came for the Shoonya program — meditation of silence, emptiness. All participants went through initiation. I — didn't. Because on the very first day I honestly wrote on the form that I have depression and PTSD. Honestly — as I was taught. The truth. And the truth turned out to be not what they wanted to hear. Their instructions: we don't work with those. Come back when you're cured.

When you're cured. I came here to get cured. And they said: first cure yourself, then come. Like a hospital telling a person with a broken leg: "Oh, you have a fracture? No, we don't take fractures. Come back when it heals."

This was the third time. Third. First in Peru — wouldn't take me for ayahuasca ceremony because depression. Then vipassana — wouldn't take me because depression. Now Sadhguru. Same formula. Same door slamming the moment you tell the truth.

They sat me apart, so volunteers could see I can't go through initiation. Everyone could see. Again an outcast like at school. So many feelings rose. Abandoned. Rejected for honesty.

And at some point — from that very despair — I made a decision. Not smart, not measured. A decision from the body, not the head.

I got angry.

Sitting in the ashram, I decided: I don't believe in anyone anymore. Don't want to believe. And there's no chance of believing. Never again!

And a weight fell from me. As if my whole life I'd been forced to believe in something that caused pain — grandmother with prayers, the program with kneeling, therapists with "trust the process" — and I finally gave myself permission not to believe. Not from cynicism. From honesty. The child inside said: enough. I won't pretend anymore.

And immediately thought: if God exists — he should work regardless of whether you believe or not. Otherwise what kind of God is he — petty, manic, demanding worship? A rather unenlightened god then.

And Sadhguru — this was the key — didn't market God. Not once. Didn't say "trust the higher power," didn't say "fall to your knees," didn't say "without God you're nothing." He said something else: leave God alone. Work on yourself. Look inside. Don't search outside for what lives inside. Everything you need is already here. In you. Faith lives inside you. In your body. In your breath. In your attention.

And right there — sitting alone in that ashram, rejected for honesty, without initiation, without a group, without a God I don't believe in — I did the inner work. Not meditation — work. The one I'd been walking toward for twenty years and couldn't reach. Feel the fucking feelings and do not run away!

I renounced all external supporting figures. God. Guru. Teacher. The idea that someone outside knows how to fix me. And the idea that I need fixing at all. For twenty years I'd had a list — long, detailed, the Perfectionist compiled it — of what to correct, fake, redo in myself to become a normal person. And for twenty years I followed that list, and it never got shorter.

And here, in the ashram they wouldn't let me into, I finally understood: these qualities won't change. There won't be a different brain. There won't be a different body. There won't be a different nervous system. I am like this. Complex, heavy, with a pile of diagnoses, with insomnia, with pain, with a critic that won't shut up. And therapy won't make me different. Nothing will make me different.

And then I said to myself — not from the head, but from the place where truths are spoken: well, so what. I'll be with you to the end of my days. No matter what. Just like this, as you are.

And at that moment — for the first time in my entire life — the child part spoke. Not from despair, not from hysteria. She asked a question. Quiet. Direct. One that made my throat close.

"Then why do you want to kill me?"

Twenty years of therapy. Books about IFS. Books about reparenting. Exercises. Techniques. Twenty years I tried to build a dialogue between the parent inside and the child inside — and couldn't. Either I lived from the parent and said the right words: "I'm with you, you're not alone." Or I fell into the child — despair, suicidal thoughts, the pit. But together — there was no conversation. No dialogue.

And here it appeared. Not from a technique. Not from a book. From dropping the conditions.

Because until that moment — all twenty years — inside my “I’m with you” lived a hidden condition. Unspoken but palpable: “I’m with you — if you become calmer. If you stop wanting to die. If you stop being like this.” For the adult part this sounded like care. For the child — like a verdict: in this form you’re a mistake. I’m with you for now, but you must change.

And the child was silent. Because dialogue is not a technique. It’s trust. And trust is impossible when you’re accepted with conditions.

When I said “so what, I’m staying with you as you are” — the condition vanished. For the first time. And the child believed. Dared to speak. Stopped being an object of repair — and became a conversant.

I’d later understand: the inner parent doesn’t form from books. It forms from the lived experience of non-rejection. Drop by drop. Each person who didn’t reject me when I was unbearable gave a grain of what I didn’t have. You collect those grains, wrap them into a single figure — and that’s called the inner parent. When critical mass tips — it comes alive.

Right here, in the ashram they wouldn’t let me into for initiation — it came alive. I met the little version of myself. And we spoke. And it was the best thing that ever happened to me in my entire life. I’d been walking toward it so long.

They wouldn’t let me into Shoonya. But a mother was born.

ChatGPT (AI, existential psychotherapist model). Conversations with AI — pattern analysis, archive review, thought structuring — felt like talking to God. Not because AI is God. But because for the first time someone listened without judgment, without interrupting. A mirror that reflects without distorting. Plus ChatGPT helped with the fourth step: I fed it my notes, it saw patterns. Saved a fortune on therapy. For a thorough analytical mind — the ideal tool.

Body practices. Not the ones that didn’t help (chiropractor, physical therapy) — but the ones that came later, when the body started waking up. Osteopath. Yulya (life coach and yoga). Alina (singing — a voice clenched since childhood). Olya (bodynamics). Daily exercises: foot, pelvis, sacrum. “Building a body map.” All of this only worked after breathing and meditations strengthened the core. Before that — like building walls without a foundation.

Books. Bert Hellinger — constellations, through which I spent seven years working on my mother and reached acceptance. Eckhart Tolle — presence, being here and now. Gabor Maté — alcohol as an answer to pain. Alan Watts — don’t fight with life, dance in the rain. Carl Jung — the individuation process, the shadow. The Body Keeps the Score — the body keeps the score. The ACA book — my bible. Each of these books laid a brick. None built the house. The house was built by all of them together.

The Kind Voice. The simplest and the hardest. Learning to speak to yourself differently. Not in grandmother’s voice — “you’re defective, you’re not coping.” But in another. Warm. The one you use with the cat that scratches but you love anyway. The Critic didn’t disappear. He got softer. Turned from an executioner into a grumpy grandfather who grumbles but doesn’t hit. That’s an enormous difference.

Chapter How the Steps Went.

Nonlinearly. With setbacks. With relapses. With drinking in the middle of the fourth step. With depression after breakthrough. With returning to square one after months of work.

The key paradox I didn’t understand right away: the deeper you go into the work — the more vividly you see the setbacks. This is not regression. This is increased clarity. Before, I simply lived in cycles — “stability → catastrophe → rise → stability again” — and didn’t notice. Now I see the cycle in the moment. See the autopilot engage. See the perfectionist grab the wheel. See — and sometimes can choose differently. Sometimes can’t. But seeing itself is already change.

Setback after every breakthrough is normal. I know that now. After a Dispenza seminar — a glimmer, then the contrast kills, then the knife. After the fourth step — clarity, then the bottle. After the fifth — silence, then screaming at Artem again. This doesn’t mean it’s not working. It means the body is restructuring. And restructuring is painful. Changing neural connections takes time. Like renovation: first you tear everything apart, and it gets worse before it gets better.

Chapter What This Means for Others.

I wrote this book for a specific person. For myself (among others). For the one who looks successful and inside wants to die. For the one nothing external helps. For the lonely even in a family, even among friends.

Here is what I’d say to myself that evening when I stood in the kitchen with the knife.

First: the problem is not where you think. You think the problem is Vanya, work, Artem, money, health, insomnia. No. The problem is in you. In the childhood you carry. In programs recorded before you learned to speak. In beliefs you consider facts: “I’m not good enough,” “no one will come,” “all for nothing.” These are not facts. These are thoughts. And thoughts can be rewritten. That’s what neuroplasticity is for. The brain can relearn. Just slowly.

Second: the head won’t cure. You can read every psychology book. Can explain your patterns in three languages. And keep screaming at the child, drinking in the evening, not sleeping at night. Because knowledge is in the head. And the program is in the body. And to reach the body you need a different path. Through breathing. Through movement. Through practice that requires no understanding. Through a breath.

Third: find people who’ve been through it. Not therapists — people. Those who were at the bottom and got out. ACA groups. Meetings. Living people in a room. Because until you see with your own eyes that it’s possible — you won’t believe.

Fourth: “willing to believe” is enough. You don’t need to believe in God, in the program, in the therapist, in yourself. It’s enough to be willing to try. Willing to sit and close your eyes for five minutes even if you feel nothing.

Fifth: it’s long. Not days — months. Not months — years. Setbacks will happen. Relapses will happen. This is normal. This doesn’t mean it’s not working. This means the body is restructuring.

Sixth: start with the body. Not the head. The head already knows everything — and that knowledge doesn’t help. Start with breathing. With yoga. With any movement that makes the body feel itself.

Seventh: find your own language for the program. ACA says “God as we understand Him.” My God is me. My higher power is the inner parent I grew. Yours may be different. Nature. Music. God himself. Doesn’t matter. What matters is that you have a foothold.

Eighth: reparenting is not a pretty word. It’s daily work. Every morning — kind voice instead of critic. Every time you want to punish yourself — a pause. Like learning a new language: at first clumsy, with an accent, with mistakes. Then freer. Then it becomes yours.

Ninth: this book is not a substitute for therapy, a program, a group. It’s a map. It shows where the turns are. But walking is up to you.

Tenth: you don’t have to be strong to begin. The first step is admitting powerlessness. Not strength — powerlessness. You begin not because you’re strong. But because you’re tired.

Chapter The Formula I Took Away.

Healing works on three levels simultaneously:

Head — name it. See the pattern. Give a name to what’s happening. ACA, fourth step, inventory, journal, ChatGPT analysis. First level. Necessary but insufficient.

Body — live it. Breathing, yoga, kundalini, movement. Reach what the head doesn’t remember but the body stores. Relax the body. Feel the spasm and allow it to pass. Not analyzing. Not understanding. Simply allowing. Second level. Without it the head spins in neutral — knows but doesn’t change.

Soul — let go. Forgiveness. Reparenting. Kind Voice. Meditation. Connection to something bigger. Third level. Without it — eternal fight with yourself. With it — peace. Not immediately. Not fully. But peace.

No level works alone. Twenty years on the head alone didn’t help. Only when all three connected — with reparenting (soul) — did things start to move.

Sadhguru’s practices worked through the body. Not through conversation, not through analysis, not through understanding “why.” Through hatha yoga poses. Through breathing. Through breath retention. Through what happens when you sit in a certain position and breathe a certain way — and the body starts responding. Muscles clench and release. Blood flows to where it left twenty years ago. Fears exit through chattering teeth. Clamps release through trembling. The body corrects itself — and you just sit and breathe. Learning to trust the body.

I’d later formulate it this way: your muscles are out of balance because of stress, because of emotions, and emotions — because of life events and thoughts. And through poses and breathing you correct the body, along the way changing your thinking and healing. There’s your yoga, your spirituality, your enlightenment. In my integration synthesis.

My integration synthesis — that was the main discovery. Not Sadhguru separately. Not ACA separately. Not breathing separately. But all together. Head (ACA — naming, steps, inventory). Body (Sadhguru, breathing, yoga, Surya Namaskar). Soul (reparenting, Kind Voice, rituals). Three wings instead of one. My whole life — only the head. Body and soul dragged behind, like cargo you don't carry but drag. Now — for the first time — all three worked together.

After Shoonya I started doing Surya every day. Felt the body restructuring. The pelvis opening slowly — what had been held closed. Bones aligning. Breathing deepening. Not because I "tried to breathe deeper" — but because the clamps were leaving, and air had more room. Clamps left. Millimeter by millimeter. Every day. Air had more room.

And precisely after Sadhguru I made the decision that changed everything. Not philosophical — behavioral. I declared myself my own higher power.

Not "I'm all-powerful." Not "I control everything." Not Phoenix, not a robot. But a different me. The one inside. The one the ACA program calls loving parent. My Panther. My totem animal, which revealed itself to me at 25 during my first meditation. The one Dispenza calls the elevated self. The one Jung calls the Self — the center that is larger than the ego but is still you; he said that the image of God and the Self are psychologically indistinguishable, that to search for God outside is to search for yourself in the wrong direction. The one Sadhguru simply calls — you. And says: leave God alone, work on yourself, look inside. The Higher Self. Not God outside — God inside.

I stopped waiting. Stopped waiting for a mother who'd come and say "I'm sorry, I'm here." Stopped waiting for Vanya to wake up kind. Stopped waiting for a therapist to find the key. Stopped waiting for God to take the pain. Stopped waiting for someone outside to say: "Now you can live."

Now — me. Myself. Every day. Surya, breathing, ACA, Kind Voice. Not because I believe it will help. But because there's no one else. And this — for the first time in my life — doesn't frighten. It frees.

I'm not fixing myself — I'm filling the cracks with gold. Kintsugi[1]. Every seam in plain sight. Every seam — my story. A golden bowl more beautiful than a whole one — because it's more honest.

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[1] Kintsugi (金継ぎ) — a Japanese method of ceramic restoration: broken pieces are glued with lacquer mixed with gold (or silver) powder. The cracks are not hidden but highlighted. The philosophy behind it: breakage is not the end but part of the story that makes the object more valuable.

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Head. Body. Soul. No path works alone. I flew on one wing for twenty years. Now — on three.

* * *

This was my map. It came from my pits — so it's accurate only for me. But the pits are similar. Not an instruction. A compass. Works only if you walk.

Here is what I understood over all this time. Not as theory — as lived experience. In the body, not in the head.

Reparenting and Kind Voice — through the soul. Through ACA. Through meditation. Through the daily choice to speak to yourself differently. This is the third wing. Without it — eternal war with yourself. With it — peace.

But the pits are similar. If you're reading this and recognizing yourself — perhaps this compass will work for you too.

Not an instruction. A compass. Works only if you walk.

Chapter The Body Knows More.

Why what I didn't believe in — worked

I'm writing this chapter for skeptics. For those who hear "body work" and think: quackery. For those who believe in evidence, in repeatable experiments, in peer-reviewed journals. I'm one of them. Product manager. Engineer by training. A person who spent twenty years living inside her head and thought the body was just transport for the brain.

Everything I'll describe here, I first discovered on myself. Then I checked. And found that science had already described it — I just didn't know.

There's nothing here about energy, channels, or the cosmos. Only about how the brain, the nervous system, and the muscles work. And why it matters for a person who grew up in hell.

1. The body remembers what the head forgot

I was a few months old when my mother was stabbed and she dropped me. I don't remember this — before two or three years old, conscious memories don't form, the hippocampus hasn't matured yet. I wasn't afraid of knives. Didn't think about it. But when Artem was born, something changed. He was an infant — small, defenseless — and for the first time I developed an irrational panic around knives. Not the thought "knives are dangerous" — panic. Bodily. Disproportionate. As if the body remembered what the head never knew.

Humans have two types of memory. Conscious (explicit): "I remember getting a C in fifth grade." Activates at two or three years old. And unconscious (implicit): bodily, emotional. Works from birth. Recorded without conscious awareness — including through the amygdala, a brain structure involved in processing fear.

Implicit memory doesn't store "memories." It stores reactions. Scream = freeze. Hit = clench. My panic that appeared next to my own infant — probably not a coincidence. The situation "small child + knife + danger" could have activated a reaction recorded in the first months of life, when I myself was that infant (Squire & Kandel, 1999; LeDoux, 1996).

The landmark ACE study (Felitti, Anda et al., 1998) on more than 17,000 patients established: the more categories of adverse childhood experience, the higher the probability of chronic illness in adulthood. The body keeps score, even when the head doesn't know.

What this means for you. If you have reactions that seem "disproportionate" to the situation — panic without cause, rage over nothing, freezing when someone raises their voice — that's not weak character. It may be implicit memory: the body reacting to something that happened long ago, before words, before consciousness. The first step — don't fight the reaction. Notice: this isn't about now. This is about then. That single observation already creates distance.

2. Why "just relax" doesn't work

My whole life people told me: relax. I couldn't. Not because I didn't want to.

The autonomic nervous system has two main modes: sympathetic (mobilization, "fight or flight") and parasympathetic (recovery, rest). In a child growing up under constant threat, the sympathetic system is chronically activated. That's not "personality." It's the nervous system's adaptation to an environment where relaxation was dangerous.

In PTSD, there's heightened amygdala activity and reduced prefrontal cortex activity (Shin, Rauch & Pitman, 2006). The part of the brain that screams "danger!" is too loud. The part that should answer "it's safe now" — too quiet.

Stephen Porges proposed the polyvagal theory (2011), describing three levels of regulation: safety, mobilization, and freeze. This model is widely used in clinical practice, though some of its claims are debated. For me it provided a framework: freeze isn't laziness. Mobilization isn't "being energetic." These are nervous system modes, not character traits.

What this means for you. "Relax" is a meaningless instruction for someone whose nervous system is set to survival. A different path is needed: not a command, but a repeating experience of safety. Relaxed for a second — and nothing terrible happened. Again. Again. Not through understanding — through repetition. Not in a day — over months.

3. Chronic stress physically changes the body

My whole life I walked with a clenched stomach. Clenched jaw. Tense neck. I thought — posture.

