

## Unhinged

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### 1. **B**efore (it wasn't enough) – c. 2019

I was on the cusp of turning 40 when my world spun off its axis.

When I consider all the parts of Self that make up my whole person, I imagine hundreds of little versions of me in a cavernous classroom, each one sitting in their respective desks. All of these different parts of my Self represent all the past and present versions that exist within me. These parts each have their seat in my life, many of them always sitting in the front row, mentioned in any conversation in which I engage. There is the mother part, who came into being when my daughter was born in 2016. There is the friend part, with long-standing relationships dating back to elementary school, high school, and college. There is the part who is a group exercise teacher, a role I only recently began to embrace—I believe the part of myself that comes forward when I lead a group exercise or yoga class is truly me, standing fully in my power, fully expressed, my best self. And there are other parts, roles I've performed for years, decades, or forever: the social butterfly, the student, the reader, the athlete, the funny girl, the party girl, and more.

Some parts of me came into existence much earlier. They have been sitting in the room of my mind for as long as I can remember, essential to my self-definition: the sister part, for example. I shared the majority of my childhood and formative years with my identical twin sister, Elizabeth. I also have a younger brother, Sam. But my relationship with each of my siblings is, at best, strained and, at worst, nonexistent. And there is the daughter, always negotiating boundaries, riding waves of guilt and past trauma in an effort to balance the needs of Self with the needs of my mother.

In 2019, the wife part was perhaps the most performative, always showing up as I believed it was supposed to: appearing on my wedding day, walking down the aisle to songs I selected solely because I knew they would speak of romance and bliss to

the audience of our friends and family who gathered in the vineyard that October day—the songs actually meant nothing to me or my relationship with my soon-to-be husband.

What I didn't see coming: the uprising of another massive part of my Self, one that had been hiding, wordless, waiting for years in the dark back corner of that room. She was a part of me that I had ignored, denied, or silenced—consciously and unconsciously—for decades. This was a part of me that didn't fit the narrative of the nuclear family, that didn't fit into a heterosexual marriage. But in 2019, this part would appear and announce herself, letting me know that she would no longer be silent or ignored. She claimed her seat in the front row of the room of my mind, and there was no more denying that this part of me existed.

Before she arrived, I had all the things I believed I was supposed to want: the heterosexual marriage to the good man, the lovely home, the beautiful daughter, the rescue dog, the fulfilling, mission-driven career in nonprofit communications, the network of friends who loved, supported, and showed up for me. I believed I was safe. I believed my ambivalence toward my marriage, toward my husband, and oftentimes toward sex was normal and acceptable—I heard so from many friends in the same early parenthood chapter of life who all mirrored my ambivalence. I dreaded sex and grew to believe that I was asexual—and that was okay. I had ideas and intuitions—all outside of my marriage, all only in my imagination—that crept to the front of my mind from time to time, but I tamped them down, drowned them out. I became adept at numbing myself, crowding out the hard, impossible feelings and urges with alcohol, busyness, denial—an exquisite inability to focus on what was just beneath the surface. I honed in on anything other than the truth. I did that for years—until the truth became so impossible to ignore that I had no other option than to break wide open and surrender to it.

Until this moment, I had clung to so many aspects of my life as absolute. I would be married to this man forever, and that would be fine. We were just fine, good enough; we had a deep friendship and functional partnership. We were safe. Michael was—is—a kind, funny, respectful, smart, evolved man. He was—is—an amazing father. He was our provider; he worked really hard in life and at home, and he took good care of me. The fact that I dreaded sex with him was normal, I thought. Most everyone in my group of new-mom friends confirmed this: “Ugh, the last thing I want at the end of the day is to be touched by my husband!”, any one of them would say on any given day.

I never paused to dig deeper into my specific dread. And so we went on, having systematic and rote weekly intercourse, like clockwork. He always walked away satisfied, while my orgasm batting average was more like one for ten. Again, I heard from almost all of my friends: This is normal, do not worry, do not question or want more. You can't expect to be satisfied by every intimate encounter in married life, especially not once the years and co-created children begin to add up. So I went about my life, and I was safe in the understanding that this was enough.

Until it wasn't.

I met Carolyn in the group exercise class I taught twice weekly at my favorite Charlottesville studio. I remember the first few times I noticed her in class, as I made my way through the crowd to give hands-on assists and adjustments to students as they lifted weights and sweated through cardio intervals. She was beautiful and had a strangely familiar face—*had I met her somewhere before?* I felt as if I knew her somehow, perhaps from some past life.

I noticed how she strode into the group fitness room, eyes looking slightly down in a shy, unassuming way, her long, shiny, pin-straight black hair slicked back into a ponytail. She claimed her spot among the 25 or so other students with a strong, quiet presence. Carolyn didn't say much, but was hard-working and determined. I noticed her body immediately. Her physical strength was on display throughout each class, honed from years of playing club and professional soccer—she consistently pushed herself, never giving up on any exercise, whether it was push-ups, burpees, lunge jumps, or whatever else I threw at my students.

I learned that she was a middle school teacher, and she arrived at the studio for my class each Monday and Friday afternoon with a look of unwavering focus. I could tell she took my class seriously and was there to fully commit to the workout. I loved that; I had no time for people who came to the studio unwilling to push themselves. I took my class seriously, and it was an unspoken expectation that my students did as well.

Besides her body, I noticed her eyes: deep, dark brown, they could appear black from a distance. Her eyes were the thing that sunk me—I felt as if she was looking directly into my soul whenever we locked eyes. It was never during my group exercise class that we made eye contact—we were both too focused on our own individual work during that 60-minute period. I was focused on being the best fitness instructor I could be for my students, building them up, challenging them to do more, amping

up the intensity with a carefully curated playlist. But afterwards, in the locker room, or in the hallway that led out of the classroom and into the studio lobby, that's where she got me. We locked eyes one day after class, saying goodbye in that hallway. With one raised eyebrow glance and a shy smile on the way out the door, she unhinged me.

