



Between Us

a memoir of my family

By Kara Gildea

for my opa and little cousins Lulu + Gilly

Amy
(my mom)

Kim
(my aunt)

Abee
(my grandma)

Suz
(my aunt)



Alaskan Cruise, 2007

me

Opa
(my grandpa)

I come from a family of caretakers, bound by the
rhythms of giving.

For my grandmother, Abee, that meant caring not only
for her three daughters, Amy, Kim, and Suz, but also
for her husband, my grandfather Ed.

"Better known as Opa."



Abee and Opa, Feb. 1971

My Opa came from nothing. His father owned a gas station. Opa started as a pencil pusher, put himself through business school. Then took the Long Island Rail Road into Manhattan with a transfer at Jamaica every day for 50 years.

Opa had polio as a child. His legs never fully recovered. Climbing subway stairs was hard.

Eventually, Abee would steady him while he steadied the family.



This is the house
we stay in at
Cooperstown.



Aug, 1973

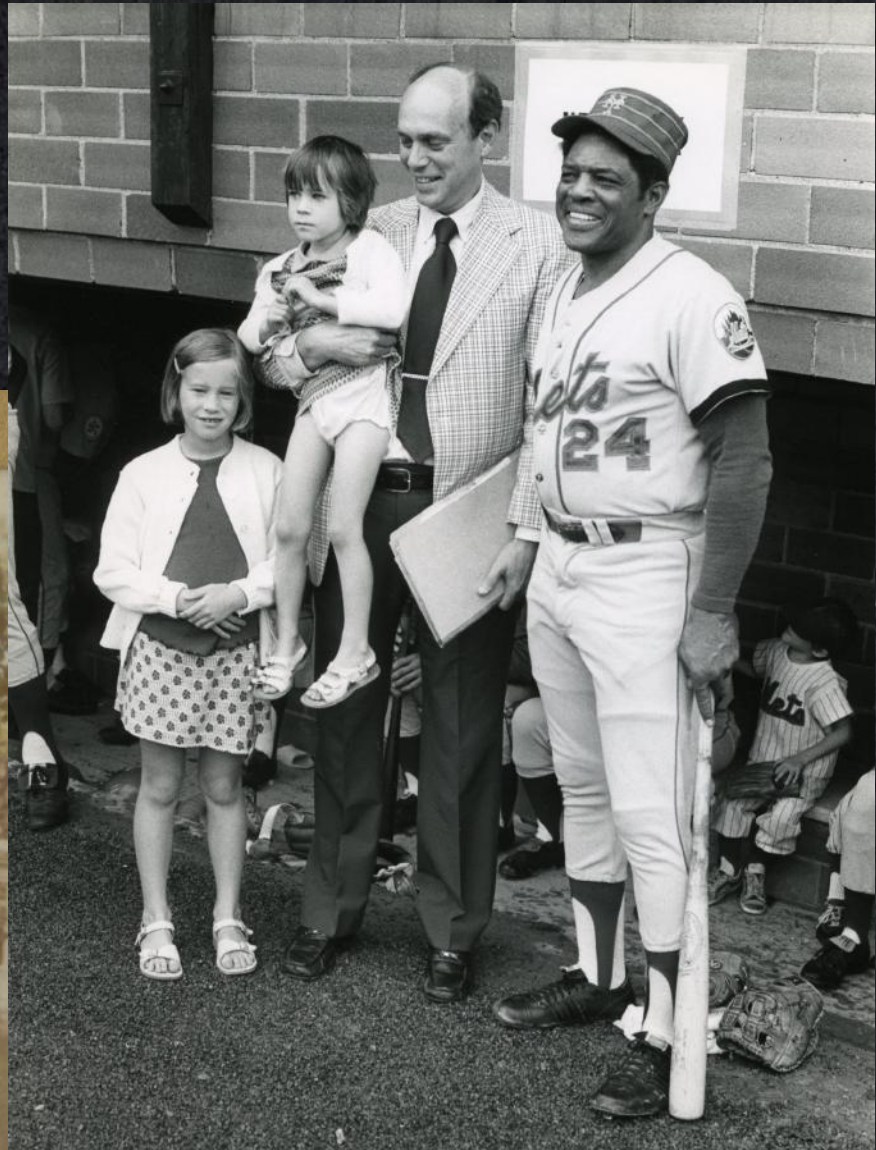
An excerpt from my mom's journal, mid 1970s

When my mom was younger, Opa used to take the family upstate to spend summers in Cooperstown, NY, home of the National Baseball Hall of Fame.