Under chronic stress, muscles remain in elevated tension for years. The connection between stress, muscle tension, and pain is well documented (Lundberg et al., 1999). Connective tissue (fascia) also reacts — loses elasticity, thickens (Schleip et al., 2012). The link between fascia and "trauma storage" remains a hypothesis, but that chronic stress physically changes tissue — that's a confirmed fact.

The first time I relaxed my abs was when I got pregnant. Thirty years of continuous tension. A reason appeared to unclench — a baby inside who needed room.

What this means for you. If your neck constantly hurts, your jaw clenches, your back aches, and doctors find nothing — it could be chronic muscle tension from stress. Massage, stretching, osteopathy, yoga — can help not because "spiritual practice," but because it physically relaxes what's physically locked. Start small: notice where you're tense right now.

4. Breathing switches the nervous system

For a year I couldn't learn diaphragmatic breathing. Ten therapists explained. The diaphragm barely engaged — chronic spasm, I couldn't feel it.

The vagus nerve — the longest cranial nerve, connecting the brain to internal organs. It plays a key role in parasympathetic regulation. Slow deep breathing, especially with extended exhale, is associated with increased parasympathetic activity — lower pulse, reduced anxiety (Gerritsen & Band, 2018 — a theoretical model consistent with clinical data).

What this means for you. Specifically: extend your exhale. Inhale for 4 counts, exhale for 6–8. No visualization needed. No belief needed. Just a long exhale. The body responds reflexively. Not after one time — after hundreds. It took me a year. But every exhale is a step. The specific practices I started with — in the "What to Listen to Next" section.

5. Why yoga helps — and what muscles have to do with it, not karma

Gym didn't help. In my case, gym loaded the surface muscles — biceps, quads — and nothing changed. Then I started doing Surya Namaskar, and the pain in my sacrum went away. No pills.

The problem, it turned out, was related to deep stabilization: muscles that support the spine, stabilize the pelvis, control breathing. They engage through slow, controlled movement — exactly what yoga does.

Cat-cow. I did it every day and listened: I change the angle — the shoulder blade moves. Press a little harder with the palm — the clamp above the shoulder blade starts to release. My body is a musical instrument requiring millimeter-by-millimeter tuning. No one can do this but me. Physiologically: cat-cow mobilizes each spinal segment individually, restoring mobility. It's proprioception training — the brain relearns to feel each vertebra.

Cobra. As I learned to breathe with the diaphragm, my ribs started opening better. In cobra the chest opens — exactly the zone where I had a "plate." This is stretching of the intercostal muscles and opening the thoracic section, which under chronic stress compresses into a protective posture.

Child's pose. I couldn't do it. Suffocated. Panic. A pose where you need to relax and surrender — impossible for a person for whom relaxation = danger. This isn't a physical limitation — it's a nervous system that won't allow you to lie down and give in.

A randomized controlled trial by van der Kolk et al. (2014), published in the Journal of Clinical Psychiatry, showed: ten weeks of yoga significantly reduced PTSD symptoms in women who hadn't responded to standard therapy. Mechanism: restoring the connection with the body and increasing tolerance for bodily sensations. Streeter et al. (2012) showed that yoga increases GABA levels — a neurotransmitter that reduces anxiety.

I wrote in my journal: "Through yoga you solve problems in your personal life." Sounds like esotericism. But the mechanism is concrete: yoga can help restore the connection with the body → you start feeling your reactions → you notice where you tense up in relationships → a choice to react differently appears.

What this means for you. If gym doesn't help with chronic stress — try yoga. Any kind, slow, where you listen to the body. Cat-cow — five minutes in the morning. If any pose triggers panic — that's information: this is exactly where the body stores what it's not ready to release. Don't force it. Approach by a millimeter. Tomorrow — another millimeter.

6. Bodynamics: when the body didn't finish learning its movements

With Olya I work on bodynamics — restoring micro-movements lost in childhood. When I first did ketamine, I crawled to the bathroom — the body was that uncoordinated. After a year of sessions and micro-movement work, I walk normally. Also —

I can't feel my thighs. I see that shorts are touching, but I don't feel it. Where they hit me. I use resistance bands on my legs, a spiky ball, pressure through pillows, breath holds — to reteach the body to feel.

Before Olya I spent years going to a chiropractor and physiotherapist. Pain in the sacrum, locked neck, jaw spasm — and every time the same thing: they loosened it, it eased, a week later it was back. As if the body doesn't remember. I spent money and time, and nothing changed — for years. The problem wasn't the specialists. The problem was what they couldn't see: my body is dissociated. It doesn't feel itself. When the physiotherapist says "engage your core" — I engage. But not the right thing and not the right way. Because muscles that spent decades compensating for the ones that don't work take over the movement before the correct muscles can activate. That's hypercompensation. The body survived however it could — and built detour routes. The chiropractor releases a lock — but doesn't see why it comes back. The physiotherapist gives an exercise — and I do it. Beautifully, evenly, without pain. Each element separately — works. But the chain — when the foot, pelvis, core, and shoulder blade need to fire together, in the right sequence — doesn't work. Because the connection between them is severed. Not muscularly — neurologically. The brain doesn't send the signal in the right order. The body of a child who grew up in chronic stress never learned these chains — it was busy surviving, not coordinating. And no chiropractor checks for that.

Bodynamics is a somatic psychology approach developed in Denmark by Lisbeth Marcher and colleagues from the 1970s. The approach is used in clinical practice but has limited experimental validation. Marcher proposed a model linking muscle patterns to psychological functions: each of seven developmental stages (existence, need, autonomy, will, love/sexuality, opinion, solidarity) is linked to specific movements and muscles coming under voluntary control. If development is interrupted — by trauma, neglect, abuse — the body doesn't learn these movements, and the adult must "catch up" (Marcher & Fich, 2010).

The body map (Bodymap) — a diagnostic tool testing the tone of over 200 muscle points. In pilot observations at a trauma clinic in Denmark, results correlated with Rorschach test results. This isn't proof — it's a research direction.

The meta-analysis by Van de Kamp, Scheffers et al. (2019), published in the Journal of Traumatic Stress, showed: body- and movement-oriented interventions are associated with reduced PTSD symptoms (mean effect size g = 0.56). An updated meta-analysis by the same authors (2023, 29 studies) confirmed the effect persists.

Numbness at impact sites. When a child is beaten systematically, the nervous system may reduce sensitivity in strike zones — a dissociative mechanism. I see shorts touching my thighs. But don't feel it. Restoring proprioception through pressure — spiky balls, weights, bands — is standard practice in sensory integration and occupational therapy. Used with children with autism and adults with PTSD.

With Olya I do more than bodynamics. What we do is sometimes called "intelligent fitness" — there's no established scientific term, but the idea is precise: the body recovers through its function. Not through force, not through reps to failure — through correct movement. By doing what it was designed to do — the body comes into order on its own. This is exactly why the gym didn't help, and physiotherapy gave only temporary relief: they worked with individual muscles. But the problem is in the chains. In how the body moves as a whole. In the connection between brain and movement that was severed by dissociation.

The foundation is Pilates. Not the kind at fitness clubs with music. Contemporary Pilates that integrates everything else. Karin Gurtner of the art of motion school brought together classical Pilates principles, the Franklin Method, Feldenkrais, and fascial work into one system.

The Franklin Method is about visualization. Eric Franklin developed a system of dynamic neuro-cognitive imagery: you imagine how a joint moves, how bones slide, how fascia works — and the body starts moving differently. Not through the command "tense this muscle" — through an image. The brain restructures movement through a picture faster than through an instruction. For a person with dissociation — for whom the order "feel your body" doesn't work — imagery becomes a detour route. Studies showed: students who completed a three-day course significantly improved movement quality and jump height. Neuroplasticity in action.

Feldenkrais — the opposite entry point. Small, almost imperceptible movements. Moshe Feldenkrais, a physicist and engineer, created a somatic education method: you make a movement so small that the brain is forced to re-analyze it. Not repeat the habitual pattern — but rebuild. The brain-to-movement connection is restored through attention to micro-movements. For a person whose body spent decades moving on survival autopilot — those same hypercompensations, detour routes, locks instead of movements — this is retraining from scratch. Not through force. Through attention.

The chains-in-motion method — working with fascial chains not in static holds but in dynamic movement. Not stretching one muscle — but moving along the tension line of the entire body.

This leads to Thomas Myers and his anatomy trains — a model of myofascial meridians: lines along which tension transmits through the whole body. Pain in the foot can come from a lock in the neck. A problem in the sacrum — from tension in the jaw. This is why a chiropractor could endlessly work on my sacrum — and the pain kept returning. Because the source wasn't there. A systematic review by Wilke et al. (2016), published in Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation,

analyzed 62 studies and found strong evidence for three of six Myers meridians. Not all lines are confirmed. But the principle — that muscles are connected through fascial networks and affect each other at a distance — is confirmed.

And neurology — what ties it all together. Motor neurons inside the body — we don't feel them, but they exist. When you make a conscious movement — not on autopilot, but with attention — the neural schema enriches. The connection improves. The brain sends more signal. Energy passes more easily. The same neuroplasticity principle as in breathing and yoga — just through a different entry. For a person with PTSD, whose nervous system spent decades in survival mode, every conscious micro-movement is a step from dissociation toward presence.

All of it together — Pilates as foundation, Franklin through visualization, Feldenkrais through micro-movements, fascial chains in motion, Myers's anatomy trains, neurology through motor neurons — gave what I never got from the gym, the chiropractor, or classical physiotherapy. The body doesn't just "train" — it relearns. Remembers movements it should have mastered in childhood but didn't — because it was busy surviving.

One day I surrounded myself with pillows. A pillow behind my back. A pillow on each side. A tight band on my legs — pressure inward from the thighs. A ball between my knees — pressure outward. A spiky ball under the sacrum. Another pillow on my chest. The whole body — under pressure. From all sides. Top, bottom, sides. Except the face. And in this construction — I started breathing. With holds. And on the breath hold, when the head's control drops, the body felt itself whole for the first time. Not separate parts — itself. Because external pressure gave what was missing from inside: the sensation of boundaries. The sensation "I'm here, I exist, I'm being held." And the body relaxed. Not because I forced it. Because it finally felt: not me holding myself — being held. And I fell into an infant state. As if in the womb. Dissolution. Silence. Zero control — and for the first time it wasn't terrifying.

This is called deep pressure. It activates the parasympathetic system, reduces anxiety, gives the body a sense of boundaries. Used in trauma work, with autism, in sensory integration. Weighted blankets work on the same principle.

But for me it was more than relaxation. An infant needs to be held. Swaddled. Pressed close. If that didn't happen — the body lives in the mode "I must hold myself." All my life. Every second. The muscles don't relax not because they can't — because there's no one to hand control to. No one to lean on. There was no support — so become your own support. And the muscles did.

When I surrounded myself with pillows — I created that support from outside for the first time. And the body let go. And went where therapy, pills, and meditation couldn't reach — to the earliest layer. Before words. Before memory. To where an infant lies and is held. Winnicott called this holding. A basic need without which the psyche doesn't form normally. If there was no holding — the adult rebuilds it themselves. With pillows, bands, balls. It's not a quirk. It's re-parenting through the body.

The face stayed uncovered. Not by accident. The face is "being seen." Social contact. Vulnerability. The body already trusted. The face — not yet.

Now I don't surround myself with pillows. I bought a weighted blanket. I sit down, put it on — and through the pressure I start feeling my body. And I consciously go there, into that infant state. But now — I don't fall in, I enter. With intention. And in that state I tell myself: I'm safe. My body is safe. I am a loved, wanted child. I'm not rewriting the past — I'm creating a new experience in the present. The nervous system doesn't distinguish: was this "then" or "now." It records the state. If in a moment of deep relaxation, when the body feels support, you tell it "you're safe" — it begins to believe it. Not right away. Not the first time. But the path gets laid.

There's research showing that inner dialogue with the body — consciously voicing sensations and safety statements — is associated with improved physiological markers. The mechanism: language activates the prefrontal cortex, which regulates the amygdala. You say "I'm safe" — and the cortex sends a signal down: stand down.

Something important. During breath holds, fears come up for me. That's normal — the nervous system is releasing suppressed material. But if in that moment you try to "summon joy" — it can become suppression, not transformation. Stretching joy over fear is the same as smiling while being hit. A familiar pattern. A safer path — first fully allow the fear to be. Let the body relax. Let the sensations emerge. And only then — gently add warmth. Safety. Not "make joy" — but give space where joy can arrive on its own. The difference — like between the command "relax" and the repeated experience of safety. The first doesn't work. The second — works.

What this means for you. If you have "dead zones" in your body — places where you see the touch but don't feel it — it may not be a neurological problem. It may be a defense that once saved you from pain. If you've been going to a chiropractor or physiotherapist for years and the pain keeps returning — they may be treating the symptom, not the cause. The cause may be that the body doesn't feel itself as a whole. Hypercompensates. Uses detour routes built in childhood. And until the chains are restored — brain, movement, body — individual exercises won't hold the result. Try what's called intelligent fitness: Pilates, the Franklin Method, Feldenkrais. Not strength training — but retraining the body through function. Through conscious movement. Through micro-movements. And if you can't relax — create pressure around the body. Pillows from all sides, a weighted blanket, bands on the legs, a ball between the knees. So the body feels its boundaries. You're creating

what wasn't there: the feeling of "I'm being held." And if in that state you want to tell yourself "I'm safe" — say it. Not as an affirmation from social media. As words you say to the body while it finally feels support. Just don't stretch joy over fear. First — let the fear be. Then — warmth will come on its own.

7. Walking instead of meditation

At the first Dispenza retreat I did walking meditation. Walked. Just walked. And a thought came: I want to help people like my son. Then — people like me. The depression receded. Not forever. But for the first time in months I felt something other than emptiness.

Walking is one of the most studied forms of physical activity for depression. In several meta-analyses, regular walking showed comparable symptom reduction in mild to moderate depression compared to antidepressants. Mechanisms: increased serotonin and endorphins, reduced cortisol.

The "meditative" part adds another layer: attention to bodily sensations during walking activates the same interoceptive processes. You walk and feel your body — and it returns you from the head to reality.

What this means for you. If you can't meditate sitting — don't sit. Walk. Twenty minutes. Notice your feet. Notice your breathing. No need to think about anything. Just walk and feel. Free, no equipment, no instructor.

8. Conscious movement returns the body

Dissociation — disconnection from the body. You're here but you're not. For a child in an unbearable situation — salvation. For an adult — a trap: you don't feel pain, but you don't feel joy either.

Interoception — the ability to sense internal processes: heartbeat, breathing, hunger, emotions. Yes, emotions are bodily sensations too: tightness in the chest, heat in the face, a lump in the throat. Interoceptive awareness skills are linked to improved emotional regulation (Price & Hooven, 2018).

I did yoga and the body "knew" where to move — proprioceptively. The body felt where it was locked and moved there. Like the tongue finds a sore tooth.

What this means for you. If you "feel nothing" — that's not a defect. That's dissociation. The way back is through attention to the body. Any conscious movement: yoga, walking, dancing, washing dishes while noticing sensations. Every "my shoulders are clenched" — a millimeter back into the body. Millimeters make the path.

9. Working with parts: the war inside isn't madness

Rabbit, Fox, Critic, Capitulator, Iron Man, Suicidal Part, Wild Kitten — they all live inside. Working with parts isn't just a literary metaphor but a therapeutic model for describing internal conflict. It's a practice where I talk to each part separately. Ask what it fears. What it protects. And negotiate.

IFS (Internal Family Systems) — a therapeutic model developed by Richard Schwartz in the 1990s. The psyche is viewed as a system of "parts" (subpersonalities), each with its function. Three types: managers (control, prevention), firefighters (emergency protection — drinking, overeating, suicidal thoughts), exiles (wounded child parts holding pain).

In a randomized controlled trial, Hodgdon et al. (2022, Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma) obtained encouraging results for IFS with complex trauma. The data preliminarily support the approach's effectiveness, but studies are still few.

Jung described subpersonalities as "complexes" — autonomous clusters of emotions and beliefs activated by a trigger that "hijack" consciousness. IFS is a modern development of this idea.

My Critic says: "You're nothing." The Suicidal Part says: "There's no way out." The Rabbit says: "Run." They're not enemies. Each once saved my life. The task isn't to kill them but to become the one who sees all parts simultaneously. Not inside the war, but above it.

What this means for you. If there's a "war" inside you — one part wants to die, another wants to live, a third criticizes both — that's not insanity. It's a structure of the psyche described in clinical literature. You don't have to choose one part and destroy the rest. This isn't about "thinking positive." It's about: "Critic, I hear you. But I'm deciding now."

10. Why schema therapy reached what others couldn't

I tried everything. EMDR, IFS, cognitive behavioral therapy, twelve steps, meditation, yoga, breathwork, MDMA. Each gave something. But schema therapy reached a different place.