The tug I felt to be close to her, even after just a few interactions, was magnetic. I felt drawn to her in a way that was out of my control. One day during class, students were shuffling around the room, returning to each of their mats after some partner drills that required them to move around and pair up. Without thinking, I casually popped her on the leg with my hand as she jogged past me. I felt an electric jolt reverberate up my arm. From then on, I lived for the hands-on assists during the final resting period of class (known as savasana) and anything that allowed me to get close to her face, to her body. Pre-Covid, it was commonplace to give students hands-on assists by, for example, pressing your palms into the front of their shoulders as they lay supine in savasana, sweaty from class. Carolyn was usually the last student I would assist; externally, I remained completely professional, but on the inside, I lingered over her, studying her calm face and dark eyelashes with a curiosity and awe no one else sparked in me.

Carolyn crept into my thoughts slowly during the first few months of 2019. I didn't realize I was thinking about her all the time until it was too late; I remember waking up one day, and she was my first thought. Then I remembered that not only had I drifted off to thoughts of her, but she had visited me in my dreams, as well. Carolyn was my first and last thought of every day.

The thoughts of her were with me nearly every waking moment. I looked at my class sign-up list obsessively to be sure she was attending my Monday and Friday afternoon classes. I began to plan my workouts, my outfits, what I would say when I saw her, with the nervousness of a teenager with their first crush.

One afternoon, on the phone with my best friend Melissa, I confessed that I had a crush on this woman. I told my friend everything: I thought about this woman constantly, I dreamed about her, I felt like something inside of me that I thought was dormant or possibly dead had been turned on again—I sensed something was brewing and was halfway looking for outside opinion to snap me out of this fantasy. I sought my friend's advice.

"Have you ever had a crush like this on someone?" I asked Melissa, who was married and also a group fitness instructor.

"Yeah, maybe not as serious as what you're talking about, but I've definitely been attracted to guys here and there at the gym," Melissa said.

"So, what did you do? Did it pass?" I asked. *Please tell me it will pass. This has to pass. I cannot go on thinking about Carolyn with this intensity and frequency. Something has to give.*

"Well, I stopped going to the gym at the times I knew I would see them," Melissa said. "I stayed away. You need to stay away."

*Huh*, I thought to myself. Interesting tactic, but not one in which I was the least bit interested. Staying away from her would have meant stepping away from teaching my twice-weekly group exercise class. I couldn't fathom not teaching—it filled me up and made me feel alive in a way that few other things did at that time.

"Okay, I will try to avoid interacting with her as much as I can. Thanks," I said before hanging up the phone.

I considered following her advice briefly, but I knew deep down that I could do no such thing. I was drawn to Carolyn with a force that I didn't understand and couldn't ignore. I was in trouble, I thought. But I rationalized with myself: This fantasy would soon fade and give way to some dramatic flaw or vile turnoff (i.e., reality) that I couldn't yet see in Carolyn. I tamped down the voice of warning and carried on with denial and a hope that I was still safe.

## 2. Back then (the secrets) – c. 1990s-2000s

I grew up in a home full of secrets. I spent the first eight years of my life in Floyd, Virginia; then, when I was in second grade, my family moved to Blacksburg for a better school system. My mom and dad—who had known each other since attending high school together in Roanoke—were unhappily married, and they eventually divorced. Their initial separation took place when my twin sister and I were 15, and my brother was 10. I don't remember my dad being around much when I was a kid—his job as the vice president of a regional bank was demanding, and he seemed content to work late most nights. Feelings were not discussed; desires and big emotions were viewed as shameful and to be hidden. A babysitter played the role a present parent should have during my adolescent years: She delivered "the talk" about sex and showed me how to correctly secure a condom using a banana as her prop.

My mom was the queen of busyness and avoidance—she packed her schedule so full of activities for herself, and for me and my siblings, that I don't think she ever gave herself the chance to sit still, to take a moment and process any of what was going on in her marriage. At least, that's what I saw. And anger—I saw a lot of anger. I didn't understand why my mom was so angry and short-tempered with us. Sure, she had a lot on her plate as a school teacher and perpetual volunteer for parent teacher associations, not to mention running me and my siblings between the multiple daily extracurricular activities she insisted we all join. While I didn't understand where her anger originated, I figured out quickly that I would do best by staying small and out of the way. I needed to be the good girl, to not ask too many questions, and to not make trouble.

I remember my curiosity about same-sex female couples starting to take shape in high school. During my senior year, I fell into a rhythm of spending time with the out girls in my grade and their close friends from the high school in the neighboring town. Krista, Shannon, Morgan, and I spent a lot of time together during what felt like the final year of childhood. Krista was the one with whom I was closest. We played softball together; we were co-captains of the team. She was a riot—so hilarious, loud, bawdy, just so much fun to be around.

She introduced me to Ani DiFranco, the voice of the lesbian soundtrack, particularly the adolescent one. Ani was the anthem. I have vivid memories of riding shotgun in Krista's blue-green Ford Ranger pick-up, blasting "32 Flavors," "Both Hands," and "Not a Pretty Girl" as we drove with the windows down, smoking cigarettes like the idiot kids we were. Later in our senior year, when the *Little Plastic Castles* album came out, I memorized every guitar strum and croaking note that Ani sang from the passenger seat of Krista's Ranger.

Being with Krista and Shannon felt so easy, so fun, without expectations. I didn't have to be the "pretty girl" that I was used to being around the others—the more popular, conventional crowd. I envied the relationship Krista and Shannon shared: their style, their secret shared language, the confidence they exuded together. I pierced my eyebrow to fit in with that group, shunned makeup, and wore bikini tops under overalls, to look more like them.

But I never allowed myself to explore the physicality of what I was experiencing emotionally. I never made a move, though I felt the strong pull of attraction. I tamped it down. I drank. I drank a lot—we drank a lot. Shannon was emancipated from her parents and had her own place in Roanoke, a short drive up

the highway, so we spent a lot of time there. I was sometimes partnered up with a boy, but usually I would spend time with the girls alone. We pre-gamed with bottles of Boone's Farm until a heavy buzz dulled any nervousness or hesitation. Then we headed out to the only gay club in town and would dance into the early morning.

My memories of those nights are hazy, clouded by time and alcohol, but I know I never let anything happen with another woman. It wasn't something I was ready for or willing to explore then. The blunt force of alcohol always led me to the old familiar: a man or a boy, any one would do.