He was its president.



Opa holds Kim for a picture with Mets Hall of Famer Willie Mays in 1976. Amy stands to the left.



Coopers town, 1973





Before Opa's job, of course, came his daughters. He formed a special bond with my aunt Kim. His middle daughter.

Like Opa, Kim spent a lot of time in medical care too. She was often ill with Celiac disease before we knew what that was. We think that's why they became so close.

He made sure she always had everything she needed, even into adulthood. That was the kind of man he was. He took care of his family while being a perfectionist. My mom inherited that, and now I have too. He never wanted anyone to worry.

Abee did enough of that for the family. She just wanted everyone to be helpful to whoever in the world needed it.

Dear Daddy I love you. You are
the best Daddy because
you play Games Whith me.
and you let me go Shoping For
groceries. Daddy you are +
best

Note
written
for Opa
from Kim
when she
was a
child.

"It's really hard for me to look at pictures of Dad. I have such vivid dreams of my Dad it is gut wrenching."
Kim, March 2024



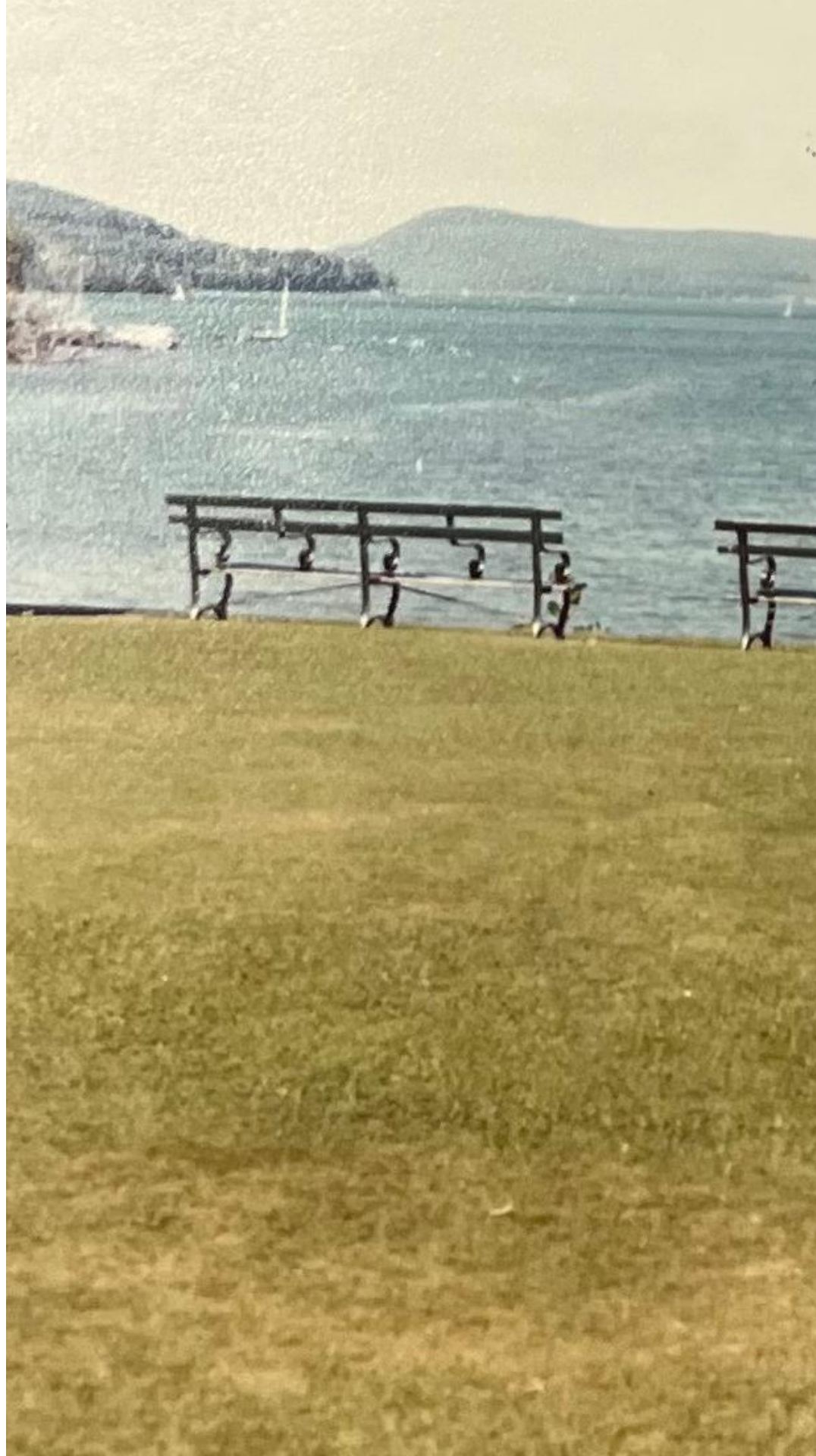
Kim takes a photo with Opa while she waitresses at the Otesaga Hotel. Abee, my mom, Suz, Kim, and I all have worked here. It wasn't an option for me not to.
Mid 1990s