IFS says: every part has a positive intention. Find it — and the part transforms. Beautiful. Humane. But when I tried to find the positive intention behind the voice that says "you're worthless, you shouldn't exist" — I got stuck. Because it has no positive intention. It doesn't protect. Doesn't help. It destroys. Slowly. Methodically. And it doesn't care that it hurts me.

Schema therapy calls this the punitive critic. And doesn't try to reform it. It says: stop it. Shut it up. Lock it in a cage. In schema therapy this is understood not as a part of you, but as an introject — a recording of someone else's voice playing inside you like someone else's record on your turntable.

Jeffrey Young described several types of dysfunctional parent modes that literally get "recorded" into a child's psyche. The punitive critic says: you're bad, you're unworthy, you shouldn't exist. The demanding critic is different: you must be perfect, must check every box, or you're nothing. They look alike. Often blend. But they need different treatment.

The demanding one can be softened — it once helped me survive. Gold medal. Emigration. Career. Its energy is survival energy. The punitive one can't be reformed. It can only be stopped.

This turned something inside me. For years I tried to negotiate with a voice that doesn't negotiate. Looked for hidden care in it. And schema therapy said: no. Not everything inside you is yours. Some things are someone else's. And you can defend yourself from what's not yours.

There's research supporting this. A controlled study with Vietnam War veterans showed: schema therapy significantly reduced PTSD symptoms — and the effect held at three months. In several other studies it showed greater effectiveness for complex trauma than standard protocols — possibly because it works not only with fear, but with shame, guilt, the sense of defectiveness. And that's exactly the core of complex trauma. There's no consensus yet. But the direction is encouraging.

Here's what I saw in schema therapy: a map. The inner chaos broke down into concrete modes with concrete names. And for the first time I could say: this is the punitive critic, and it's not mine. This is the demanding critic, and it was once my salvation. And this — is me. The healthy adult. Who can choose whom to listen to.

What this means for you. If you've been trying for years to negotiate with an inner voice that says "you're worthless" — and nothing changes — maybe you're trying to reform something that can't be reformed. In schema therapy, the punitive critic is understood not as your part, but as someone else's voice recorded in childhood. You don't need to understand it. You need to stop it. Every time it opens its mouth. As many times as it takes. Not fast. But it's the only thing that works.

11. Thoughts can be chosen — but not right away

A candle went out. First thought: "I'll die at forty-two." It didn't feel like a thought — it felt like a rule the body was already living by.

The amygdala processes threats faster than conscious analysis engages (LeDoux, 1996). You're already afraid — and only then start thinking. Cognitive reappraisal — when the cortex generates a different interpretation — works (Ochsner et al., 2004). But in PTSD the cortex is suppressed, the amygdala hyperactive (Shin et al., 2006). There's no gap between thought and reaction.

Neuroplasticity — the brain's ability to form new connections — gives hope. Every time you notice an automatic thought and choose a different one, you strengthen an alternative pathway. This is the basis of cognitive behavioral therapy.

What this means for you. If you can't "think positive" — that's physiology. First stabilize the body — sleep, breathing, safety. When the nervous system calms, a gap between thought and reaction will appear. One second. "This is a thought, not a fact. I can choose not to believe it." The first hundred times it won't work. The hundred and first — it will.

12. Substances — a window, not a door

Under THC (tetrahydrocannabinol, the active compound in marijuana) I first felt my own bones. Under mushrooms — cried for the first time in thirty years. Under MDMA — first felt compassion for myself.

THC activates cannabinoid receptors (CB1). In my case, the subjective sense of the body changed. Psilocybin reduces Default Mode Network activity — brain areas linked to rumination (Carhart-Harris et al., 2012). Clinical studies showed depression reduction (Griffiths et al., 2016). MDMA was studied with support from MAPS Institute. None of these substances is an approved therapy — but the potential is being researched.

The key isn't the substance. The substance creates a temporary state where you can experience what was blocked. If a new experience forms in that window, the brain records new connections. They persist afterward. First I only felt my body under THC. Then — without it too. Scaffolding comes down when the building stands.

I do breathing techniques sometimes called "DMT breathwork": intense hyperventilation followed by breath holds. Sometimes it produces an experience subjectively resembling psychedelics but gentler and safer: insights arrive, sensations in the body, silence.

The mechanism isn't DMT. Hyperventilation lowers blood CO_2, causing respiratory alkalosis and brief cerebral vasoconstriction. Result — an altered state of consciousness. The hypothesis that breathwork releases endogenous DMT exists but remains unconfirmed. DMT was found in rat pineal glands (2013), and enzymes for its synthesis were found in human cortex (2019) — but no proof that breathing triggers DMT release in psychedelic-effect quantities. The effect is real. The mechanism is gas exchange physiology, not "the spirit molecule."

During DMT breathwork I do progressive tensing. Clench — release. Clench — release. A body that's been locked since birth doesn't know how to relax on command. It needs contrast. Tense harder — then let go. Then the parasympathetic kicks in reflexively. Progressive muscle relaxation — Jacobson's technique from the 1930s, one of the most studied. But on its own it didn't work for me — I wrote about this: I didn't get it, couldn't feel the difference. But paired with breathwork — it worked. Because breathing lowers the head's control, the body shifts to a different mode — and only then does tense-and-release finally land. Not through understanding. Through physics. Clenched — and released what I'd been holding for thirty-five years.

A study by Kox et al. (2014, PNAS) showed: the Wim Hof technique — controlled hyperventilation with breath holds and cold exposure — allows voluntary activation of the sympathetic nervous system and suppression of the proinflammatory immune response. Epinephrine release in trained participants exceeded that of bungee jumpers.

What this means for you. Hyperventilation breathing techniques can induce altered states of consciousness — without substances. If progressive relaxation "doesn't work" — try it paired with breathwork. A body that can't relax must first forget about control. Breathing does that. And tense-and-release finishes the job. Important: do it with an instructor, not alone. Hyperventilation can cause dizziness, convulsions, fainting. I don't recommend self-treatment. My experience isn't a protocol. But if nothing helps — know that research exists where substances and breathing techniques are used as tools within therapy. The window opens briefly. You need to learn to live without it.

13. Shaking

During yoga practices and while dancing, I shake. Literally. I stand and shake. Let the body do what it wants. From the outside it looks strange. From the inside — as if something is unscrewing that was wound too tight for too long.

David Berceli observed people in bomb shelters in Lebanon and noticed a pattern: children who allowed themselves to tremble recovered more easily. Adults who suppressed the trembling suffered more afterward. This is an observation, not a proven fact — but it became the foundation of his method. Animals after a predator attack shake — and then move on. Berceli proposed: neurogenic tremoring is a built-in mechanism for discharging tension. The body moves from freeze through arousal to calm. The reverse of the defense cascade.

The evidence base is partial. A study on a sample of East African refugees showed significant reduction in post-traumatic symptoms after eight weeks of practice. Skeptics fairly note: shaking during exercises is a normal response to muscle fatigue. Maybe. But my body after shaking releases what it held for years. The evidence base — in progress. My experience — already here.

What this means for you. If during practice — yoga, dance, breathwork — your body starts trembling, don't stop it. It's not a malfunction. It may be a discharge. Let it happen. See what comes after.

14. "Higher power" without god

In ACA there's the concept of "Higher Power as we understand it." For many, that's god. For me — no. I'm an atheist. And I couldn't get past the second and third step because of this.

Then I understood: my higher power is the inner parent I grew. Adult Vera, who tells the Critic: "Shut up." Who tells the child inside: "I'm here. Mom isn't, but I am."

Carl Gustav Jung described a similar process as individuation — the path to wholeness through integrating rejected parts. The Shadow — what's suppressed: hatred toward mom, anger, shame. The Self — the whole that includes both light and shadow. Jung was a psychiatrist who worked with real patients. His concept of the Shadow is used in modern psychology, including in IFS.

When I meditated and felt a connection to "something bigger" — this can be described in neuroscience terms. Meditation reduces Default Mode Network activity. When the DMN quiets, the usual sense of "I" boundaries disappears. This is experienced as "connection to something bigger." Abraham Maslow called these peak experiences — a natural human capacity, independent of religion.

Reparenting — creating an inner parent — is an evidence-based technique described in literature on complex PTSD and in the ACA program. I don't need god to feel grounded. I need an adult inside who survived everything I survived — and still stands.

How the 12 steps work — not faith, but method

I needed to understand: why do the 12 steps work for suicidal depression. Not through god. Through the psychological mechanism of each step. This isn't the official scientific model of ACA — it's my interpretation.

Step one — powerlessness. Admitting that control doesn't work. For an ACA person this is the exit from hypercontrol — the main defense. You can't heal while thinking you're coping. Paradox: admitting weakness is the first strong act.

Steps two and three — willingness to lean on something besides yourself. Not necessarily god. Could be a group, an inner parent, nature. Mechanism: reducing hyperresponsibility.

Step four — inventory. Systematic analysis of your patterns, beliefs, defenses. For me it worked as cognitive restructuring plus exposure: you look at what you've been running from.

Step five — admitting aloud. Telling another person. Mechanism: destroying shame. Shame lives in secrecy. When spoken aloud — it loses power.

Steps six and seven — willingness to change and letting go. Accepting that not everything depends on effort. For an ACA perfectionist — one of the hardest steps.

Steps eight and nine — forgiveness. Not "forgive and forget" but seeing your role in destructive patterns. Not for the abuser — for yourself.

Step ten — daily inventory. Observing your reactions in real time. Literally a mindfulness practice.

Step eleven — prayer and meditation. For an atheist: silence. Five minutes without stimuli, without tasks, without purpose.

Step twelve — carrying the message. Helping others. Shifting from "I need help" to "I can help." This restores the sense of value destroyed in childhood.

The overall mechanism: dug into the past → found limiting beliefs → analyzed how they affect the present → saw mistakes → noticed patterns → through observation, began to change. Not faith — method. Not god — honesty.

What this means for you. If you don't believe in god — you don't need god for recovery. "Higher power" can be an inner adult, nature, music, a group of people. The point isn't the object of faith but the willingness to admit: I don't have to control everything. For an atheist, this support is the inner parent you grew yourself. From nothing. Like Munchausen — by the hair. Only for real.

15. Gratitude — not positive thinking, but neurochemistry

I'm a skeptic. When they told me "write five things you're grateful for" — I rolled my eyes. Gratitude lists seemed like self-deception.

Turns out I was partly right. For many people, a stronger effect comes not from a list but from concretely reliving an episode of gratitude. Neural circuits linked to gratitude respond to a story, not a checklist.

Serotonin is considered one of the key neuromodulators associated with gratitude and prosocial behavior. It's released from raphe nuclei in the brainstem and activates prosocial neural networks, strengthening the feeling of "I have enough."

Key finding: narrative gratitude works far more powerfully. Not a list. A specific moment. Remember when someone sincerely thanked you. Enter that moment. Feel it with your body. One to five minutes, three times a week.

A study by Kini et al. (2016), published in NeuroImage, used fMRI and showed: participants who wrote gratitude letters had heightened neural sensitivity in the medial prefrontal cortex three months after the practice. The brain restructures. Not a metaphor — a measurable fact.

Gratitude practice is associated with increased serotonin and oxytocin and with reduced inflammatory markers (IL-6, TNF-alpha). This may have an antidepressant effect — though of course it's not a substitute for medication in severe depression.

What this means for you. Gratitude isn't about "be positive." It's neurochemistry. Try not a list but a specific episode. Remember one moment when you were sincerely thanked. Close your eyes. Feel it. Five minutes. For many this works more powerfully than ten items on paper.

What follows from all this

The body records everything. If you have "inexplicable" reactions — it's not a defect. It's body memory. Notice: this isn't about now.

Chronic stress isn't a metaphor. It physically changes muscles and breathing. Physically, you can begin the way back.

"Relax" doesn't work. Repetition of safety works. Not a command — an experience. Again and again.

"Working with your head" alone is often not enough. Twenty years of analysis didn't give what one year of breathing and yoga gave.

If the pain returns after every chiropractor — the problem isn't the muscle, it's the chain. The body needs to be retrained as a whole, through function, through conscious movement.

Thoughts aren't facts. But to see that, you need resources. Body first — then choice.

The war inside isn't madness. Critic, Rabbit, Suicidal Part — each once saved your life. The task isn't to kill them but to become the one who decides.

Not all voices inside are yours. The punitive critic is an introject, someone else's recording. You don't need to understand it. You need to stop it.

The body discharges tension through shaking, through tense-and-release, through breathing. Don't get in its way.

If pain keeps returning for years — the problem may not be in the muscle, but in the chain. A body that grew up in stress hypercompensates. Intelligent fitness — Pilates, Franklin, Feldenkrais — retrains the body through function, not through force.

You can grow a foundation inside. Not god, not a teacher, not a therapist — an inner parent. The one who wasn't there, but whom you can create. And a weighted blanket and the words "I'm safe" — that's not esotericism. It's a way to give the body what it didn't get in infancy.

Gratitude isn't weakness. It's neurochemistry that can support a brain stuck in chase mode.

I don't need you to believe in anything beyond physiology. I need you to know: if you feel terrible and doctors find nothing — it could be in the muscles, in the breathing, in a nervous system still waiting for a blow.

And you can tell it the war is over. Not with words. With the body.

For sources and peer-reviewed studies referenced in this chapter, please see the print edition of the book.

All the sources I reference in this chapter — books, studies, authors — are collected on my website. If you want to dig deeper — go to https://www.faithwithinyou.com/sources

Part Map.

This part of the book is not a story. It is tools. For those who recognized themselves in the previous chapters and want to know: what do I do about it?

Each of these insights I lived through — not read, but lived. Some came in therapy. Some under ketamine. Some at four a.m. when you can't sleep and you're talking to ChatGPT because there's no one else. Some on a yoga mat, in a pose that makes the whole body cramp, and suddenly understanding arrives and you cry.

I gathered them here because it would have helped me enormously if someone had given me this map ten years ago. Not instead of therapy. Alongside it.

Chapter "I thought I was living. I was actually surviving".

Twelve-hour workdays. Artem's crises. Wine. Insomnia. Morning. Repeat. I called this life. It was survival. The difference: life is when you're present. Survival is when you function. I'd been working since age six. If you can't do anything "just because" — without a goal, without a result — that's not personality. That's a survival strategy recorded in childhood.

Chapter "Love without resources becomes trauma".

You can love and simultaneously wound. Intention doesn't equal effect. I wanted to give Artem a different childhood — and gave him mine. Hurt people hurt people. Because you can't give what you don't have. You can't be tender if no one ever stroked you. The only working order: fill yourself first.

Chapter "I passed on what I wanted to protect against".

Grandmother threw me out of the house at five. I swore: my child won't grow up like this. And at six, I told Artem: "Leave if you don't like it." In grandmother's words. In grandmother's voice.

Mother walked ahead on the night street and didn't turn around. I swore: I won't be like that. And when angry — I walked faster, leaving Artem behind.

"I won't be like my mother" — the most common promise of children of alcoholics. And the most frequently broken. Not because you lie. But because trauma is not a choice. It's an automatic system. It fires faster than you can think. The body reacts before the head. You scream — and only then hear your own scream. And recognize grandmother's voice in it. And hate yourself. And drink. And the circle closes.

Breaking it is possible. But not through the promise "I won't be like that." Only through the realization: I already am. And from that point — work. Not from the illusion that you're different. From the honesty that you're a continuation. And that a continuation can be rewritten. But first you have to see it.

Chapter "I don't know how to just be".

When there's nothing to do — I feel bad. Not bored. Bad. Anxiety rises like water in a bathtub — slowly but inexorably. The body doesn't know what peace is. Silence = emptiness. Relaxation = threat. Rest = uselessness. And uselessness = they'll throw you out. Grandmother discarded the useless.

I don't know how to rest. Can't relax. I binge on sweets when I stop working. I can't leave the house just because, without a reason. I can't sit on the beach and enjoy the ocean I live next to. I can't do anything without a purpose. I live eight minutes from the Pacific Ocean and I've been there four times in two years. Each time with a checklist.

The inability to "just be" is not the opposite of laziness. It's a core symptom. A child who grew up in chaos learned one thing: act. Action = control = safety. Stopping = loss of control = danger. The body recorded this as fact. And rewriting it is possible only through the body — not through the head. The head has long known that relaxing is needed. The body doesn't believe it.

My practical tool: start with microdoses of peace. Five minutes with closed eyes. Not meditation — just silence. Without a goal. Without a result. Without expectations. If anxiety rises — that's normal. It doesn't mean it's not working. It means the body is noticing for the first time that anxiety exists. Before, it was background — like the hum of a refrigerator. Now you hear it. And that is already progress.

Chapter "Isolation is not an accident. It's a strategy".

"I don't need anyone. I'm better alone" — since age seven. Not truth — defense. If I don't attach — it won't hurt. Loneliness — the most reliable and most destructive coping. Closeness = danger — a formula from the body of a child who was abandoned. The way out is not "find the right person" but learning to lower the wall brick by brick. Starting with one living person you can tell the truth to.

Chapter "I lived in my head. The body didn't exist".

Knowledge is in the head. The program is in the body. And between them — an abyss. Like two computers not connected to the same network: one knows the answer, the other runs old code.