One night, a guy friend had come along for the party, and we hooked up after coming home from the club. I was so wasted, covered in dried sweat from hours of dancing on a crowded floor. I kissed this guy, whom I was only mildly attracted to, but whose approval and desire I needed that night. I pictured Krista and Shannon in the next room and I channeled my desire into a performance for this guy who meant nothing to me then, and whom I now can barely remember.

That became my routine when I went away to college at Longwood in Farmville, Virginia: get drunk, hook up with a random dude—the more random and transient, the better. I frequently would seek out the friend of a friend, whoever was just in town for the weekend, visiting someone who lived on the same dorm hall as me. I became a pro at performing the role of fun, drunk party girl, usually getting black-out drunk, and the visiting male would come home with me for the night. It was easier that way—the next morning was a quick, shameful goodbye, like pulling off a band-aid, and then I never had to see him again.

Thinking back to those nights still fills me with shame. I never processed the reason for or the feelings behind my actions; I never paused to question why I got so drunk, why I hooked up almost exclusively with men who meant nothing to me and whom I would never see again. I just kept doing it.

My party girl persona went over really well in college—I was in good company. Everyone around me, it seemed, had the same goal in mind: get as drunk as possible, as fast as possible. I went to a small liberal arts school. Few of us had our own cars, so we walked everywhere and mostly partied in dorm rooms and at nearby house parties. I was lucky—I never got a DUI, I only really got in trouble for underage drinking once, early on in my freshman year, and I had a strong network of friends who looked out for me, so I never got myself into situations that were too

dangerous. But I sure did try: I drank with the sole objective of getting obliterated.

In April of my freshman year, our college had spring weekend, and field parties on the rural land around our college campus that were legendary. Friends of my college roommates came from other schools across the state. I remember being the hit of the party with one particular group of lesbians who was visiting because of my drunk mantra that day: "I've puked at 10 o'clock, 12 o'clock, and 2 o'clock... and I'm hoping to keep it going at 4 o'clock." I wish I was exaggerating. I puked three times before 3 p.m. that day, after downing enough gin to kill a small animal.

I was the life of the party. I got high on the attention—particularly from men. I loved making people laugh with my shenanigans, and I connected with people over the shared buzz, the shared drunken experiences (what I remembered, at least), and the shared pain of the hangover the next day.

During my junior year of college, I went home to Blacksburg for Thanksgiving break, and my dad uncharacteristically asked to spend the evening alone with me. We drove to a movie at the nicer theater, 40 minutes away in Roanoke. At this point, my parents had been separated for five years, and it seemed their acrimonious divorce was going to be finalized soon. Dad was quite tense during the movie—he lashed out at another moviegoer behind us who was talking during the feature, yelling at the man to be quiet. I found this odd—my dad was generally subdued and mild-mannered.

As we climbed into the car and set out for the drive home, the reason for his tension came to light. My dad said he wanted to tell me something, something he'd been keeping from me and my siblings up until now: the reason he and my mom had divorced.

"Rachael, I'm gay," my dad said in a voice that was straightforward and unemotional.

Immediately, that statement resonated through my body as shock. I was shaken by the revelation, by learning that something I believed to be an absolute truth—that my dad was a straight man—was not at all true, and he had been hiding his true self from me and from everyone for who knows how long. He said he had known that he was gay for years, maybe decades, but had tried to hide it to make our family work. This was the reason for his and my mom's divorce. Suddenly, years of not understanding my mom's anger and simmering resentment came into focus; so much made sense. I felt at first like my life had been built on a lie—I wondered what other secrets my parents had been hiding over the last twenty years.



The initial shock wore off as the minutes ticked by. Most of the car ride passed in silence as I processed this revelation and its implications. As I processed, I mentally indexed all the disparate memories from my childhood that finally made sense in a way they never had before. I had grown up surrounded by many men I knew to be my “gay uncles,” flamboyant same-sex male couples who were dear friends of my dad, men who led lives that everyone in my small town would refer to as “nontraditional.” Many of my dad’s best friends from college had come out as gay.

I was reckoning with feeling lied to and betrayed, but I truly understood the need to keep his sexuality secret. My dad was the vice president of a small bank. He was well-known in our small community as a heterosexual business man, married with three kids. The late ‘90s and early ‘00s in Southwest Virginia were not the time nor the place to even imagine a middle-age man coming out as gay—it just didn’t happen.

Thinking about what my dad must have been struggling with for years, and what he was finally now admitting, I quickly came to clarity on that car ride about how proud I was of him. I truly admired his bravery in admitting what was true to him despite it being unheard of and unacceptable in our small community, despite the fracturing of our family that it caused. His business associates at the bank, his bosses, most of our neighbors would never know nor likely accept this side of him, I thought. This was the stuff of tabloids and soap opera storylines, not small-town families. How hard this must have been, to face and share this reality of who he really was. He was 52 years old and finally coming into his truth.

Back at school after the break, I was settling into my chosen major of English and getting serious about what I wanted to do after school—become a writer. I buckled down and plowed through another couple semesters of English course work. One year after the movie date and his car ride confession, my dad was scheduled to come pick me up for Christmas break after final exams were over. I had stayed out late the night before and spent the night in the bed of the boy du jour, so I was running late when I got back to my dorm room. The phone was ringing. It was my mom.

“Rachael, you need to get ready to go; I’m coming to get you,” she said. “We have to go straight to Roanoke to see your dad. He’s in the hospital.”

I had many questions: What was going on with my dad? Why was he getting my mom to call me? My parents were, by that point, mortal enemies who communicated only through passive-

aggressive comments and sealed envelopes passed back and forth between the kids whenever we visited. Whatever the reason, my mom would not—or could not—tell me anything more about what was happening with my dad: We just had to go to him.

We arrived at the hospital a couple of hours later. As I sat on one of the two beds in the sterile hospital room with my dad, mom, and siblings, the doctor came into our room carrying MRI film scans. My dad started to explain why we were at the hospital: After weeks of experiencing strange symptoms with his vision and cognition, he had grown concerned and checked himself into the hospital for more testing. The doctor took the conversation from there, placing those MRI scans on a lighted display so he could read and interpret them for us. The images showed a softball-sized tumor at the core of my dad's brain—he had stage IV glioblastoma multiforme—inoperable, terminal brain cancer. He was given six months to live.