I've been trying my hardest not to spend money. I had to buy some things at the grocery store like paper towels, laundry detergent, soap, kotex etc... That's all though. So how are you all at home?

1990

A letter sent home by Kim during college about her spending.

My mom walks with my Aunt Suz on the
Otesaga Resort Hotel's back lawn,
summer 1981







Opa and Abee at an award dinner, mid 1990s

In the end, Abee bathed him and dressed Opa, but still followed his guidance each day; when to eat dinner, what to get at the store, what time church was.

His guidance anchored her and gave her purpose. Opa was the glue for the entire family. The one that had all the answers. And she was his support.



My mom and Kim's matching Volkswagen Jettas parked outside my grandparent's house on Long Island, Glen Head, NY, winter 1990

They sold the family house in 2012, and we were all heartbroken. But by then, my Opa's legs had completely stopped working, and they couldn't keep up with such a big house anymore.

They moved into an apartment, and soon, couldn't travel to Cooperstown in the summers anymore.

With Opa's passing in 2023, Abee's daily rhythm dissolved.

The absence of direction left her vulnerable to confusion.

Leaving room for the dementia to creep in rapidly.

Her connection to the present started short-circuiting.

Making new memories became impossible, but still the
selflessness remained.



Abee is shown casket options for Opa
three days after his death on Long Island.

June 2023



My mom helps Abee to the car after lunch
at the Otesaga Hotel in Cooperstown, NY.

Dec. 2024

This hotel is where my mom had her wedding reception. It is where she took my last-day-of-school photos every year in elementary school. Where I had my cotillion. Where I would have had my prom if not for the pandemic. It's where my mom, aunts and I met famous baseball players growing up without even knowing it.

My Opa loved it here. It's where he met Abee, a waitress. It took him three summers to work up the courage to give her his business card. They were married for 55 years.

Opa always said, "Welcome to the funny farm," when talking about the family.

He knew things weren't right, especially toward the end.

But he trusted my mom, the oldest daughter, to take his place when he was gone. Maybe she could put her foot down harder.





Although summer brings some sunny days, Cooperstown is nestled in a part of upstate New York often clouded under a thick gray blanket throughout the winter months. Something about its proximity to the Great Lakes and its latitude, I've heard. All we know is it means seasonal depression.







Kim, Suz, and my mom at their aunt's house in NJ, summer 1995

I never remember wanting a sister. It was always an older brother. I envied my friends who had one – a protector but also someone to joke with.

I already knew what having a sister looked like.



Amy's Halloween Party
Oct., 1973

Amy is Wilma Flintstone

Kim is a ghost (Background)

Step 1. sister

→ Belittled, Controlled
Abandoned, Stupid
Not able to be independent

Step 2. I am stupid

I can't do it myself
No one believes me
I am worthless
She hates me

Step 3. I am somebody

← I can do it

← I am capable

I am worthy
I am different in a good way

Step 4. Overreacted to

she is alive. Every time I hear the fire/ambulance whistle, I think it's for her. The ones in the middle of the night are the worst.