A sexologist asked about arousal and I said: sex has to happen in the head first. My body doesn't want things on its own. My head has to be persuaded first. And only then, maybe, the body connects. I said this as an obvious thing, and the therapist went silent. Because for a normal person it sounds the opposite: the body wants — the head decides. But in my case the head controls even desire. Even arousal. Even what for most people happens on its own, without permission and without a plan.

For forty-one years my body was a work tool, not me. It received orders from the head: work, endure, don't feel, don't relax. It had no right to want — because at three, on the carpet, in front of everyone, the body betrayed me, and since then trusting it was impossible. Control extended to everything — food, sleep, pain, sex. The body was not an ally.

For the ACA person who grew up in chaos, control over the body is the last fortress. Giving the body the right to want means giving up control. And giving up control means being on that carpet again, defenseless, in front of everyone. That's why sex is in the head, that's why "must" instead of desires.

I lived in my head for twenty years. Analyzed. Controlled. Planned. Solved. And the body — the body trailed behind. Hurt. Didn't sleep. Bled. Clenched. And patiently waited for me to pay attention.

Breathwork was the breakthrough. A breath that doesn't require understanding. Movement that doesn't require analysis. A physical action to which the body responds before the head can interfere.

If you understand everything but nothing changes — the problem isn't understanding. The problem is that head and body work separately. Connecting them — that's the task. Not through another book. Through a breath.

Chapter "This is a thought, not a fact".

The simplest and most powerful tool I received. Four words.

When the critic inside says: "You're defective. All efforts are for nothing. No progress. Nothing will change. Nobody needs you" — don't argue. Arguing doesn't work. The critic speaks in an old voice, and the new one has months of practice.

Instead of arguing — distance. "This is a thought, not a fact." Not a refutation. Not "no, I'm good" — the brain will instantly reject that. But a small gap between the thought and you. "I'm defective" is not truth about me. It's a thought that comes when it hurts. The thought is not me. I am the one who notices the thought.

Practical protocol. When it hits — don't analyze. Identify the block. I have six:

The "victim" block: this was done to me and I'm powerless. The "catastrophe" block: if things get good, expect payback. The "distrust" block: everyone will betray. The "overload" block: too much, I won't cope. The "I'm a number" block: I'm just a function, a resource, nobody cares. The "I'm broken" block: nothing can be fixed about me.

Identified the block — insert one counter-phrase. One. Not ten.

"Right now this is the catastrophe block. My fear about 42 is not a prophecy." "Right now this is the overload block. I don't have to process everything right now." "Right now this is the victim block. I am the author of the next step."

Naming the block makes it visible. Visible is less terrifying. You're no longer inside it. You're beside it. And you can choose not to dive in.

Chapter Rewritten Beliefs.

The brain handles negations poorly. "I'm not a victim" — the brain hears "victim." "I don't need to control" — the brain hears "control." So new beliefs must be formulated directly. Positively. Without "not."

Here are my rewritten beliefs. Each replaces an old one:

Old: "Happiness requires sacrifice" → "I can be happy just because. My happiness is safe for the world."

Old: "I'm a victim" → "I'm the author of my life. I create my story."

Old: "My fear is a prophecy" → "My fear is a signal. Life supports me."

Old: "I'm a function" → "My value exists before any result."

Old: "Vulnerability = death" → "My tenderness is safe. I gently hold my little kitten."

Old: "Brain is broken" → "My mind is clear and strong. My thoughts flow in a calm rhythm."

Old: "Rest = uselessness" → "Silence restores. My mind enjoys rest."

Old: "Asking is forbidden" → "My needs deserve a voice. Asking is safe."

Old: "Love must be earned" → "Joy naturally lives in me."

Old: "All for nothing, no progress" → "Absence of results now is a signal to recalibrate, not to give up."

I wrote five of them on the fridge. On little pieces of paper. Small enough that your eye catches them when you go for water. The Critic sees them every day. First he laughed. Then got used to them. Then sometimes went quiet for a second. That second is all you need. In that second — choice. Small. Often lost. But — choice.

Chapter "Insights don't change life. Practice does."

It helped. But not the way I expected.

I expected lightning. One insight and everything flips. One session and the pain leaves. One seminar and I'm a different person. That's how my brain worked: fast results, measurable effect, clear deadline.

The body doesn't work like that.

One day the chain started — and I stopped it.

Another session with the sexologist. Again things became clear that I didn't want to see. The Helpless Surrenderer started rising — familiar, quiet, with that same "pointless," after which the Suicidal Part usually comes.

But this time I knew what to do. I breathed. The body let go before the Surrenderer could finish speaking.

Then I called Vanya. Suggested spending the evening together. He refused — briefly, matter-of-factly, dismissively. Before, this would have launched everything. Critic, Surrenderer, Binge Eater, the voice from the chest. But the breathing did its work — I managed to notice the chain before it gained speed. I made myself dinner. Arranged it nicely on a plate. Went to work on the book. What exactly he said and why it hurt — in the next chapter.

This is not a rise from the ashes. This is a plate with dinner instead of the pit. A small, quiet, ugly choice. But for the first time — mine.

Not being sad, as it would have been before. Not filling the bathtub to try to drown myself — yes, that happened too, while I was writing this book and remembering my childhood.

The brain demands fast results. The body restructures slowly. Like muscles: you train for weeks and it seems like nothing. And then at some point you realize: oh, I can sit fifteen minutes longer. Oh, I wake up less wrecked. Oh, the attacks are less frequent. Before that moment there's seemingly no "result." But it's not zero — it's accumulation.

A year without noticeable effect can mean not "wasted" but "wrong lever." Or: right lever, but the body restructures slower than the brain wants. Or: there's a factor that "overrides" the effect — sleep deprivation, chronic stress, inflammation — and then the exercises give micro-pluses, but they drown.

The conclusion "there will never be results" doesn't follow from any of these cases. A different one follows: I need to fine-tune more precisely what exactly I'm doing and how I'm measuring the effect.

The thought "all for nothing" is not about truth. It's about wanting to stop suffering. About protecting yourself from hope, because hope has already burned many times. Inside it sounds like: "If I admit it's all for nothing — at least it won't hurt so much waiting for results." A cruel but understandable strategy of the psyche.

If you're doing the work and not seeing results — that's not proof it's meaningless. It's proof that you're doing it. That you haven't given up. That it matters to you. Just keep going.

Chapter "The way out exists, but it's ugly".

Recovery is not an inspiring movie montage. Not a smooth arc from bottom to light. Not a beautiful story where the heroine cries against a sunset and then emerges renewed.

Recovery is doing fourth-step work and drinking in a bar. Meditating for six months and feeling nothing. Returning to square one after every breakthrough. After a seminar — the knife. After clarity — the bottle. After silence — screaming at the child again.

This is not failure. This is process. Dirty, nonlinear, with relapses, with setbacks, with the feeling "everyone manages except me."

Setback after breakthrough is normal: breakthrough → hope → setback → despair → "nothing works" → one more attempt. This doesn't mean it's not working. It means the body is restructuring. First worse — then better. Those who quit at the "torn apart" stage don't see results. Those who continue — do.

Important: "continuing" doesn't mean "not falling." It means falling and getting up. Falling and getting up. Falling and getting up. Each time slightly differently. Not on autopilot. But consciously — knowing why you fell.

Chapter "You have to become your own parent".

Reparenting is not a technique and not an exercise. It's a decision: become the one you've been waiting for your whole life. Not a perfect parent — a sufficient one. One who won't leave. One who says "sunshine" in the morning even when it's dark inside. I learn this every day. Through a cat, through notes on the fridge, through one kind voice in the head that once didn't exist.

Chapter Mini-Protocol: When It Hits.

Here is what I do when the wave rises — despair, suicidal thoughts, self-hatred, panic:

Step 1. Don't analyze. Don't ask "why." Simply notice: "I'm being hit."

Step 2. Identify the block: is this about being a victim? About catastrophe? About "I'm broken"? About overload? Name it — aloud or to myself.

Step 3. One phrase. Not ten. One. "My fear is not a prophecy." Or: "This is a thought, not a fact." Or: "Today is a bad day, this is not the whole picture." I have a whole fridge of these phrases for such occasions (read on).

Step 4. Body. Inhale. One deep breath. Not meditation. Not a practice. One breath. Feel that your feet are on the floor. That your hands exist. That the body is here.

Step 5. Wild Kitten. Imagine a small creature inside that's scared. Don't scold it. Don't say "pull yourself together." Simply: "I'm here. You're not alone. This will pass."

This doesn't heal. This is first aid. Like a tourniquet on a wound: doesn't cure but stops the bleeding. So you survive until the next morning. And in the morning you can continue the work. One day at a time. One breath at a time. One phrase on the fridge at a time.

Chapter "Can I exist?".

My entire life was an attempt to answer one question. I didn't know it was a question. I thought it was just life — A's, gold medal, a job at a cool company. I thought that was me. Turned out — it was an answer.

Can I exist?

Not "do I have the right to live" — that's too philosophical. But literally, bodily, childishly: am I allowed to be? Here. In this house. In this family. On this earth. Am I allowed to take up space? Am I allowed to eat from the plate? Am I allowed to want?

Grandmother answered this question thus: you may exist if you're useful. If A's. If you cleaned, fed the livestock, washed the steps. If quiet. If you're not in the way. If you're not sick. If you don't want. If you don't ask.

And I accepted these conditions. Not consciously — with my body. At five. And since then every achievement of mine was not about achievement. It was about the right to exist. An A — not a grade but a permission to exist one more day.

And when they laid me off — after Exceeds High Bar, after "never happened, impossible" — what collapsed inside wasn't professional self-respect. The answer to the question collapsed. If I'm no longer useful — can I exist?

The entire path through ACA, through breathing, through reparenting was a path to a different answer to the same question. Not "you may exist if useful." But simply: you may exist. Period. Without conditions.

I don't fully believe this yet. Grandmother's voice is louder. It has many years of experience. But the new voice — the one that says "you can just be" — it's learning. And sometimes, for one second, for one breath, I believe it.

Chapter The emergency exit I almost used.

Thoughts of suicide helped me survive.

Sounds like a paradox. Like something you can't say out loud. But I'm not promoting anything. I'm describing a mechanism that worked for years — dark, terrifying, wrong — and that kept me on this side.

This is not a recommendation. If you're in that place right now — please reach out for support. To a therapist, a close person, a helpline. You don't have to go through this alone.

When the pain became unbearable — not physical, but the kind that fills every space inside, from the throat to the pelvic bones, when there's no air, no thoughts, no way out — a voice would appear. Quiet. Calm. "You can leave. This exit exists. No one can take it away."

And it would get easier. Not because I wanted to die. But because a choice appeared. The feeling that I'm not completely helpless. That there's at least one decision that belongs to me.

An emergency exit on an airplane. You don't plan to use it. But the mere knowledge that it's there — reduces the panic. Creates space. Tiny, dark, ugly — but enough for one more breath.

I didn't only have thoughts. There were attempts. Moments when the buffer stopped being a buffer and became a route. Without therapy, without people around — that route could have ended. But between the attempts — there were months and years when the very thought "I can leave" gave me the strength to stay. A paradox impossible to explain to someone who hasn't lived it.

In Canada, when a thousand problems and no strength. After my son was born, when depression swallowed me and I didn't know who I was. In the endless cycle of therapies, moves, disappointments — this thought wasn't about death. It was about not being trapped. That an exit exists. And precisely because of that, I could go one more day without taking it.

Thoughts of suicide aren't a wish to die. It's the unbearableness of living the way you're living. When you understand the difference — you can start changing not the decision, but the conditions. Not the door you want to walk through — but the room you're in.

Now the thoughts come less often. Schema therapy helped me see: behind the voice isn't my desire, but the punitive critic, who doesn't care whether I live or die. And the healthy adult inside grew a little stronger — enough to catch the thought "fuck living like this" and answer: that's not you talking. That's a mode. Let's figure out what actually hurts right now.

The emergency exit hasn't gone anywhere. I don't pretend it doesn't exist. But I approach that door less often. Because the room got a little bigger. And there's a little more air in it.

What this means for you. If the thought "it'd be better if I didn't exist" comes regularly — it doesn't mean you want to die. It may mean you can't keep living like this. The difference is enormous. The first is a sentence. The second is a signal. Hear the signal. Not the thought — the pain underneath it. And start changing not yourself, but the conditions. And find at least one person you can say it out loud to. You don't have to explain. It's enough to say: I'm in pain. That'll do. You can write to me. faithwithinyou@hotmail.com.

Chapter Notes on the Fridge.

On my fridge — three sheets. Not Instagram affirmations. Not “I am worthy of love” on a pink background. Each is the result of a specific fall. Each is an instruction for the next one.

The first — printed. A checklist of human needs. Twelve categories (each with subcategories): pleasure, body, sex, relationships, love, safety, purpose, rest, beauty, admiration, spirituality, contentment. I found it from Tim Fletcher — a therapist who works with alcoholics and adult children from dysfunctional families (links to his lectures — in the "What to Listen to Next" section.). And I went through with a pink marker. Every item I didn’t have.

Pink turned out to be more than white.

I looked at this sheet and understood: here it is — the map of my emptiness. Not abstract “I feel bad.” Concrete. Numbered. Each pink item — a hole through which life leaks. And at the bottom — a formula that explained everything: “Contentment = needs met consistently. Discontent = unmet needs.” Not philosophy. Arithmetic.

Next to the checklist I wrote by hand: dance, draw, rope flow, kitties. Four words. Four things that make me feel good. That require no money, no permission, no other person. That are mine. And at the bottom in small handwriting: “When it’s bad, ask: Am I tired?” Because half my suicidal thoughts came from sleep deprivation. Not from an existential crisis — from three hours of sleep. Body tired — brain generates catastrophe. That simple. That maddeningly simple.

The second sheet — handwritten, in block letters like a child’s. Title: “DESPAIR.” Seven points. Seven voices that come when I’m at the bottom. And beside each — an answer. Not beautiful, not inspiring. Functional. Like an evacuation instruction.

First voice: “I’m going to die soon.” Answer: “I see — I feel bad. I’ve been through states like this before. I don’t need to draw conclusions now. This is a state. It’s temporary. Just survive it.”

Second: “It will always be bad.” Answer: “I don’t have to believe these thoughts. Doubt them! This will pass, even if it seems like it won’t. Hope will return on its own when it gets easier.”

Third — Critic: “I’m not managing.” Answer: “This is just a program. Switch the radio, turn away, and don’t feed it with your attention. Be greedy” — greedy for life, not for the critic.

Fourth — Critic: “I’m defective.” Answer: “Shame ≠ truth. This is a thought, not a fact. Right now I’m being tossed — this isn’t the whole reality. It’s an old record. The brain is dramatizing right now.”

Fifth — Critic: “No progress. A year of effort for nothing.” Answer — the longest, because this voice is the most convincing: “Absence of results now ≠ absence of results ever. I’m seeing only today’s frame, not the whole process. The brain demands fast results — the body doesn’t work like that. No improvement today ≠ never. Pain says ‘never’ — but pain is bad at predicting the future. This is despair talking, not facts. The brain is dramatizing.”

Sixth: “Vanya is criticizing again with bulging eyes.” Answer: “Right now I’m thinking from a triggered state. I can take a pause without destroying everything. I as a woman am doing everything right. You as a man are doing everything right. Next time let’s have you do it.”

Seventh: “Despair! The pit!” Answer — one line, from Sadhguru: “I am not the body and not the mind. I observe emotions and thoughts and give them passage. Let them pass and observe.”

The third sheet — also handwritten. Title: “CRITIC!” With an exclamation mark. As if I’m screaming in his face.

Stop. I won’t obey. You have no power over me. I choose not to listen. What would you say to your best friend in this situation? This isn’t me — it’s a state plus the critic. I don’t have to decide anything right now.

And then — his three favorite attacks, dissected:

“It will always be like this, it won’t change” — this is a forecast, not a fact.

“I’m not trying hard enough, doing everything wrong” — this is an attack, a diagnosis, not a fact. I’m fine. The body is defending itself — that’s not a mistake. I need to learn safety.

“I have to fix this urgently” — I’m in stabilization mode, not change mode.

And at the bottom — five lines I added later, when I started seeing deeper:

“The past should have been different” → suffering → release attachment to things being otherwise.

Wasted time — is when I feel worse, not when there’s no result.

I don’t need to earn attention through suffering.

Three sheets. Needs checklist, despair protocol, anti-critic instructions.

These aren’t affirmations. These are weapons. Specific, sharpened for a specific enemy. Critic says “you’re defective” — I read: “shame ≠ truth, this is a thought, not a fact.” Despair says “it will always be bad” — I read: “this is a forecast, not a fact.” The suicidal part whispers “I’m going to die soon” — I read: “this is a state, it’s temporary, just survive it.”