I trudged through the next six months of my dad's life knowing in my heart that the secret he had kept for the majority of his life—who he really was and who he really loved—had eaten him alive.

He died almost exactly six months to the day after we sat together in that hospital room.

### 3. Numbing (the 'shoulds') – c. 2002-12

I floundered through school and life in the months after my dad's death. There were drunken nights when I was so wrecked and flagrant that I'm not sure how I survived—going home with inappropriate people and acting irresponsibly was routine behavior. About six weeks after Dad died, I was preparing to travel abroad for a summer school session in Spain. Late one night while I was partying with college friends in Virginia Beach just before I flew to Madrid, I got so drunk that I left my purse on the side of the main road outside of a bar where my best friend Sophie and I were trying to score a bag of weed. In it were my ID, my credit and debit cards, my checkbook, the keys to my locked car, and a wad of cash for my trip that was in excess of \$1,000. The only valuable things I didn't lose that night—which were thankfully safe at Sophie's house—were my passport and my plane tickets. Back at Sophie's the next day, I found a ride to the airport and boarded my flight to Spain.

During those weeks abroad, when I wasn't in class, my days were filled mostly with crying, listening to Radiohead's *Amnesiac* album, and consuming bottles of wine. Upon returning to the U.S.

in late summer, I extended my residence at college by an extra semester. I cried whenever I wasn't drunk, and also often when I was. I was catatonic at times.

But it wasn't all bad—those early days of grief were when I discovered yoga, which pulled me out of some of my darkest times. I began seeing a bereavement counselor, thanks to a recommendation from the social worker on my Dad's hospice team. I started taking antidepressants, which further buoyed me and helped me get out of bed and put one foot in front of the other when those simple acts felt impossible. That extra semester at Longwood allowed me enough time and credits to earn a Spanish minor that I otherwise would not have completed.

After finishing my undergraduate load and completing a couple of internships, I was living in Northern Virginia, but I wasn't happy there. I recently ended the latest going-nowhere relationship I had stumbled into and was plotting my next move when I talked to my friend Sophie, the friend I had stayed with in Virginia Beach a few months earlier.

Sophie and I had partied hard together in college, but our friendship went beyond booze. We had deep conversations and went to see live music together whenever our favorite musicians were playing nearby—Ani in particular was a favorite show I saw with Sophie, who is queer, but there were many. We worked out together and kept each other accountable for those habits. She had lost her mom during college, so we were now both members of the dead parent club, too. She was a thoughtful, introspective, intelligent, engaging friend with whom I would have thoughtful and meaningful conversations—and not just when we were tripping on mushrooms and sitting in a field together, laugh-crying about how beautiful life was.

Sophie convinced me to move to Charlottesville. Back in early 2002, I had spent only a few days there with my dad while he was receiving radiation treatment for his brain tumor. We stayed at a Days Inn on Route 29 after he'd been referred to UVA to receive gamma knife treatment, an attempt to shrink or slow the tumor's growth. We had rung in the New Year together at Miller's bar on the downtown mall, my dad's head shaved and pocked with stickers marking the spots where radiation tools would deliver gamma knife waves into the core of his brain. Charlottesville was a place where my dad and a few of our memories together still lived. So, I found a job and moved in November 2004. I was 24 years old, unencumbered and completely confident that I'd find my way in this new place.

Once I arrived, Sophie's friend group became my friend group, so I was almost constantly surrounded by lesbians and queer women who were just as much the life of the party as I was: They loved dancing at clubs late into the night, drinking to excess, wearing ridiculous costumes for no specific occasion, attending any concert that was within a day's drive, and basically living life to the fullest and having the most fun. Just like the women in high school whom I had grown close with then, I grew closer to Sophie and her group of friends with a secret curiosity. What would it be like to be with a woman? Would it feel different than being with a man? I had always found women beautiful—who doesn't? But could I ever allow myself to physically express the strange, secret desire I had felt for years, deep in my body? I had buried it so deep, for so long, never allowing it to come to the surface, never exploring it, always fearful and always tamping it down.

Until the night I met Nora after an Indigo Girls concert. Nora was masculine and beautiful, with short, light auburn hair, a smattering of freckles across her face, and she was interested in me. She made that abundantly clear. Her group of friends and Sophie's group of friends—riding high on the intoxicating vocals of Emily and Amy—wanted to keep the party going. To the gay bar we went! It took me several more strong cocktails and a few more hours to gather the nerve to make a move, or at least I think that's how it went down. What I do remember is an out-of-body observation once Nora and I started kissing—how buzzed I felt with not just alcohol, but with desire and satisfaction.

The night of dancing and making out at the gay bar continued, and then I went home with Nora. We fooled around more once we got into her bed. My experience with the opposite sex did nothing to prepare me for being in bed that night with Nora—I didn't know what to do, where to put my hands, how to let go of all the complicated feelings and fear swirling around inside of me. I was scared and hesitant with her; it felt like losing my virginity all over again. But what was I scared of? I didn't know exactly then, or at least I couldn't understand it. For once, I wasn't performing—I didn't know how to perform in this role with Nora. I wasn't blacked out. I remember the details of that night with incredible clarity, even now, almost 18 years later. How she moved, how soft and supple she was, how I felt under her body, looking up at her, waking up next to her.

I fell hard for Nora that night... and she broke my heart. Turns out, she was still hung up on her ex-girlfriend, coincidentally also named Rachel. Nora relocated to Georgia a few weeks after I met her.

I'd had sex with many, many guys by that point, but it felt different with a woman. With men, I was very familiar with my practiced moves—I'd assume the role of sexy temptress, biting lips, scratching backs, and faking an orgasm, rarely ever satisfied. I nailed my part, every time. So, after having my hopeful heart stomped on by Nora, I retreated. I had a couple more drunken flings with women over the next few months, because gay women were the company I was keeping, but I never had any intention of opening myself or my heart up to any of them. Eventually, gradually, I made my way back to coupling in a way that was most familiar and comfortable to me after more than a decade of experience, and I did what I thought I should do—I went back to dating men.

Looking back on many of the men I slept with, I know deep down that I was seeking connection, and I believed my body was the currency with which to earn it. I acquiesced my body to them, some of whom I barely knew, with the hope that they would find pleasure and desire me in return. It was transactional, to some extent—I offered myself as the sexy, naughty party girl, ready to have fun, and the man received an entertaining performance and an orgasm in return. Then, usually, it was over. I wasn't able to be present for any connection there may have been during or after, because I was almost always numb from alcohol.

Sex was a dissociative interaction for me. For the first decade and a half of my sexually-active life, I was drunk during the majority of my sexual encounters. My level of drunkenness ranged from a slight buzz (which I felt I needed to incite some desire for the man I was partnered with and to loosen my inhibitions about the role I needed to be playing), all the way to completely blacked out and no memory of what the hell I did nor with whom. I can count the times I had sober sex on one hand, prior to meeting the men with whom I entered long-term relationships. Then, once coupled, sober sex became boring sex. I stopped performing; I stopped faking my desire. I lost interest in men pretty quickly and realized I was partnering with them because I thought it was the thing I 'should' do. They wanted me—shouldn't I want them, too?

When Michael and I met in Charlottesville, I was about to turn 30, and our relationship was initially more of the same performing for the newest male in my life. But he was different; he was kinder, funnier, more selfless—a truly good person. For some reason, he stuck around, and I did what I thought I should do, what everyone around me was doing at that stage of life—we got married. I was 32.

#### 4. Breaking and healing – c. 2019

It's May of 2019. I am a wife; I am a mother. On the outside, my life appears to be moving along just swimmingly. Inside, I'm tormented by near-constant thoughts of a woman, Carolyn. That hidden part of myself that I had denied and tamped down for years was starting to reappear. It was gradual at first, the uprising of that part of myself, then it was all at once, before I had a chance to know what was happening. Still, I truly believed in the spring of 2019 that I could continue to deny her and ignore her, and she would eventually go away.

Though I only saw Carolyn in person twice a week in class at the studio, we followed each other on social media and started messaging each other at least daily, sometimes multiple times a day. Early on, our messaging was insignificant, with banter, silly GIFs, daily check-ins. But over the months, the conversations evolved. We got to know each other through what we shared in those messages—our senses of humor, insights about our families, our jobs, our lives outside of the small parts of each other we saw during our time at the studio in classes. Since I followed her on social media, I knew that she had lost a parent, too—her own beloved mother had died when Carolyn was just 14, so we messaged on Mother's Day about that loss. We confided in each other the parts of ourselves that we felt were unlovable. We learned more about each other's inner worlds as we shared our struggles and made more plans to spend time together at the studio where we practiced. Still, I did not fully acknowledge or tap into the deeper feelings brewing beneath the surface as I talked to and got to know Carolyn. I still was not willing to face that part of myself. Like my mom had modeled as I was growing up, I stayed busy, never sitting still, instead allowing constant activity and commitments to numb out the parts I wasn't ready to face.

At some point that spring, I learned that Carolyn was newly (and perhaps unhappily) married—to a woman. In the locker room after class one day, she mentioned in passing that she was going to visit her wife in North Carolina, where her wife had relocated for a new job a few months earlier.

Hearing that confirmation of her sexual orientation was the nail in my coffin. When I heard the words "my wife," my stomach dropped. It was actual confirmation of something I feared as we were getting to know each other better—that the energy between us was not one-sided; perhaps it wasn't an energy I alone was experiencing. It was possible, now knowing Carolyn's sexuality, that she felt something more than friendship for me,

just as I felt something more for her. I knew this was dangerous, deep down, but I shook off the shock as I walked out of the locker room and drove home, back to my real life. I convinced myself again that anything between me and Carolyn was imaginary, something I was creating that lived only in my head.

I rationalized that since I was married to a man, this was “just another female friend.” I was becoming adept at denying that I was breaking any rules or boundaries of my committed relationship. This woman was just a new pal, someone I clicked with, I told myself. I was used to meeting a new friend and becoming close, spending more time together, and getting to know each other on a deeper level. None of those times had ever been a threat to my marriage, to my husband. None of those women had been Carolyn, though.

This time was different. I knew that deep down. I felt a connection to Carolyn that was other-worldly. I couldn’t explain it. I felt deeply attracted to her, not just physically but emotionally and spiritually—and more so as I got to know her better. None of my other female friends—no one in my life—intrigued me the way she did. There was an energy between us, palpable even in those messages. Her words, innocuous as they seemed, could send shivers through my body.

Thoughts of her crept into my head constantly. While in Maryland on family vacation, I thought only of Carolyn’s body as I had sex with my husband in the hotel room. I thought of her the next morning as I pushed myself through a bootcamp-style workout with my sister-in-law, imagining Carolyn next to me, motivating me to work harder. I envisioned how and what I would share with her about the weekend, how I could turn the chaos into funny stories that would entertain her, but also help her understand and know me better.

Upon arriving home from that vacation, I messaged Carolyn to catch up. That conversation would shift the tide of our communications. She and her wife had a difficult conversation over the weekend about when exactly Carolyn would be relocating to North Carolina to be with her wife, to a town where Carolyn knew no one, had no job, and was generally unexcited to be moving. Carolyn confided in me that her wife was angry with Carolyn for wanting to stay in Charlottesville as long as possible. Despite the tension and resentment between them, Carolyn was moving. Her wife had already been in Greensboro for the better part of the year—the entire time Carolyn and I had been getting to know each other—and she was anxious for Carolyn to join her and find a teaching job there in a local school. Carolyn’s school year was coming to a close, and she would then relocate. I had

three weeks left to spend with her before I imagined she would leave my town and my life forever.

Those three weeks were full of distraction and me making excuses to sneak away from my family to spend more time with her. I'm not proud of this. I was not being honest with them, and I was absolutely not being honest with myself. But I was pulled, inextricably, to her. I needed to spend every moment I could with her before she drove away to her wife, to her new life. I believed I could get everything I needed out of those times together over her final three weeks in Charlottesville and then I would be able to walk away, to say goodbye.