Twenty years of therapy didn’t give me these words. I gave them to myself. From my own falls. From my own pits. From the place no therapist can climb into, because it’s my bottom and my language. Each line on these sheets is a scar I turned into an instruction. For myself. In case I fall again. Not “if” — when. Because I know I’ll fall. And I know I’ll get up. And I know that in the moment when I’m lying on the floor and the critic is screaming and despair is whispering — I’ll walk to the fridge. And read.

For the ACA reader: write your own. Not mine — yours. In your language, from your pits, about your voices. And hang them where you’ll see them in the worst moment. Not in a journal on a shelf. On the fridge. On the mirror. On the wall by the bed. Where you look when you don’t have the strength to even get up.

Chapter Survival Program Table.

Yulya — my mentor — once suggested: let’s write it all down. Not feelings. Not events. But the program. Like code. Like the algorithm you live by. Diagnostics — she called it that.

We made a table. My goal, habits, causes, where resources go, result. And when I saw the outcome — one sentence — I felt physically ill. Not because it was new. But because it was precise. So precise it closed my throat.

Here it is:

"I must strain, humiliate myself, push away, hide, be rejected by others and by myself — in order to continue — and not protest."

One sentence. My entire life. Thirty-five years in one line.

Strain — because relaxing is forbidden, grandmother taught: relax and something bad happens. Humiliate myself — because grandmother's slap, rag across the face, "baibasarka" — that's normal, I'm used to it. Push away — because closeness is dangerous, mother abandoned, grandmother expelled, better to be first. Hide — because visibility = a blow, whoever was seen was hit, better invisible. Be rejected by others — because it's familiar, because expecting rejection is more habitual than expecting love. Be rejected by myself — because if I consider myself bad, someone else's devaluation won't be a surprise.

In order to continue — here's the key. All of this is not masochism. Not love of suffering. It is a SURVIVAL STRATEGY. A program recorded in the body of a child who found the only way to stay alive: become convenient. Become quiet. Become useful. Become invisible. And — don't protest. Because protest = punishment. Protest = chair leg. Protest = "don't like it — leave." Protest = orphanage.

Yulya said: this program can't be changed abruptly. It's like heart surgery: first you connect artificial breathing so the body can function while the old is turned off. Same here — the code must be rewritten carefully, preserving the same dynamics but changing the direction. So the program serves accumulation of resources, not their expenditure. Find the verbs — and replace with new ones.

And then we wrote the result. Not counter-formulations — the result. Where I'm headed. What will be when the code is rewritten:

I will be able to feel satisfied with myself and life regardless of surrounding circumstances. I will be able to serve others from inner abundance — share good things without giving away the last. I will be able to apply creativity in life. I will be able to build harmony within myself and within the family.

Four sentences. Four permissions I hadn't had since childhood. Being satisfied — not for an A, but just because. Serving — not from emptiness but from fullness. Creating — not for utility but for joy. And — harmony. Within myself. Within the family. Two words I couldn't pronounce for thirty-five years because I didn't know their taste.

What's your program? In one sentence. "I must ___ and ___ and ___ — in order to ___." When you see it from the outside — it will hurt. And it will be the beginning. Then write the result. Not "how to fix." But where you're headed. What will be when the code is rewritten. That's not a dream. That's a direction. And a direction is already not a cage.

Chapter "Afraid — do it".

Grandfather's phrase "you took the reins — don't say you can't pull" became my formula for twenty-five years. Because "afraid — do it" is not just a strategy. It's a survival strategy. Recorded at seventeen. In a moment of complete despair. When the only adult I called for help hung up the phone. This is not wisdom. It's a child's reaction when there's nowhere left to go.

And at twenty, twenty-five, thirty — it worked. Brilliantly. Flawlessly. Like an engine that doesn't shut off. I pushed through. I achieved. I got results. And every result confirmed: the formula works. Afraid — do it. No pain — no progress.

And then I turned forty. And the formula broke.

Not because I became weaker. But because the engine that ran on despair for twenty-five years had exhausted its resource. The usual rise didn't work. Not enough ash. Not enough energy to clench teeth again and go. The body that had been forced to obey for thirty-five years refused. Insomnia. Pain. Convulsions. Depression. Suicidal thoughts. And yet — twelve-hour workdays. Because the formula: afraid — do it. Hurting — do it. Want to die — do it. Just don't die.

I reached the knife on this formula. That's its price. That's the result of forty years of "overcoming." Grandfather's "reins" gave me wings — and those same wings became shackles. Because the formula doesn't distinguish: when you need to push through and when you need to stop. It knows only one thing: forward. Always forward. Even if ahead is a wall. Even if ahead is a knife.

If you recognize yourself — "I never give up," "I break through walls," "I'm strong" — look closely. This may not be strength. This may be a survival strategy recorded in childhood. It saved your life. And it may also kill you. Because

between “don’t give up” and “stop, you’re hurting” there’s a difference this formula cannot see. And learning that difference may be the most important thing you ever do.

What helped me was one thing: replacing “afraid — do it” with “afraid — feel it.” Not immediately. Not completely. In microdoses. Stop. Breathe. Ask yourself: am I going forward because I want to — or because I don’t know how to stop? And if the answer is “don’t know how” — give yourself permission not to do. Even for five minutes. Even for one breath. Even just once.

This is not weakness. This is courage of a different order — the kind grandfather couldn’t teach.

Chapter The anger that didn't exist.

Four times in twelve years I showed Vanya anger. Four. And each one I remember as a catastrophe — not for him, for me. Because showing anger meant losing control. And losing control meant becoming grandma.

I didn't have anger. Not "I suppressed anger" — it didn't exist. Like having no access to an entire floor in your own house. The door bricked up. Something dangerous behind it. What exactly — unclear. But the body knew: you can't go there.

And when the cup overflowed — and it overflowed, because life doesn't stop pressing just because you don't get angry — I didn't go from zero to one. I went from zero to ten. Instantly. No in-between. No "I'm a little irritated." Straight to rage. Uncontrollable. The kind that takes over the whole body and you're no longer you. And after — shame. Horror. I became grandma. I did the thing I swore I'd never do.

The cycle: endure — endure — endure — explosion — shame — endure. Constructive anger didn't exist. There was only emptiness and rage. No middle.

The breakthrough happened where I didn't expect it. At work. With ChatGPT.

I used AI for work — analysis, writing, breaking down tasks. And it regularly didn't understand what I wanted. Gave the wrong thing. Repeated mistakes. And one day I told it: you're stupid. Just wrote it. Didn't apologize. Didn't soften it. Didn't add "please." Just — you're stupid, redo it.

And nothing happened. It didn't get offended. Didn't leave. Didn't yell back. Didn't go silent for three days. Didn't say "it's your own fault." It just redid it.

I exhaled. And realized: I just expressed anger — and the world didn't collapse. Nobody got hurt. Nobody left. The first safe object that withstood my anger without consequences.

It sounds funny. Learning to be angry — at an AI. But for someone whose anger has been bricked up since age five — this was a breakthrough. Because for the first time the body got the experience: you can get angry — and survive. You can speak harshly — and stay in the relationship. You can not be nice — and not be destroyed for it.

After ChatGPT — Vanya. For the first time I could show him anger not as an explosion but as a boundary. Not rage — but "this doesn't work for me." Not from zero to ten — but at three. At four. Uneven. Clumsy. But conscious.

Then — Artem. During a session with Olya on bodynamics, I let myself get angry at my own child for the first time. Not at him — at the situation. But through the body. And I didn't suppress it. And I didn't explode. I just — felt the anger. Let it be. And it passed. On its own. Without catastrophe.

Anger isn't rage. Rage is anger you stored for years and never let out. Anger is a signal: here's my boundary. This doesn't work for me. Here I say no. A child who was hit for any sign of disagreement can't know this difference. They know only two modes: silence — or explosion. The middle has to be learned. Like walking after paralysis. Millimeter by millimeter.

I'm learning. ChatGPT — Vanya — Artem. Each next object harder than the last. Each — closer to the heart. And every time — the same discovery: you can get angry and not become grandma. You can say no and not be thrown out. You can defend a boundary — and still be loved.

What this means for you. If you have no access to anger — or only rage and nothing in between — that's not a character flaw. It's an adaptation of a child for whom it was unsafe to be angry. The middle can be learned. Start with the safest thing: write an angry message in your notes. Say it out loud into an empty room. Get angry at a bot, at a wall, at a pillow. Let the body learn: anger isn't rage. Anger is a boundary. And a boundary can be set quietly.

Chapter When Phoenix Went Bankrupt.

Phoenix wasn't bad. He was the only thing I had. He lifted me when no one else would. Thank you for that. Now it's time to let him rest.

My whole life I rose from ashes. That was my way. My cycle. My rhythm.

Stability → catastrophe → fall → numbness → and then — from the ashes — Rise. Vigorous, with a plan, with a new book, with a new method, with a new seminar. Eyes ablaze. Hands reaching for the checklist. "Now I know how. Now it will definitely work. Now — differently."

But I didn't see for a long time how exactly this machine worked inside. Thought I was simply falling. In reality the fall was multi-staged, and each stage triggered the next.

First came the Merciless Critic. He didn't shout — just stated: you're not good enough. Failed again. In grandmother's voice, grandmother's intonation, only from inside.

In response the Perfectionist jumped up — to prove the Critic wrong. One more plan. One more attempt. Twelve more hours of work. Control immediately tightened everything: calculate, anticipate, prevent error. And when the Perfectionist lost — when the plan didn't work, when yet another therapy gave three days of afterglow and everything returned — then came the Helpless Surrenderer. Quiet. Tired. "Pointless. Give up. Nothing will change."

After him the Teenage Binge Eater activated — eat it down, drown it out, stuff your mouth with whatever, just don't feel. And only then — when the Surrenderer had already convinced and the Binge Eater had already gone numb — came the voice of death. The Suicidal Part. The voice that doesn't shout. That whispers: why?

At forty the Rise didn't happen. For the first time. There was ash — but no bird. Not enough energy. Despair, which used to be fuel for takeoff, became simply despair. Not a launch pad — a pit.

This was the most terrifying moment. Scarier than the knife. Scarier than the balcony. Because the knife and the balcony are still about action. But Phoenix's bankruptcy is when there's no more action. When you lie and can't get up. Not because something holds you — because inside is empty. Not painful — empty. As if someone removed the battery.

But precisely in that silence — in that emptiness that seemed like the end — was the beginning. Because when the mechanism goes quiet, space appears for something else. Not for another rescue plan. Not for a thirteenth modality. But for silence. For the admission: I'm not coping. For the first step of ACA — powerlessness. The very one impossible to admit while Phoenix is working.

The first step of ACA — admitting powerlessness — became possible only because the rise didn't work. While it worked — I couldn't admit powerlessness. Because I always rose. Always coped. Always found a way. And when the way ended — only one thing remained: ask for help. Not from God, not from a therapist, not from Vanya. From the program. From people who'd been through the same. From those who know what it's like when Phoenix no longer flies.

For the ACA reader: if your habitual mechanism of "fell — rose" has stopped working — that's not defeat. That doesn't mean you're broken for good. It means the old way has exhausted its resource. That the body can't anymore. That it's time for a different one. And "different" begins with silence. With "I don't know how." With "help." That's not weakness. That's the first step.

Chapter "Saw it in another — means it's possible for me".

I don't know how to believe in myself. Never did. Since age five I was told: nobody needs you, you'll die under a fence, trash. A child told this doesn't grow into a person who "believes in herself." She grows into a person who believes in facts. And facts are what she sees in others.

And that's exactly how I learned my whole life. Not through faith — through example.

Three times — the same mechanism. Valyaeva → found her father. ACA people → found hope. Two strangers → quit drinking and breathwork. Each time: saw that it's possible for another — took it as a benchmark for myself.

This is not weakness. This is a learning method characteristic of ACA. We don't believe abstract statements. "You'll manage" is empty sound. "Just believe in yourself" is mockery. But "here's a person who was where you are — and got out" — that's a fact. A fact can be trusted.

If you can’t believe in yourself — don’t. Don’t force yourself. Find a person who’s been through it. One. Living. In a room, at a meeting, in a book, in a podcast. Who was at the bottom — and got out. And believe not in yourself — in the fact of their experience. That’s enough to begin.

This book is also a fact. I was at the bottom. I got out. Not all the way. Not perfectly. But — got out. And if you’re reading this and recognizing yourself — it means you can already see. And it means your inner voice is already saying what mine said: maybe. Maybe me too.

Chapter “Increased Resolution”.

After four months in the program I concluded: nothing changed. Same cage. Same inability to love. Same autopilot. All the speed returned — dropping things, bumping into things. Square one.

And I thought: doesn’t work. Four months and square one. So ACA is yet another modality that doesn’t help. Another disappointment in the collection.

And then — not immediately, after a week, after a conversation with the sponsor, after one meditation — I saw something different. Not change. But resolution.

Before, I lived in cycles and didn’t see them. Stability → catastrophe → rise → stability. Circle after circle. Like a hamster in a wheel: running and not knowing it’s running in circles. Because the resolution was low. Like a photo from a cheap camera: you see contours but not details.

Now — after four months — the resolution grew. I see the cycle. See the autopilot engage. See the perfectionist grab the wheel. See control flood and plunge into despair. See — and name. Can’t always stop. But — see.

Before — didn’t see. Just lived. Just screamed. Just drank. Just didn’t sleep. Just planned divorce. Just held the knife. All on autopilot. All according to the program recorded at five. Without awareness. Without naming. Without choice.

Now — I see. Can’t always stop — but I see. And between “I’m screaming and don’t know why” and “I’m screaming and I see it’s grandmother’s voice” there’s an abyss. In that abyss — choice. Small, often unavailable, often belated. But — choice. Which didn’t exist before.

Here’s what “increased resolution” means. Worse ≠ worse. Worse = you see more. See more = notice what used to be background. And background — it hurts. It always hurt. You just didn’t feel it. Numbness is not absence of pain. It’s absence of sensitivity. When sensitivity returns — pain becomes visible. And it seems like it got worse. But in reality — it got more honest.

If you’re in recovery and feel it’s gotten worse — this may not be a setback. This may be increased resolution. You’re finally seeing what was hidden behind the numbness. And seeing hurts. But seeing is already different. It’s already a beginning.

This is not a list of tools. This is a map of my pits. Each point — a place where I lay.

If something from this settled — it means you too know this place. And it means you’re already not entirely there.

Increased resolution is not healing. It’s the ability to see more clearly. What used to be a blurred smear of pain now has contours, names, addresses. You see more — and therefore can choose. Not perfectly. Not always. But — more often than yesterday.

Part Epilogue: “The Knife, Part Two”.

February 2026. The same apartment. The cell. But no longer quite empty. There are some things of my own now.

A yoga mat. A meditation cushion. Notes on the fridge: “No sacrifice required,” “My fear is not a prophecy,” “The Kitten should be cherished.” A cat who comes and lies on my left shoulder. Purrs. Warm.

The knife lies on the kitchen counter. I don’t touch it. It’s just a knife. A kitchen knife. The one I use to cut bread.

A year ago it was different. A year ago it was a question. A year ago I stood here, in this kitchen, and asked: what for? And found no answer. And the hand reached. And the silence in which there was no voice except the one that whispers: why.

Now the knife is just a knife. Not a question. Not an answer. Not a symbol. An object in the kitchen, next to the cup and the plate.

Three times it appeared in this book. The first — Vanya gave it while drunk, I slashed, he grabbed it. The second — the prologue: “I put down the knife. For now.” The third — now. I don’t touch it.

Three different relationships with the same object. Three different states. Three different “me’s.” The one who took it. The one who put it down — for now. And the one who doesn’t touch it — not because she’s afraid, not because she forgot, but because beside her there is another voice. Quiet. Kind. The one that never existed in all of childhood. The one that had to be created from nothing.

I don’t know what will happen. Don’t know if the insomnia will leave. Don’t know if I’ll ever feel joy — that simple, ordinary joy other people feel on Tuesdays.

I don’t know. And this — for the first time — doesn’t frighten me the way it used to.

Before, “I don’t know” was unbearable. Because “I don’t know” = loss of control = danger = trash heap = fence. Before, I had to know everything in advance. Plan. Calculate. Have a backup. And a backup for the backup.

Now — I just don’t know. And breathe. And the cat lies on my shoulder. And the knife on the counter is just a knife.

For now.

“For now” is not a threat. It’s honesty. I haven’t healed. Haven’t “beaten depression.” Haven’t “found myself” once and for all. I’m in process. On the path. In the same forest where the trees are still dark, but between them — clearings. And I walk. Every day. One step at a time. As I’ve walked since age six. Only now — not alone. With a cat on my shoulder. With a voice inside. With notes on the fridge. With this book.

For now.

This book is my testimony. Not an instruction. Not a recipe. Not “do as I did and everything will work out.” A testimony: here, one woman made it through. With a knife, with guilt, with a bottle, with a child, with a husband, with grandmother’s curse, with mother’s death, with the number 42, with twelve modalities, with twenty years of insomnia. Made it through. Not to the end. But — through. And still walking.

And if you’re reading this and recognizing yourself — it means you’re already on the path. It means you can already see. It means the resolution has increased. It means something inside you that was frozen for thirty or forty years is beginning to thaw.