Once her current school year wrapped up and she had only a house full of boxes to pack (a task that she would put off at any cost), Carolyn spent a lot of time at the studio and, by default, with me. We went to classes first thing in the morning, when I was normally home helping my daughter get ready for summer camp, and I dipped out as soon as Michael was home from work to go to evening classes on the same day. I needed any excuse I could get to talk to her, to be near her, while I could.

One night, we rode together to an outdoor yoga class at a local vineyard. The ride out to the vineyard was not too memorable but upon arriving, Carolyn needed to change into her workout clothes. She pulled off her shorts and tank top sitting next to me in her car, as I pretended not to look. I still feel currents moving through my body thinking about this first viewing of her bare, muscular thighs and toned stomach, her body so close I could touch it.

After our vinyasa class was over, we sat outside with wine and talked more. I asked her about how and when she came out to her family. It felt like a first date—like the best first date I'd ever been on. I felt our relationship evolving in those moments, into something much stronger than friends, but I couldn't stop myself from continuing to spend time with her. I saw the milepost of her leaving on the road ahead, and I believed that would mean closure and finality; I told myself that her move out of the area would allow me to go back to my normal life and resume my heterosexual marriage as if nothing had ever happened.

The sky was nearly dark at the winery, and the owner came to collect our glasses. As we drove home, I was tipsy as we discussed my deceased father and all the things I wish I'd said to him before he died. I began to cry. We were almost back to my house, where she would be dropping me off.

"I feel like we're not done talking," she said. "Can I have you for one more drink?"



*You can have me whenever and for however long you want,* said the drunken, unfiltered voice in my head. Out loud, I put on a cool front, not wanting to seem too eager. I casually asked if she wanted to come to my house for one last beer. Michael was there. I knew this was not a good idea, given how absent I had been lately and also given Michael's distaste for unannounced visitors. He wouldn't be happy that I was showing up late—it was after 9 p.m. at that point, which may as well have been midnight for an early bird like me—with an unannounced guest. I knew this may tip him off to something bigger going on. Again, I could not stop myself, and I quickly rationalized how I'd explain things to Michael if he asked ("She lives right down the road, we were just in the middle of a great conversation!"). I didn't truly believe he would ask, though. I wanted to believe he was living in as much denial as I was about where my desires were directed lately. I didn't give myself time to think about it too much—I just wanted to extend the feeling of being near her, of being seen and seeing her, for as long as I could.

She came in, she met my dog, and she met my husband. He was caught off guard by my late arrival and unexpected guest, as I predicted.

Carolyn and I sat down in the kitchen, on the other side of the wall where Michael was watching TV. We picked up our conversation where we'd left off in the car, cracking a beer together and talking for another hour or so. Michael wandered in once or twice, observing, looking at me with questions in his eyes.

He said very little until after she left, when he inquired about how I knew her.

"So, you just know her from the yoga studio?" Michael said. "She's just a student in your class? Why did she come over?"

I tried to diminish my interest in her. I wouldn't admit the power she had over me. Michael must have felt it, though. Regardless, I truly believed that I was close to the exit ramp, that my quandary of wanting something I absolutely couldn't have would end as Carolyn drove away from Charlottesville.

I walked away from that conversation, still drunk from the evening's wine and beer, mired in denial, and immediately reached for my phone to message Carolyn. I wanted to make sure she got home safe; we made plans to meet at the studio the next morning for a class. I went to sleep thinking of her and woke up with her as my first thought. Then I dashed away from my home, eager to get to the studio and to see her. She was leaving soon; I didn't have much time.

Three days before Carolyn's anticipated move date, we gathered at the restaurant next to our studio for a send-off with drinks, food, and friends. Hours passed as we sat outside, a double rainbow appearing in the sky above us before it grew dark. People came and went. Finally, it was close to 9 p.m. Several bottles of wine had sufficiently propelled me to a place of either complete courage or sheer idiocy. I got Carolyn alone and told her I needed to say something important.

"I don't expect a response to this, but I just need to say it: I'm really glad you're leaving," I said, then paused, my hands shaking beneath the table. "I *need* you to leave. I can't keep thinking about you like this all the time, so I think it's a good thing you're moving."

She sat dumbfounded across the table. I didn't know if I'd get a response, but after a few thoughtful moments, she said, "I agree, 100%. I feel the same."

It wasn't her words but her tone, her posture, and the look in her eyes that spoke volumes. Her tone was shocked and scared, as if she too were realizing the significance of the energy between us, now out in the light and no longer unspoken. Her posture was frozen, also registering complete shock at my admission, but the look on her face, her expression said it all. Looking at me with her deep brown eyes, I felt warmth, vulnerability, and recognition of our connection. It was confirmation that we felt more strongly for each other than we'd previously admitted.

It was so validating to hear that the connection had not been one-sided, but so painful to face the certainty of her imminent departure. We had now confirmed our mutual feelings, our shared connection... and we had to say goodbye? It didn't seem fair, but it was necessary. At that moment, I told myself this was what I'd planned for; this was what I needed so I could go on with the life to which I'd committed. She would leave, and my life would go back to "normal." Our timing was off; we had to get on with our lives. We said goodbye. I sensed my heart was breaking in a way it never had before.

She moved on a Saturday. That same morning, Michael pulled me aside at home and asked me to go for a walk. I knew by his tone that I had not gotten away with my fantastical tale of denial. Of course I hadn't. As we walked through our neighborhood, he asked the question I feared was coming, but never fully allowed myself to believe he would ask: "What's going on with you and Carolyn?"

Hearing that question, I felt a transformation taking place in my heart, mind, and body. I committed to telling him the truth. I

decided I would answer his question in that moment—and the rest of his questions I sensed were coming—with full honesty and transparency. With this decision, I started shedding the skin of a Self that no longer served me—the Self that had lived in denial for most of my life. I couldn't let the lies eat me alive like they had my father.

A brief sense of lightness spread over me as I told Michael the truth of what I was experiencing in that moment: "I don't exactly know what it is, but something is definitely happening: I have feelings for her. I've had them for a while. I don't know what to do about it. I didn't mean for this to happen." It felt good to finally tell the truth, even if the truth was going to change everything. I couldn't lie anymore—Michael didn't deserve it. I didn't either.

I was keenly aware that this conversation would change everything. Carolyn and I had not crossed any physical boundaries—we had hugged a grand total of two times. (I did not tell him that hugging her felt like my heart was exploding in bright white light each time—did not tell him about the actual blinding brightness that surrounded and enclosed me those two times I wrapped my arms around her body.)

We walked and talked for a while that morning. I cried and shook with discomfort. I felt so ashamed of the part of myself I was revealing, the part who had strong feelings for a woman. I had done nothing wrong—I was simply admitting to him the complicated truth of the feelings that this woman had awoken in me over the last half a year—but I was so ashamed. My body and brain were so accustomed to keeping secrets that I was overcome by the discomfort of the truth.

The shame came up again and again in my weekly therapy sessions. I was fearful—of what people would think, of how I would be treated, of what I was potentially giving up, of not knowing what was ahead. But I pressed on with honest inquiry. I intuited that the part of myself who had come into the light, the woman that had been hiding in the back corner of the room of my mind for most of my life, was not going to go quietly. She was here to stay.

I was ashamed that I wanted to leave the marriage I had committed to honor in front of friends and family. I was ashamed that this union no longer felt true to me, to this *new* me. I was ashamed and guilt-ridden over the pain I was causing Michael. In those early days of him finally knowing more about the deep inner desires I'd been harboring, I was constantly torn between wanting to be completely honest with him and simultaneously wanting to protect him from the information that was going to

shake his world irrevocably. But I knew, as author Glennon Doyle famously wrote after she fell in love with a woman while married to a man, that there's no such thing as one-way liberation. My honesty—with myself and with him—was the greatest gift I could bestow upon him, our marriage, and our future.

We started marriage counseling with a wise, kind therapist who helped us navigate our path forward. It was a challenging, painful several months. I broke open in every way. I didn't hide how I felt. I cried openly—often at restaurants and in other public settings—and missed Carolyn tremendously. I wasn't prepared for the depth of grief I would feel in those months as I honestly admitted to myself all the things that were no longer true. It no longer felt true to me to be in a heterosexual marriage, so I mourned the loss of the self and the life I thought I knew as certain. I faced the frightening reality of breaking up my family, and I mourned for my daughter, who would grow up in a household fractured by divorce. I had many doubts. I sought counsel from professionals, from friends, from anyone who would listen. But mostly, I went inward.

I read constantly, seeking out books in the genre of "later-in-life lesbians" that I found on Amazon. I took in others' words and found comfort in familiar themes. I read essays published by women who could have been me, their words and revelations and years of denial mirroring the conversations I was having with all the parts of myself inside my head. One book in particular, titled *Living Two Lives: Married to a Man & In Love with a Woman* by Joanne Fleisher, offered practical steps and tips on how to examine your predicament, manage the roller coaster, help your children, consider your options, and expand your resources.

I wrote when I wasn't reading, in journals and by the thousands of words in a Google doc. In writing, I dumped the messy contents of my brain and tried to make sense of the competing narratives that were still running in my head—the narratives of who and what I used to be and of who I was becoming.

I stopped drinking for the most part, which allowed me to stop numbing and start sitting with my hard feelings. I walked whenever I could, at work and at home, using the quiet time with nature and no disruptions to process my thoughts further. For the first time in a long time, I dove into my feelings and allowed them to be, not trying to change or avoid the pain and transformation I was going through, but witnessing and honoring them with curiosity and acceptance.

It was hard to watch Michael process this reality, and he pleaded with me to hold out hope for our marriage. But how could I hope for and honor our marriage if it meant abandoning *myself*? I expressed that to him in the kindest and most straightforward terms I could. I remember one morning, a few months into marriage counseling, when our daughter was in the kitchen eating breakfast, and Michael cornered me in our bedroom closet—the irony of this is not lost on me.

“Do you see yourself being in a relationship with a woman? Is that what’s going to make you happy; is that what you want in life?” he implored.

In a small, shaking voice, I said what I had to say: “Yes.”

I moved my things to the guest bedroom soon after that. Michael began searching for his own place. We knew our marriage was going to end, and we were crafting our path forward with honesty and respect, prioritizing our deep shared love for our daughter. I give Michael a tremendous amount of credit for the grace he showed me throughout the process of unraveling my truth and our marriage—he was more compassionate and forgiving than I could have hoped for. He rarely got angry, he didn’t lash out, and he too practiced curiosity and acceptance in witnessing what I was going through. I tried to instill in him that this wasn’t his fault—it wasn’t anyone’s fault.

We were both children of divorce and had first-hand witnessed how traumatic, hostile, and damaging that path can be for the people involved, especially the children. We pledged to each other and our families that we were going to do it differently. Our lives didn’t have to look like our parents’ lives; we would do it better.

Once I committed to honesty in self-inquiry and conversation with Michael, I came to clarity rather quickly. Within only a few months, I was certain that I was not meant to be married to a man any longer. But I needed more resolution. I knew that my path forward was being forged regardless of whether or not Carolyn and I had a future—but I had to know if a future for us was possible. I sensed from our other-worldly connection and final admission of our feelings for each other that maybe there was a glimmer of hope.

I wrote her a letter. Using good old-fashioned pen and paper—and after trashing numerous drafts—I sent this letter to her at the school where I learned she had gotten a job:

Dear Carolyn,

Meeting you and feeling what I feel for you sent my world spinning off its axis, in a good and necessary way. And now, I'm in the process of exploding my life. Sometimes it feels like everything that I once knew is no longer true. The world looks different, I feel different, and everything has changed. And that's okay; everything is happening as it should (as scary as it all seems). My path forward is towards a life where I'm no longer in a compulsory heterosexual marriage and I'm true to myself in a way that I've never been able to realize; it all feels right and authentic. That's where I am and what I'm seeking right now, to be authentic and to listen to my heart.