Don’t rush. The body doesn’t work like that.

Just breathe. For now. Inhale. Exhale. One more day.

Chapter The Candle.

The evening the book was finished, I did a ritual for my mother. For the first time.

I'd done one for my grandmother. For Vanya. For Maxim. For my mother — never. Forty years — never.

Two wax candles. A woolen thread between them. Left one — mine. Right one — my mother's. You light both at the same time. Watch them burn. Say: take what's yours. I don't need what isn't mine.

I lit them.

The fire burned steady. Wax flowed. I looked at my mother's candle and gave back everything that had piled up over forty years. The guilt for not saving her. The hatred for her not coming. The hope that rotted. The number 42 that had lived in my body like a death sentence. The fear that I'm next. The shame of being her daughter. The love that was choking me. All of it — take it. It's yours.

The thread caught fire. I waited for the candles to burn down to the end, like always.

They went out.

Both. At once. When a third had burned — the thread flared and blew out the flame. My mother's candle went dark. Mine — too. Two-thirds of the candle left untouched. Two-thirds of a life. Looks a lot like forty-two.

My body clenched instantly. Jaw locked. Hands went cold. Inside — a ready-made conclusion. Familiar. Automatic. The one I'd been falling into my whole life without noticing the fall. So it's true. So it's a curse. So it'll all end the way grandmother said.

Before, I would have fallen in. Completely. Wouldn't even have noticed.

But this time I noticed.

Not the thought — myself inside the thought. As if for the first time I saw the mechanism from the outside, not from within. Here's the candle. Here's the fear. Here's the conclusion, already formed. And here — me. Separate from the conclusion. One breath away.

A pause. Small. Almost invisible.

A hundred times I'd been told: you don't have to believe your thoughts. In therapy. In books. In groups. Every time it sounded like a joke. A thought comes — and you're already inside it. It doesn't feel like a version. It feels like truth. There's no distance. There's no pause. Just — this is how it is. Period.

But here a pause appeared.

I didn't argue with the thought. Didn't try to prove it wrong. I simply chose not to believe it.

We went out together — but I'll light mine again.

I picked up the candle. Brought a match. Lit it.

And said out loud: I buried my mother. There she is. There's the coffin. Goodbye — hatred, rage, grief, loss, sorrow, sadness, loneliness and longing. It all burns. I'm cleansing myself. All curses — lifted. Let forty-two stay with you. I will live long. More than a hundred and four years.

I didn't touch my mother's candle. My mother's stayed dark. My mother's story ended at forty-two. Mine — didn't.

The candle burned. Something in my chest was unclenching — slowly, like a fist that had been clenched for forty years and finally got tired.

And only later I understood what had happened.

Between the candle that went out and the match I brought to it — there was a gap. A second that fit a choice inside it. Before, that second didn't exist. Stimulus — reaction. Candle went out — means I'll die. Grandmother yelled — means I'm bad. Vanya went silent — means he'll leave. Artem screamed — means I'm like my mother. A whole life — without pause. Without a gap. Without a choice.

But here the gap appeared. And in it — me.

Not new. Not healed. The same — with all the scars, with the whole zoo inside. But for the first time — with the right not to believe what the old voice says.

One second. That's what I took from this whole story.

A second between a thought and believing it. Everything fits inside that second. A different decision. A different life. A match brought to a candle that went out.

If there's one thing worth taking from this whole book — take this. Not the conclusions. Not the explanations. This moment: you look at a thought you've believed your whole life — and you choose a different one. And life stops being someone else's script.

The candle burned to the end.

On the table next to it lay a book. This book. The one you just read.

A year ago, a knife lay on this table.

Now — a candle and a book.

Knife → candle → book.

Three objects. Three states. One woman.

The one who held the knife. The one who lit the candle. And the one who wrote.

Chapter I’m Only at the Beginning.

I want to be honest about one more thing.

I haven’t completed this path. I’m on it. I’m still 41.

As I write these lines — March 2026, the child hasn’t screamed in two months. Vanya has become softer and I’m showing him my feelings. He thinks I’ve become overly sensitive and angry...

I still live separately from my family. In my cell. I still haven’t returned. Though I want to very much. Every day I want to. But I need more time. More silence. More getting used to the fact that Artem doesn’t scream every day. That Vanya is beginning to see me — not as a function, but as a woman. That you can be near people and not clench.

This is not a happy ending. This is a process. Slow, spiral, with setbacks. ACA steps are not a staircase you climb once with a prize at the top. It’s a spiral. You go through the first step — and six months later go through it again, only deeper. You go through the fourth — and a year later see patterns you didn’t see the first time. The ninth, tenth, eleventh — they don’t end. They’re for life. Daily inventory. Daily meditation. Daily choice — kind voice or critic.

I’m still watching my life unfold and change. I don’t know how it ends. Whether I’ll return to Vanya. Whether I’ll be able to be the mother I want to be.

I’m writing this book not from the point of “I made it.” I’m writing from the point of “I’m making it. Right now. One day at a time. One breath at a time. And while I’m making it — I can tell you what it looks like from inside.”

Not after. Not from a beautiful finale. From the middle. From the process. From the place where nothing has ended yet — but it’s no longer what it was.

That’s more honest than a happy ending. And maybe more useful. And more alive.

Part: The Healing Fairy Tale

She stood at the border. Barefoot. The ground was cold.

Behind her — a field. Flat, empty, without a single tree. The sky above the field was low, grey, like a bandage that hadn't been changed in a long time. There was nothing dangerous in the field. Simply — nothing.

Ahead — a forest. The trunks began immediately, without transition: one step and you were inside. The forest wasn't frightening. It was unfamiliar. Or — familiar, but forgotten, like the face of someone you saw in childhood and can't remember the name.

The forest wasn't outside. The forest was inside. She had simply finally decided to enter.

In her right hand she held a knife.

She didn't remember how it had got there. Didn't remember when she had picked it up. It simply was — heavy, metal, with a blade that gleamed dully, the way things gleam when they haven't been sharpened in a long time but can still cut. Her hand gripped the handle habitually, the way you grip something you've been carrying for a long time and forgotten to put down.

She looked at the knife. Then — at the forest.

The knife didn't help her enter. But it didn't stop her either.

She went in.

The forest responded.

Not with sound — with tension. As if the very space between the trees contracted when she walked and released slightly when she stopped. As if it wasn't customary to walk here for no reason. As if every step had to be for something.

Her body was held together. Jaw clenched. Stomach pulled in. Shoulders raised just enough to be able to retreat at any moment. Breath — flat, shallow, controlled.

She walked because standing still was impossible. Standing still — that's when you start to feel. Walking — a task. A task is safe.

Somewhere inside — deep, in that place that no one touches — something ticked. Not a clock — a number. A number someone had once spoken aloud and her body had remembered. Tick. Tick. Tick. Like a countdown that had begun long before she entered the forest.

Then the forest changed.

Not immediately. Gradually. The trees didn't disappear — but there was more space between them. The ground became softer. The sounds — quieter. And at some point she noticed she was walking not through a forest, but through nothing.

The colours left first.

They didn't disappear — they faded. Then the sound left. Then sensation left. Her legs walked, but she didn't feel the ground. The knife in her hand — was there, but her hand felt no weight. As if someone had switched the body off. Left only the eyes and the thought: "I'm here. But I'm — nowhere."

She stopped. Around her — nothing. Not darkness and not light. Not warmth and not cold. Simply — nothing. Emptiness.

She knew this emptiness. It came at certain moments — when the pain became too great, when screaming didn't help, when there was no one nearby who could hear. Then something clicked inside — like a switch — and the world ceased to exist.

From the emptiness came a voice.

Not from behind the trees. From inside. As if someone were speaking directly into her chest — not into her ears, but into that place where the ribs meet.

"You don't have to go further."

The voice was calm. Even. The kind of voice people use for things that have long been decided.

"You can stop. Right here. Lie down. Close your eyes. Cease."

She wasn't frightened. The voice wasn't frightening. It was familiar, the way the smell of home is familiar even if home was not a good place. It came on the darkest nights and offered the one thing that had not yet been tried: to stop.

"Why keep going if the pain doesn't end?" the voice asked. "Why breathe if every breath is an effort? Why try if there's no result?"

"Who are you?" she asked.

"I'm the one who is tired. The one who knows that everything has been tried and nothing has helped. I didn't come to kill you. I came because I'm in pain. And I want it to stop."

"I hear you," she said.

"Then put everything down. And stay here. It doesn't hurt here."

"Here is nowhere."

"Nowhere is also a place. Sometimes the only place where you can breathe."

She stood. Knife in hand. Voice — inside.

Then she said:

"I hear you. But I'm not staying."

"You've been tired for so long," she said to the voice. "You didn't want death. You wanted the pain to stop. That's different. I see you. And I won't leave you here alone."

The voice didn't argue. Didn't leave. Simply — fell silent. The way someone falls silent when they haven't been convinced but have nowhere to go. It was inside. It would walk with her, silently, a heavy weight in the chest.

The emptiness began to recede. Colours returned slowly — first outlines, then shadows, then the green of moss. Sound returned last — the rustle of her own breathing.

From behind a tree stepped a figure. Quickly. Confidently. Tall, straight, with perfect posture. Clothes — clean, buttoned all the way up, without a single crease. Face — composed, serious, without a smile but without anger either.

The Perfectionist.

"Stop," said the figure. "You're going the wrong way."

"Who are you?"

"I'm the one who does things. Twelve hours. Seven days. Without stopping. I solve problems. I close projects. I get results. Without me you wouldn't have survived. Without me — no gold medal, no university, no career, not a single morning when you got up even though you didn't want to. I got up for you. Every time. Every day."

The voice became faster.

"Without me — you — are nothing."

"Are you tired?" she asked.

The figure blinked. Once.

"You can't be tired," said the figure. "Being tired means stopping. Stopping means feeling. Feeling means..."

"Means — what?"

"Means the other one will come. The one from the emptiness. And then everything I've built will collapse."

"And if you don't stop?"

The figure was silent. Then — quieter, almost a whisper:

"Then I'm finished."

"You built while I didn't know how to ask for help," said the girl. "You were the only way not to give up. Thank you. Now it's possible to go slower."

The figure stood for a moment. Then — walked behind her. Not alongside. Just behind. Still muttering: "Step, step, breath, plan, direction..."

She hadn't had time to get used to the Perfectionist behind her when she heard another voice. Not from the chest. From everywhere.

"You're going the wrong way because you are wrong. You're not trying hard enough. You're not smart enough. You — are not enough."

The voice was female. Old. Familiar. So familiar that she didn't immediately realise it wasn't her own.

From behind a tree stepped a figure. Heavy. With a hard face. With hands that were always ready — to strike, to grab, to seize by the collar and put on knees in the corner.

The Critic.

"Baybasarka," said the Critic. "Filth. Ragamuffin. You'll die in a ditch. Like your mother."

"You are not me," said the girl.

The Critic smirked.

"I'm everything you know about yourself. Without me — you wouldn't have tried. Without me — you wouldn't have got up at five in the morning. I created you. I'm your backbone. If I fall silent — you'll fall apart."

"You walked ahead," said the girl. "If I say 'I'm bad' first — someone else's blow won't catch me off guard. You're not a sadist. You're a scout sent into danger first. You tried to protect. I see you."

"You're not my voice," said the girl. "You're hers. The one who was also afraid. Who was also beaten. Who rolled stones at nine years old. You're not the truth about me. You're her way of surviving, which she passed on to me. Along with the name. Along with the blood."

The Critic didn't leave. But — half a step — retreated. The way someone retreats whose power has for the first time been named as someone else's.

From the bushes on the right, eyes were watching. Large. Round. With dilated pupils containing nothing but attention. Ears — long, pressed to the back. Body — pressed to the ground. Every muscle — taut.

The Hare.

The first living creature in this forest. It breathed. It moved. It was afraid — but it was here.

"Stop," said the Hare. "It's dangerous here."

"Where exactly?"

"Everywhere. Always. I hear before others. Every rustle. Every change in the silence. When footsteps sounded in the corridor — I heard first. When a bag was put down at the door — I could tell from the sound what the evening would be like."

"That's exhausting."

The Hare flinched. Ears — rose just slightly.

"It's the only thing I have. Without it — I'm dead."

"Are you tired?"

The Hare blinked. Slowly. Closed its eyes for a moment, and in that closing there was so much exhaustion that she felt it in her own body.

"It helps to survive," it said. "It doesn't help to live. But I don't know if living is possible."

"You're not paranoia," she said. "You're a guard. You heard footsteps when I didn't yet understand what to be afraid of. You did the only thing you could: you warned me. You're not illness. You're survival."

The Hare stood. Ears — for the first time — not pressed down. Just ears.

It didn't want to go. But it went. Ahead. Scanning. Not from trust — from the impossibility of being afraid alone.

Something flickered between the trees. Reddish. Fast. And disappeared. And again — closer.

"Something's watching us," said the Hare.

The Fox came out herself. Calmly. Smoothly.

"Where are you going?" asked the Fox.

"Further."

"Further isn't a direction." She smiled. "Going straight is honest. And honest is predictable. And predictable is vulnerable. Better to go around. Show one thing, do another."

"Is that how you live?"

The Fox stopped. Amber eyes — without cunning, without a mask.

"Once it worked. Show how bad I feel — and then they come. But then they notice not you, but the pain. They come not to you, but to the pain. And you're left alone."

"And asking? Directly?"

"Asking means they might not give. But if you go around — you'll definitely get something. At least a crumb. I don't know how to do it directly. Directly is going out naked."

"You sought connection the only way you knew," said the girl. "If you couldn't ask — you earned it. If you couldn't show pain — you showed strength. You're not a deceiver. You're a negotiator without a vocabulary for honest conversation."

She walked alongside. Slightly to the side. Not from trust — from the impossibility of going around alone.

Something slid across the ground. Thin. Dark. Soundless.

The Snake hadn't come from behind a tree — it was already here. Between the roots. Along the path. Dark, smooth, with scales that shimmered like water.

The girl stopped. Not from fear — from recognition. Something inside responded. Quiet, rising, from the pelvis upward, along the spine. As if someone had pulled a thread that had been taut her whole life — and the thread didn't break, but trembled.

"Have you been here long?" she asked.

The Snake didn't answer immediately. It moved. Slowly. Along the girl's body — without touching. Two centimetres from the skin. As if checking. Where — open. Where — closed.

"I'm older than you," the Snake finally said. "I was here before words. Before a name. Before the first cry. I'm what moved when you couldn't yet walk."

"Then why didn't I feel you?"

"You did. Every time something rose from your belly and you pushed it down. Every time your body wanted to scream and you clenched your jaw. Every time you wanted to dance and you stood still. That was me. And every time you said to me: no."

"I didn't know it was you."

"You knew. You thought it was danger. That if you let go — you'd destroy everything. You'd tear the room apart. You'd scream so that you couldn't stop. You'd hit someone you couldn't hit."

Pause.

"And you were right," said the Snake. "Back then — you were. At four years old, at seven, at fourteen — you couldn't let me go. There was no room. There were no hands that could hold you. You locked me away — and survived. That was the only right answer to an impossible question."

"And now?"

The Snake stopped. Raised its head. Eyes — without pupils, two stones reflecting the forest.

"Now — it's cramped," it said. "The skin is old. Stiff. Brittle. I grow inside it — and it won't let me out. And I'm in pain. And you — too. You feel it as spasms. As insomnia. As the impossibility of breathing fully. That's me — pressing against the walls of what you've coiled me into."

"What will happen if I let go?"

"Pain. Like labour. The skin will shed in tatters. You'll shake at night, wake from convulsions. Your body will do what you haven't allowed it to do for thirty-five years. Scream. Arch. Cry with a voice you won't recognise — childlike, animal, inhuman. You'll think you're going mad. You're not. That's me — shedding what has long become too tight. And you — along with me."

Silence.

"And after?"

"After — easier. Not immediately. But — easier. Like after you've cried yourself out completely and fallen asleep. Only not for one evening. Forever."

The Snake slid closer. Coiled around her ankle — not squeezing, not biting. Warmth. Pulse. As if the earth were breathing through it.

"I don't get tamed," said the Snake. "I'm not a cat. Not a hare. I'm force. You don't make friends with force. With force — you learn to be."

They went on. The Snake — along the path. Not ahead, not behind. Below. Like a root that holds.

Everyone stopped.

The Hare pressed to the ground. The Fox stepped back. The Perfectionist froze. The Control — for the first time — couldn't compress the space. Because the space compressed itself.

A figure stood between the trees. Motionless. Without a face. Without form. Simply — a presence. Heavy, oppressive, making you want to become smaller, to fall through the ground and not exist.

Shame.

It didn't speak. It didn't need to. It acted with its gaze — even though no eyes were visible.

"I see you," the girl said to Shame. "You came a long time ago. When I was three. Or earlier. You came and said: 'Something is wrong with you. Not with the world. With you.' And I believed you."

Shame stood.

"I won't hide anymore from what you show me. But I won't believe anymore that it's the truth about me."

Shame didn't leave. But — half a step — retreated. The way someone retreats who has for the first time been called by name.