You're in my heart. There's a fantasy of you and me and a future with us together that lives in my heart. I suspect that you have a similar fantasy that lives in your heart, too. (I don't know for sure, but we've talked esoterically about fantasies and feelings in a way that leads me to this possible conclusion.) There was a time when I didn't believe that this fantasy could ever be possible as reality, but—try as I might—my heart won't let me forget it or you or the way I felt when you looked at me. You unhinged me with one raised eyebrow glance in the hallway at the studio and I haven't been the same since. So I push forward, listening to that quiet voice that beats inside my chest.

Is it possible for you (not now, but in the future... sometime in the future) to follow your heart? To explode your current life—on your own terms and your own timeline—and to move forward towards the fantasy of us being together, towards making that a reality? This is information I need to know for my path forward. If you don't ever see the possibility for the fantasy and the reality to match up, if you can't envision a life where we try to be together, that's okay—I just need to know so I can adjust my vision for the future.

No matter what you decide, you will always, always, always be a beautiful and cataclysmic part of my life and of my growing out of who I was and into who I am now. Even if that's the only role you ever play in my life, I'll be forever grateful to you for that.

She received the letter in September. By December, she had moved out of the apartment she had been sharing with her soon-to-be ex-wife.

## 5. The other side – c. 2020-22

Michael had closed on his new home, which was so close to mine that we could walk our daughter back and forth. I was still living in the home we had shared, adjusting to the new rhythm of single parenting half the time and living in total silence the other half of the time, when I didn't have my daughter. For a handful of months, Carolyn and I saw each other whenever we could, driving back and forth between Greensboro and Charlottesville. We continued to write and mail each other letters; that was our favorite form of communication. Once her school year ended, she found a job in Charlottesville and relocated, settling a few miles away from where I lived. A year later, she moved in with me and our part-time kiddo.

The unraveling of our marriages and the aftermath was not simple or easy—there were days, weeks, and months filled with heartache, grief, regret, and sadness for everyone involved. But we ended those chapters the best way we could, with respect, honesty, and love for ourselves and our partners. It was only after we had dissolved our previous commitments that we came back together. So much had happened between us, and yet we were just getting to know each other. It was an electric, magical time, us coming back together. I have never experienced anything like the pure magic of being with her. The pain was worth it to find that.

We built our relationship on a foundation of honesty and transparency, and continue to build with those principals grounding us. But the building of our partnership has not been without its challenges: we both left our marriages and entered into partnership with each other carrying our own boatloads of respective baggage. Navigating the beginning months and years together took a lot of hard work. There have been times of intense guilt for each of us as we embarked on a new chapter together but mourned the end of the previous one. And, like all relationships, our partnership and our path continue to take hard work. We've hit many bumps in the road along the way with our different communication styles, challenges in co-parenting, and run-of-the-mill disagreements that come up between two busy, imperfect, cohabitating adults. Since we came together and committed to each other, we have relied on several things to navigate the hard times: regular sessions in couples and individual therapy, friends who know each of us really well and who hold us accountable, and trust in that undeniable connection that we share.

We have all been incredibly intentional about the integration of our family. Michael thoughtfully plotted out the entire plan for how, when, and where Carolyn would meet our daughter back in 2020, when Covid forced us into an earlier-than-planned introduction. With Michael and me, Carolyn is a co-parent to our six-year-old daughter, and I have loved watching their bond develop and bloom. Carolyn has a remarkable relationship with Michael—they share common interests, communicate with each other as needed, and are genuine friends and partners in parenting. Michael has been graceful, loving, and supportive through every stage of the last few years. We all spend time together regularly, including almost every holiday and birthday since 2020, which makes my daughter incredibly happy. Since coming into this place of deeper self-actualization—by acknowledging and accepting some parts of my Self that I had denied for most of my life—I've felt the confidence to fully embrace more of the truest parts of myself, and not just my sexual identity. I decided this year to quit drinking. Embarking on this journey of sobriety has been easy in a lot of ways (I have 26 years of heavy drinking under my belt—I know from experience that alcohol has nothing new to offer me), but also incredibly hard, because I now lack that familiar numbing agent I became so reliant on for helping me muddle through the shit of life. Alcohol was my salve; I thought it made me better—until I realized that everything about me is better without it, even the shit I have to muddle through.

I am breaking bad, self-destructive habits through self-observation and awareness—something that was hard to achieve when I was constantly worrying about when the next drink was being served or how to survive the intensity of whatever hangover was wrecking my mind and body. There is still much work to be done, many dysfunctional patterns and habits still in place. But I feel at ease knowing that I will continue evolving and seeking the truest and most beautiful version of life with my truest and most beautiful partner by my side.

I often wonder what my dad would say if he were here. I have to believe he's looking down on me, observing all of this, and that, in spite of the collateral damage, he's proud of me for speaking my truth, for following my heart. I wonder if he would have eventually partnered with someone who made his heart swell and dance. I wonder if he would have stopped drinking and pursued healthier habits after decades of abuse. More than anything, I wish my dad could know my daughter and know me as a parent. I wonder what he would think of her and her



outspoken, curious, wise spirit. I wonder what he would think of me as a parent. I wonder so much—and that's all I have: the wondering. I'll never know. I'll never be able to ask.

I wish I had my dad to help me sort through and answer the hard questions that come with aging, parenting, and life. My wonder is mirrored back to me as my daughter grows more curious and asks her own hard questions. Last week, she asked me a hard question she's asked many times before: "Why did you and Dad decide to get divorced?"

Someday she will know the full story, but for now I tell her only what she needs to know: "Your dad and I still love each other very much, but we decided it was best for us to love each other as friends and co-parents who don't stay married to one another," I said, as I usually do.

But this time, thinking harder about it, I decided to reveal a little bit more.

"And it also happened because I fell in love with Carolyn." She smiled at that last part.

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**Rachael Kesler** (she/her) has lived in Virginia her entire life. She is a graduate of Longwood University, where she studied English and Spanish. She started her career as a journalist two decades ago and currently works in nonprofit communications. Rachael is certified as a group fitness instructor; she's also a trained prenatal yoga instructor, and in 2022, she completed her 200-hour yoga teacher training (RYT-200). In her free time, she enjoys reading, camping, spending time outdoors, going to concerts, traveling, and making to-do lists. Rachael currently lives in Charlottesville with her partner, Carolyn, their six-year-old daughter, and Harry the dog.