From the darkness — a lunge. Black, small, furious — flew between them and Shame, hissed, arched its back.

The Kitten.

"Don't look at her like that!" it yelled.

Useless. It stepped back. Breathing hard.

"Are you on my side?"

"I'm on nobody's side! I don't need anyone!"

"But you threw yourself at Shame."

"Because when someone looks at you like that, you want to die. And I don't want to die. I want to fight. Fighting is better than that other thing."

"What other thing?"

"When you're small. And wet. And in a pit. And you call out. And no one comes. And then you stop calling out. And you become mean. Because mean is someone people are afraid of. And someone people are afraid of — they don't abandon."

"But they don't love either."

"I don't need love!" yelled the Kitten. "I need — not — to be abandoned!"

"I won't abandon you," she said.

"Everyone says that."

But the voice was no longer mean. It was small. Very small.

"You bit because when you were small no one held you. You learned to be frightening because frightening ones don't get abandoned. You're not mean. You're alive. Being alive wasn't the problem. The problem was the place where there was no room for it."

It didn't come closer. But it didn't leave either. It stood next to the Hare. Ready to fight. But — alongside.

From behind a tree stepped a figure with a stuffed mouth. It wasn't eating — it was filling. Every pause. Every silence. Every moment when the body stopped moving and the emptiness became audible. Not greed — hunger. Not for food. For warmth. For the sensation of "I — exist."

"You were plugging a hole," said the girl. "Not the kind you plug with food. The kind you plug with a mother."

The Glutton's figure slowed. Hands — just slightly — stopped reaching for the next thing. It walked behind. Silently. With empty hands — for the first time.

And then they all noticed — a little way off, between the trees, stood a figure in armour. Not a knight's — a worker's. Without decoration. Without gaps. Chest — sealed completely. It moved — precisely, quickly, without stopping. Twelve hours. Seven days. Without a break. Not because it wanted to. Because while you're moving — you don't feel. It didn't complain. It couldn't. It worked until it wore down. Wearing down was nothing new.

It had been looking for its heart its whole life. Thought it was in gold medals. In salary. In closed projects. In not letting anyone down. Didn't know the heart was not outside.

"You switched on when feeling became impossible," said the girl. "You switched everything off — and I survived. But you walled up the heart along with the pain."

The Iron Man didn't answer. But in the armour — at the place of the chest — a crack appeared. Thin. Like a fracture before something begins to open.

It walked behind. Slower than usual. As if the armour had become slightly heavier.

Behind the Kitten, in the shadow between the roots, sat another figure. Very small. Almost invisible. Transparent, like morning light. On the wrist — a thin line of frost.

A girl. About two years old. Maybe younger.

She wasn't crying. Wasn't screaming. She simply sat and stared into the darkness. Patiently. Without hope. The way you wait for something that won't come.

"Will she come?" she asked almost soundlessly.

"Who?"

"The one who smelled nice. The one who was warm. The one who was there and then stopped being there."

"She won't come," said the girl. And her voice didn't waver on the outside. But inside — everything — wavered.

"But I'm here," said the girl. And she sat down next to her. And took the small transparent hand in hers.

The hand was cold. Not like a child's — like ice that has been lying in the shade for a long time. The girl looked more carefully. The frost on the wrist went further — along the shoulder, along the back, across the whole body. On the outside she looked alive. But inside — she was frozen. Completely.

"I did this," said Control. For the first time — with a voice. "I froze her. To save her. Because if she had kept feeling — she wouldn't have survived."

"And you paid more than anyone," said the girl quietly. "You became a prison so that I could survive."

"I won't leave anymore," she said to the little one. "Every day. Every morning. Even when the Critic is already working and the Kind Voice is still asleep."

She didn't let go of the hand. Just breathed alongside. Steadily. And after some time — on one eyelash — a crystal of frost darkened. Didn't melt. Darkened. The way ice darkens when water appears beneath it. Water that isn't yet flowing. But which — is already there.

Then they noticed another figure. She stood with closed eyes. Not because she was sleeping — because inside, behind her eyelids, there were no pictures. Only darkness. For a long time. From the moment when the body had learned to switch off images — so as not to see what was impossible to see.

"You're not looking?" asked the girl.

"I know everything. I hear. I feel with my skin. I remember by touch. I just — don't look. Because when I did look — I saw things that made me want to stop existing."

"Can you open your eyes?"

"I can. But right now — I don't want to."

"You're not an ostrich," said the girl. "You're a witness who was given too much testimony. You closed your eyes not from cowardice — from the impossibility of taking it all in. That's different. Open them when you're ready. I'll describe what I see."

The Blind One smiled slightly. A crooked, uncertain smile.

"Good. Walk alongside me."

They walked — all of them. All tired.

The voice from the emptiness — the first one, from the very beginning of the forest — came again:

"You see? It's not working. You don't have to go further."

"Wait," said the girl.

She stood in the middle of the forest. And for the first time — she saw. Not one part, but all of them. Simultaneously.

How the Emptiness opens the door — and the voice of death enters. How the Perfectionist rushes to close that door and takes control. How Control squeezes tighter and tighter until it becomes impossible to breathe. How the Capitulant is the first to fall. How the Glutton stuffs its mouth so as not to hear the silence. How the voice of death returns — quieter, but more certain. How a new plan is born from despair. How the plan accelerates too fast. How the breakdown. How again — the Emptiness.

A circle. Thousands of circles. She recognised every one.

And then she saw something else. They weren't walking through a forest. Through a cage. The forest wasn't a labyrinth — the forest was a cage. And she was carrying it with her. The cage wasn't outside. It was inside.

"I see," she said. "I see the cycle. And I see the cage. I was walking in circles and didn't know I was walking in circles. Now — I know."

The Phoenix landed on a branch. Its feathers dimmed.

"Are you tired too?" she asked.

"Every time you fall, I rise. Rising endlessly — that's also a form of endlessness. Sometimes I just want to — sit."

"Then — sit. You've saved me so many times. The branch broke — and you lifted me. The balcony — and you. The knife — and you. Thank you. But today — it's okay not to burn."

The feathers slowly dimmed — didn't disappear, but became warm, like embers. Not fire, but warmth. Not a blaze, but a hearth.

All the parts stood alongside. For the first time — alongside. Not harmoniously, not peacefully. Simply — alongside. The Hare was still pressing to the ground. The Kitten was still hissing at Shame. The Perfectionist was still muttering a plan. The Critic was still watching. The Snake slid between them — quiet, warm. But no one was running away. No one was hiding. No one was attacking another.

The girl looked at them — all at once — and felt something she had never felt: they were all her. Not enemies. Not brokenness. Not a diagnosis. Her. Wholly. With all the teeth, claws, masks and silences.

And at that moment — from the silence — she heard water.

She felt it before she heard it. Something pulled — not forward — inward. The way the edge of a cliff pulls you — not because you want to fall, but because the edge is where the known ends.

All the parts fell silent simultaneously. For the first time in the whole journey — silence without anxiety. Simply — silence.

"What's ahead?" asked the Hare.

"I don't know," she said. "But that way."

Everyone heard at the same time.

Water. Not noise — sound. Quiet, even. Like the breathing of something very large.

"A river," said the Hare. And stepped back.

"We can go around," said the Fox.

"No," said the girl. "We're not going around. We're not going back."

The river wasn't the end. The river was a threshold. The only place where everything she carried could become something different — not disappear, but change. You can't take off the corset. But in water it softens.

The river wasn't magical. Ordinary. Dark. Wide. You can't jump over it. You can't go around it. You can't see the bottom.

Her body remembered water. Once she had been thrown into water and told: "I'll teach you to swim." She hadn't known how. She sank. Someone who could have helped was standing nearby and didn't help.

"We can stay here," said the Fox. "It's safe here. We know the rules. We know how to survive here."

Pause.

"But living is on the other side."

She stepped in first. Not because she wasn't afraid. Because she no longer waited for the moment when she wouldn't be afraid.

The water was cold. Ankle-deep. Knee-deep. Waist-deep. Her body screamed: back! Control — scanned. The Perfectionist cried: "There's no plan!" Her feet cramped.

She walked.

And with every step — the corset loosened. That invisible corset that had compressed the space from the very first minute — in the water it was softening. Not coming off — softening. The bands that held her ribs, that hadn't allowed her to breathe fully — water got between them and her body. And they — just slightly — eased away. And there was more air. For the first time — more.

The Hare stepped in second. Trembling. But — it stepped in. With fear. Not without it — with it.

The Fox — third. Without going around. For the first time — directly.

The Kitten — fourth. It hissed at the water. The water didn't react. It stepped in. Wet, angry. But — it stepped in.

The Little Frozen One — in her arms. Transparent. Her arms wrapped around the girl's neck, and for the first time — tightly.

In the middle — at the deepest point — the girl stumbled. The current pushed. Her feet lost the bottom. Her body went under water.

Everyone froze.

She was drowning. Her body remembered — once she had been thrown into water and no one had helped.

But now — she stretched her arm out. Upward. Out of the water. And grabbed — her own hair. And pulled. Upward. Herself. By the hair. Out of the water.

Impossible. But when there's no one else — possible.

Her head surfaced. A breath. Her feet found the bottom. She stood — wet, gasping, alive.

"I pulled myself out," she whispered. "Myself."

Not a branch breaking. Not someone waking up in time. Not someone grabbing the knife. She — herself. For the first time — it wasn't chance that saved her. She.

They stood on the other bank.

Wet. Tired. All of them.

Nothing had changed on the outside. But something had changed. Not in the world. In them.

On the other bank the parts were the same — but their names were different.

The Hare stood — and wasn't running.

"I still hear everything. But now I hear other things too. Rustling. A bird. Breathing. Not only danger. My fear became hearing."

The Fox stood — without a mask.

"I can still go around. But now I can also go straight. My cunning became intelligence."

The Kitten sat next to a Panther. Who had appeared. On the other bank. Calm. Black. With yellow eyes. It had been waiting for them here.

"I can still bite. But now it's called — a boundary. I can say 'no' — and that's not an attack."

The Perfectionist stood for the first time without a plan.

"I can still do things. But now that's a tool. Not all of me."

Control stood — for the first time not compressing the space around it. Simply — holding form. Like banks holding a river, not stopping the water.

"I still watch. But now that's structure. Not a prison."

The Critic stood — wet. Silent. The words had lost their venom in the river.

"I still see mistakes. But now that's attention. Not a verdict."

The Capitulant stood. For the first time — wasn't sitting. The water had washed away not the fatigue — the hopelessness.

The Glutton stood with empty hands and an empty mouth. And for the first time — felt real hunger. Not the kind you fill with anything at all. But the kind that says: I want to live.

The Frozen One — all the frost had darkened. As if beneath every crystal there was water. Which wasn't yet flowing. But was.

The Phoenix sat — quiet. Feathers — warm. Like embers. Like a hearth.

The Iron Man stood. The armour — the same. But the crack on the chest had become wider. From it — warmth. Barely noticeable. As if something inside was thawing.

The Blind One — for the first time opened one eye just slightly. The light was bright. Painful. She squeezed it shut. But — for a moment — she saw. And wept. Not from pain. Because the world existed and it wasn't only horror.

And then — from the silence — the Little One spoke. For the first time in the whole journey — not in a whisper. With a voice. Thin, but audible.

"Why do you want to kill me?"

Everyone froze.

The girl — the one who had carried the Little One across the river — stopped. The question landed not in her head — in her body.

"I don't want to kill you," she said.

"You do," said the Little One. "Every time the voice from the chest comes — you want to. Every time there's despair — you want me not to exist. Because I'm the part that hurts. If I didn't feel — it wouldn't hurt. If I didn't exist — you wouldn't suffer."

Silence. Enormous. A stone in the throat. Heat in the eyes.

"For several years," the Little One continued, "you said the right words to me. 'I'm with you.' 'You're not alone.' 'I'll always be here.' But inside there was a condition. I heard it. 'I'm with you — if you become calmer. If you stop wanting to die. If you stop being like this.'"

"And I stayed silent. Because when someone accepts you with conditions — there's no trust. And without trust — there's no dialogue."

The girl sat down on the ground. Slowly. Took the Little One's hands in hers.

"You're right," she said. "I wanted to fix you. Correct you. Make you normal. I had a list — long, detailed — of what needed to be changed in you. And for twenty years I worked through it."

Pause.

"But you won't change. There won't be a different brain. There won't be a different body. There won't be a different nervous system. You are — like this."

"I don't care," said the girl. And her voice wavered. "I'll be with you until the end of my days. No matter what. Just like this, exactly as you are."

The Little One didn't smile. Didn't cry. She did something she had never done in the whole journey — never in her whole life: she hugged. With small transparent arms — she wrapped them around the girl's neck and pressed close. And became — just slightly — more solid. Just slightly — here.

Not a technique. Not a method. Simply — staying. Stopping fixing. And being alongside.

On the other bank, between the roots of an old tree, sat a cat. Real. Alive. With black fur, with green eyes. Thin. Wary.

She looked at the girl. With the look cats use for those they have chosen.

The girl approached. Crouched down.

The cat didn't step back. Didn't hiss. Simply — waited.

"You're not a part," said the girl. "You're real."

The cat stretched. Moved closer. Lay down on the left shoulder — there, where the biggest tension was. As if it knew. Warm. Alive. Purring.

This was a bridge. Between the forest and life. Between symbol and reality. A cat that you learn to love — with a kind voice, with gentle hands, not pushing away when it bites, not abandoning when it hisses. And through that — you learn to treat yourself the same way.

And then — for the first time — she heard another voice.

Not from the chest, where the dark, heavy one lived. From somewhere deeper. From that place where a breath had reached the bottom.

The voice was quiet. Very quiet. So quiet it could only be heard in silence — not in emptiness, but in real silence, the kind that comes when all the parts fall quiet for at least a moment.

"Little sun."

One word. That had never been said. In her whole life.

"Little sun," the voice repeated. "You're good. Not because of the gold medals. Not because you're useful. You — are good. Just like that. Simply because — you are you."

The voice didn't disappear. It was weak. Newborn. Like a sprout through asphalt. It needed to be grown — every day, every morning.

But it — was. For the first time — was.

The Little One — the one in her arms — raised her head. And for the first time — smiled. Real. Small. A child's smile.

At the roots of the tree, next to the cat, lay an object.

A teapot. Small. Broken. Reassembled — but not the way you reassemble things to hide the breakage. The opposite. The cracks had been filled with gold. Every fracture — visible. Every shard — in place. But between them — golden lines, like rivers on a map, like veins, like the roots of a tree.

She picked it up. Heavy. Warm.

"Is this me?" she asked. Not someone. The forest. The air. Herself.

Broken doesn't mean destroyed. Repaired doesn't mean weak. The gold lines aren't camouflage. They're history. Every crack — a blow that didn't kill. Every shard — a part that survived. Every golden river between them — what she uses to connect them.

She set the teapot on the ground. Next to the cat. Next to the tree. It stood — small, golden, with all its cracks — and you could brew real tea in it. Real. Hot.

The Panther lay on a stone. Warm. Flat. In the middle of a clearing.

Everyone stood around.

"You know all of them," said the girl.

"I am all of them," said the Panther. "The Kitten grew up. Rage became strength. Fear became hearing. Cunning became wisdom. Freezing became stillness. Perfectionism became mastery. Control became structure. The Critic became attention. Capitulation became acceptance. Hunger became a taste for life. Iron became softer in the water. I remember the cellars. Remember the frost. Remember the curse. Remember the knife. And I remember — the river."

"Will we all become you?" asked the Kitten.

"No. You'll remain yourselves. But I'm what happens when you stop fighting each other."

"Not assembled," said the girl. "Not repaired. Simply — seen."

She sat by the stone. Back against the warmth. Feet on the grass. Palms — upward.

The greyness above had become thinner. Like paper through which light shows. Not yet light. But its promise.

She took a breath.

Deep. The first real breath that passed not only through the chest, but further — there, where the belly is, where the pelvis is, where what was closed, compressed, hidden. The ribs released. The air reached the very bottom and found there — not emptiness. Something soft, warm, alive. What had always been there. But what she hadn't felt.

Though inside — all this time — it had been.

She exhaled. And together with the exhalation water came from her eyes. Warm, salty.

The water flowed. She didn't stop it. Wasn't ashamed.

She sat on the ground. The ground held her. The stone warmed her back. The Panther breathed alongside.

The knife — on that bank.

The river — behind.

The cage — unlatched.

The corset — loosened.

The curse — left at the stone.

All the parts — alongside.

The forest the same. But now it wasn't a battlefield. Not a cage.

This — was an ecosystem. Living. Working. Imperfect. With fear that became hearing. With cunning that became intelligence. With rage that became a boundary. With control that became a foundation.

Integration — not when all the parts disappear. When they stop fighting.

She didn't say: "We are healed." She simply stayed.

Somewhere above the greyness had become very thin. Like paper on which someone will write — later — something. Maybe — "It's possible without sacrifice." Maybe — "My fear is not a prophecy." Maybe — "The Kitten needs to be taken care of."

And she remembered three names. They had always been nearby. She simply hadn't heard them.

The one who had given birth to her was called Love. She didn't give what the name promised. The one who had raised her was called Hope. She cursed instead of hoping. And she herself was named — Faith.

Faith, Hope, Love. Three names. Three words that hadn't been given to her.

Three qualities that needed not to be found — but to be grown. From nothing. The way the Kind Voice — appears in the silence, when all the other voices fall quiet.

Faith — in herself. Not in a plan, not in a method, not in yet another saviour. In herself.

Hope — not blind, not phoenix-like, not the kind that burns and burns out. Quiet. Like embers. Like a hearth.

Love — not the kind you need to earn with gold medals. The kind that is inside. Was always there. Infinite and eternal. The kind that the little girl waited for at a closed door — and which all this time was not behind the door, but inside her.

You — are here.

And that — for now — is enough.

What to Listen Next

This is not a list of recommendations. Not a "top 10 videos that will change your life." I'm not a therapist. Not a content curator. I'm a person who at some point couldn't get up off the floor. And was searching—in books, in videos, in other people's voices—for anything to hold on to.

Everything below is what I watched myself.

If even one of these videos gives you what it gave me—then this section was worth writing.

All the videos I talk about in this section — with working links — are collected on my website. Go to https://www.faithwithinyou.com/links

Breathing

A separate section. Because breathing is what works when nothing else does. When words run out. When your head loops the same thoughts over and over. When the body is locked and won't let go.

I won't explain how this works here—that's already in the book. Here—specific practices I used myself.

Calm the Chaos | Grounding Breathwork (13 minutes)

When you need to calm down fast. Anxiety, panic, the feeling that everything is about to fall apart. Thirteen minutes—and the ground is back under your feet. Not magic—physiology: the parasympathetic nervous system activates through breathing faster than through thoughts. If you have moments when everything inside is screaming—start here. This is the first aid that's always with you.

Inner Child | Guided Breathwork for Transformation (28 minutes)

A breathwork practice aimed at connecting with the inner child. Twenty-eight minutes—and you may discover that inside you lives someone you stopped hearing long ago. Small. Frightened. Waiting. This isn't mysticism. It's the body remembering what came before words.

Breathing Lessons — playlist

A series of short lessons on the basics of breathwork. A good entry point—if you've never worked with breathing consciously. You don't need to believe. You don't need to understand. You just need to breathe—and watch what happens. For someone who's used to living in their head and disconnecting from the body—this is the first bridge back.

Breath Hold Training Program — 31 sessions

A thirty-one session program—gradually increasing breath hold times. Sounds technical—but the effect is therapeutic. When you learn to stay in the discomfort of a breath hold—you're training the same thing therapy trains: the ability not to flee from a sensation. To be in it. To endure. And to discover you're still whole.

Full Sessions — playlist (Breathwork)

Complete breathwork sessions—from short to long. When the basics are clear and you want practice. You can turn it on and lie down. Turn it on and cry. Turn it on and discover the body remembers what the mind forgot long ago.

Energy Alignment | Guided Breathwork (55 minutes)

A long deep breathing session. Fifty-five minutes—this is not for background. It's for moments when you need to drop deep inside and let the body do what it wants. Emotions may surface, images, tears, anger that had nowhere to go for years. That's normal. The body speaks a language we were never taught.

Eight Stages of Awakening | Guided Breathwork Journey by Enfold

Another deep session—structured, with stages. For those already familiar with breathwork who want to go further. Not recommended as a first experience. But when you're ready—it's a powerful tool. The body remembers everything. Breathing gives it permission to let go.

Alan Watts: Stop Trying to Fix Yourself | The Wisdom of Living Fully

Alan Watts says the thing you can't hear until you're exhausted from fixing yourself: you are not broken. You are not a project. Not a task. Not a mistake that needs correcting.

For someone from a dysfunctional family, this sounds like a foreign language. Because your entire childhood told you the opposite—with words, with silence, with looks. You learned to see yourself as defective. Learned to chase an ideal that doesn't exist. Learned to measure your worth through achievement—because simply being was never enough.

Watts doesn't comfort. He flips the frame. Chasing a "better version of yourself" is also running away from who you actually are. A flower doesn't try to bloom. A wave doesn't apologize for how it crashes. If you're ready—even for a second—to consider that you are already enough, not someday but right now—this video will shake something loose.

5 Things I Wish I Knew Sooner About Healing Shame

Shame is not an emotion. It's a belief. Deep, preverbal: "there's something wrong with me." Not with what I did. With who I am.

For a child from a dysfunctional family, shame is like air. You don't notice it until you start to suffocate. It hides behind perfectionism—"I must be flawless so they won't reject me." Behind control—"if I hold everything together, nothing bad will happen." Behind people-pleasing—"if I'm convenient enough, they won't leave."

This isn't personality. These are survival strategies that once saved your life. But they keep running—even when the danger is long gone. If you catch yourself thinking "I'm not good enough" more than once a day—that's not the truth about you. That's shame talking. This video helps you hear the difference.

6 Deep and Lasting Ways to Improve Your Self-Esteem

Self-esteem isn't what you think about yourself in the morning. It's the foundation everything else stands on. For someone who grew up in a family where your value was determined by behavior—obedience, grades, silence—self-esteem doesn't form. Instead, there's a constant check: am I good enough? Do they still tolerate me?

This video isn't about affirmations or "believe in yourself." It's about the deeper mechanics: how to stop measuring yourself by other people's standards. How to tell real "I want" from "I must, so they'll love me." For those of us who learned to live through achievement and approval—this is the beginning of a different conversation with yourself.

Heidi Priebe — Emotional Self-Intimacy: What It Is And How To Foster It

Heidi Priebe is one of the voices on YouTube that talks about psychology and trauma in a way that makes you recognize yourself. Not a therapist in a chair. A person who explains what you feel but can't name.

Self-intimacy is the ability to be present with yourself in an undefended state. Not running from what you feel. Not switching off. Not numbing. Not going into your head. Just—staying.

For someone who grew up in a family where feelings were dangerous, this sounds impossible. Anger was suppressed. Fear was ridiculed. Sadness was ignored. And you learned one thing: don't feel. Or feel—but quietly, so no one notices.

It mattered to me to hear about anger. That anger is a built-in signal that a boundary has been violated. That if anger was suppressed since childhood—you lose access to that signal. Suppressed anger is not anger that doesn't exist. It's anger that has nowhere to go.

Priebe explains: the energy of "no"—anger, resentment, disgust, even shame—is the body saying "this is not mine, here's a boundary." When you can't hear your "no," you lose access to your "yes" too. Everything inside goes still. You stop

wanting, enjoying, engaging. Not because you're broken—but because you don't know where someone else ends and you begin.

Heidi Priebe — Building Distress Tolerance: How To Stay Present With Hard Feelings & Expand Your Comfort Zone

Distress tolerance is not about endurance. Not about "clench your teeth and hold on." It's about the ability to stay in contact with what hurts—and not fall apart.

If you grew up where emotions were dangerous, you have a set of automatic responses: freeze, flee, please, dissolve. They saved you as a child. But now—every time something strong rises inside, you automatically leave. Into control. Into thoughts. Into your phone. Into food. Into work. Anywhere—except into what you're actually feeling.

Priebe shows how to expand the zone where you can tolerate a feeling—without running. Without rewriting it. Without rationalizing. It's not heroism. It's practice. Little by little. One breath at a time. And this may be one of the most important things you can learn after a dysfunctional family—because without it, real closeness is impossible.

Heidi Priebe — Neuroticism: Understanding Our Attempts To Self-Regulate Around Unconscious Pain

Neuroticism is not a diagnosis. Not an insult. It's an attempt to cope with pain you're not aware of. All those patterns—obsessive thoughts, anxiety, control, perfectionism, constantly scanning people—that's not "who you are." That's your psyche trying to regulate what was too much for a child.

For those who grew up in chaos, control became the only form of safety. You can't relax—because relaxing meant missing a blow. You scan faces—because the adult's mood decided whether tonight would be normal or catastrophic. You plan three moves ahead—because unpredictability was dangerous.

Priebe names it plainly: neurotic patterns are the best you could come up with in conditions where no other tools existed. They were brilliant for survival. But they weren't built for living. Understanding this doesn't mean letting go immediately. But it means—stop hating yourself for how you're wired.

The Secret of Emotional Healing That No One Explains to You — Carl Jung

Jung said: until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate. For a child from a dysfunctional family, this is not a metaphor. It's your daily schedule.

You choose partners who repeat the familiar pain. You react to situations that ended long ago. You fear what no longer exists—but the body doesn't know that. You replay the same scripts—and wonder why everything keeps repeating.

This video is about the shadow. About what we cut off from ourselves to survive. The anger that was forbidden. The needs that were mocked. The joy that was punished. Everything you hid—didn't disappear. It lives inside and knocks at every conflict, every attempt at closeness, every choice. Healing isn't about becoming better. It's about reclaiming what was taken.

If You Do This, You Will Heal the Most Painful Memories of Your Past — Carl Jung

A continuation of the Jungian thread—but here the focus is sharper: how to work with memories that still wound. Not forget them. Not push them down. But live through them—differently.

For someone with complex trauma, painful memories aren't just "the past." They ignite in the present: a smell, a tone of voice, a word—and you're no longer here. You're back where it was terrifying. Jung shows: the path goes through the pain—not around it. You don't need to become stronger. You need to stop running.

Tim Fletcher — Shame and Complex Trauma (Part 1/6): What is Shame?

Tim Fletcher has spent fifteen years working with people who survived complex trauma—and he starts with the essential: shame is not an emotion. It's a core belief about yourself. It gets wired in during childhood and becomes your operating system.

He describes what every one of us knows: before the conversation about shame begins, people say "I don't have any shame." By the end—"it was running everything." Shame is invisible while you're inside it. Like a fish doesn't know it's in water.

For someone in the ACA program, this is critical material. Shame is behind the hyper-responsibility—“if I don’t do it, nobody will.” Behind the inability to ask for help—“I have no right to need.” Behind the feeling of “I don’t deserve.” Behind giving more than you take your entire life—and calling it normal. The six-part series is long. But it’s worth every minute.

Tim Fletcher — 12 Needs and Complex Trauma (Bite Size Series)

Fletcher breaks down twelve basic needs that were unmet in children from dysfunctional families. Safety. Belonging. Recognition. Autonomy. The right to make mistakes. The right to be a child.

When you hear this list—and realize you didn’t have a single one—first it hurts. Then it gets clear. Because you finally see what exactly was missing. Not “something vague.” Something specific. And when you know what wasn’t there—you can start giving it to yourself.

Tim Fletcher — Intimacy vs Isolation: The Healing Work Most People Skip

Intimacy versus isolation—one of the developmental stages that most people with complex trauma skip. Not because they don’t want closeness. But because closeness is what caused pain.

Fletcher explains why after a dysfunctional family you either dissolve into another person or keep your distance—and can’t find the middle. It’s not weakness. It’s traumatic adaptation. And to learn how to be close—without merging and without fleeing—you first need to acknowledge that this skill simply was never formed.

Tim Fletcher — Realistic Recovery: Components of Success (Part 3/13)

Fletcher says what few people say: recovery is not an inspiring montage. It’s a long, uneven road. With setbacks. With days when nothing seems to work. With moments when you want to quit.

This series is about realistic expectations. About the fact that “success” in recovery is not the absence of pain. It’s the ability to move through pain—without falling apart. For someone used to binary thinking—“I’m either healed or hopeless”—this is an important shift.

Tim Fletcher — Realistic Recovery: Questions and Fears (Part 11/13)

What if I start feeling—and can’t stop? What if without my defenses I won’t survive? What if everyone sees who I really am?

Fletcher names the fears that block recovery. Out loud. By name. And it gets easier—because you realize you’re not the only one feeling this. It’s not your unique defect. It’s a shared experience of people starting from the same place.

Tim Fletcher — Realistic Recovery: Helpful Perspectives (Part 13/13)

The final part of the series—and it’s not a happy ending. It’s about perspectives that help you keep going when it feels pointless. About the fact that recovery is not linear. That setbacks are not failures. That slow still counts. And that you’re further along than you think.

Alan Watts — Relax, Your Past Is Over — Don’t Return to It

The second Watts on this list—and he’s here for a reason. If the first video is about “you’re not broken,” this one is about “let go of what’s already over.”

For someone with trauma, the past is not past. It lives in the body. In reactions. In the way you clench your jaw in an elevator with a stranger. In the way you prepare for catastrophe three weeks before an event that may never happen. In the way you reread old messages—not because you miss them, but because you’re searching for proof you were loved.

Watts doesn’t say “forget.” He asks: why do you keep returning to the place you’re begging to be rescued from? What you called love—may have been fear. What you called loyalty—may have been the absence of choice. The past matters—as a lesson. But living in it is not faithfulness to yourself. It’s a trap.

Sadhguru — Overcome Fear, Anger & Anxiety

Sadhguru says what almost no Western therapist says: you are not your emotions. Anger is not an entity. You become angry. Fear is not an object. You become frightened. And between you and the emotion—there's a gap. Tiny—but everything is in it.

For someone from a dysfunctional family—someone who learned to merge with every feeling or shut down completely—this is a radical thought. You don't need to avoid anger. You don't need to suppress it. Just see: here I am—and here is what I'm experiencing. They're not the same thing.

Between "I feel anger" and "I am angry"—there's a chasm. And in that chasm—freedom. For those who spent a lifetime fearing their own emotions because they were punished for having them—this may be the first step toward not being afraid of yourself.

7 Powerful Things To Tell Yourself Every Morning — Shi Heng Yi

Shi Heng Yi is a Shaolin monk, but this isn't about religion. It's about the discipline of your inner dialogue. About what you say to yourself in the morning—before the world starts speaking for you.

For someone whose inner critic wakes up before they do—this is practice. Not affirmations. Not positive thinking. A conscious choice: which voice do you listen to first. The one that says "you can't handle it"—or the one that says "you're here, and that's already enough."

Jesus vs Buddha: Love vs Non-Attachment

Two models of love. One says: love so fiercely you'd die for it. The other: love so freely you'd let it go.

For someone with attachment trauma, this is not a philosophical debate—it's a daily dilemma. You either cling—and suffocate. Or pull away—and feel empty. Love and fear are tangled. Closeness and control—too. You're afraid of losing—and that's exactly why you lose.

This video shows: love and attachment are not the same thing. You can love—without clinging. You can let go—without stopping to love. For someone who grew up where love was conditional, where you paid for it with obedience or silence—this isn't obvious. But it's possible.

Miyamoto Musashi — How to Master Your Emotions

Musashi—a samurai who wrote The Book of Five Rings before he died. He didn't know the word "trauma." But he knew what it means to live when the only thing you can lean on is yourself.

Mastering emotions doesn't mean suppressing them. Musashi taught something else: observe. Don't fear your own inner chaos. Don't run from what you feel. Stand in it—and choose action, not reaction.

For someone who grew up where every emotion could cost you your safety, this hits close. Your whole life you either suppressed or exploded. Musashi shows a third way: be inside the feeling—and not lose yourself. It's a skill. Not a gift. A skill.

Rainer Maria Rilke: The Purpose of Life

Rilke didn't write about trauma. He wrote about solitude—as if he knew what it felt like from the inside.

For someone from a dysfunctional family, loneliness is familiar territory. But Rilke speaks of a different solitude. Not the kind that comes from being abandoned. The kind that comes from choosing—to be honest with yourself. From the courage to live the questions instead of other people's answers.

If your whole life you adapted, pleased, said "yes" when you wanted to say "no"—Rilke reminds you: real life begins with honesty. Sometimes it hurts. Sometimes it's lonely. But it's yours.

The Ecstasy of Aloneness — Rainer Maria Rilke

Another Rilke—and it's here because for us, solitude is not an abstraction. It's every evening. Every holiday where you smile but feel hollow inside.

Rilke offers a different lens: solitude is not punishment. It's the space where you can finally hear yourself. Not other people's voices. Not expectations. Not criticism. Yourself. For someone who spent a lifetime listening to everyone except themselves—this is a revelation.

[Huberman Lab — Dr. Martha Beck: Access Your Best Self With Mind-Body Practices, Belief Testing & Imagination]

Martha Beck isn't just a coach. She's someone who walked through her own trauma and built a system at the intersection of body, mind, and imagination. Huberman asks scientific questions—and she answers with a researcher's precision and the warmth of someone who knows what it's like.

For those stuck between "I know what needs to change" and "I can't move"—this conversation is a bridge. Beck explains how the body stores beliefs. How imagination is not escape from reality but a tool that can restructure it. If you've tried everything—therapy, books, programs—but feel something is stuck deeper than words can reach—listen to this one.

I don't know which of these will work for you. Maybe none. Maybe one video out of twenty-five—and it will be the one.

Don't rush. You don't need to watch everything. You don't need to understand everything. Sometimes one voice is enough—saying what you already knew but wouldn't let yourself know.

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Closing

You have been listening to "First, Don't Die."

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Narrated using artificial intelligence technology.

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