What is she doing in there? How is she getting money? My biggest worry is that she is going to scam more people or hurt someone while driving. I'm also worried she is going to talk her way into another apt. in town + then destroy it. And I'll know the landlord.

Dinner

We are
Both m
Same p

She wrote
letter to
meeting
of HR.
this m
the offic
my Elm
1-yr. re

Amy's journal

Voicemail
Opa to my mom
2021

“

Amy, it's your father, better known as Opa. I reached out to Suzanne this morning, and I'm reaching out to you now. If you could both, either together or independently, reach out to Kim and take her out for dinner, or, in other words, to try to reconnect.

It really bothers me that there's no connection between the three of you, and it would help you, it would help me, and it'd help your mother to know that you're all on the same track.

I think she's trying hard to put everything together and making good progress, but she needs the two of you, her sisters, to be a part of what's going on, take care. Have a good day.

”

My mom brings Abee to a work
appointment and to get a snack at a
cafe. She tries to get her out of
her apartment as much as possible.

Nov. 2024





210

I grew up as the only child of divorced parents. I learned how to converse with adults from an early age. Honestly, I preferred it. I loved drawing whimsical fantasy worlds and could read three books in a single day. I was independent, but I was lonely.



I relax at Otsego Lake with my mom, Aug. 2012



Picture drawn by me to welcome my grandparents back to Cooperstown for the summer, spring 2010

Abee and Opa stopped coming to Cooperstown when I was almost in middle school. We were able to get close because I'd spend my summers with them up until then.

That's my Opa sitting in his recliner. I could always see his head in the living room window when I'd pass by. He loved to people watch. So do I.

Their house was across from a fenced-in deer park. Abee and I would feed them all our veggie and fruit scraps by throwing them over the barbed wire fence.

They were a rare deer species. She worried about how they felt. If this was their natural environment, somewhere they could thrive.

I haven't seen them in there for years.

Abee loved it in Cooperstown. She always wished she could have lived there year round, but Opa had to live the rest of the year on Long Island to be able to commute into the city for business.

After he passed, Abee moved upstate permanently. I'm glad she finally got to.

Abee stands outside a house she owned for Kim
for three years near Cooperstown. Kim only
lived here for a year between 2021-2022.

Sept. 2024







Opa and I, Three Mile Beach Park, Cooperstown, NY, summer 2005

My Opa always understood me. We could communicate without words. When I was little, he intimidated me, but he could also make me laugh with just a look. He's the kindest man I've ever known. The definition of a family man.

Since he had weak legs I felt like everything I did when I played sports or traveled was for him growing up. We would email him photos of my adventures.

And he always ended a phone call with, "Send me your latest report card."



Aunt Kim and I on a family trip to Alaska, 2007

The funny aunt. Outgoing, creative, sarcastic. We always picked up right where we left off. She'd call, excited about all the things we'd do together.

Then she'd call again to postpone.

Not her fault, her depression or bipolar disorder always got in the way. Eventually, she'd cancel. Or worse, just leave everyone waiting.

When she didn't show up to Christmas dinner in 2020 without notice, we knew something was more wrong than usual.

My mom refused to believe she had relapsed injecting cocaine. I didn't believe it either. Addiction felt distant, like something long buried, but it wasn't.

Her relapse did happen. Kim ended up telling my mom.

She was my favorite person in the world. Still is. Absolutely hysterical. We have the same humor. I get in trouble for it sometimes, and so does she.

There's so much good she has done and will do. People love her. She can connect with anyone. That's a gift. She could do anything she wanted. I just wish she could see that.

She lived here for about a year. She
craved her independence.

But my mom stopped paying the rent.

Kim was supposed to budget enough
money to pay for her utilities but
sometimes she didn't.

So, they got shut off.

She used the money for cocaine.

Jan. 2025



Kim's apartment complex in Niskayuna, NY.





My mom fights with Kim about what time they
need to get on the road to visit a rehab.

Nov. 2024



A picture of me packed in boxes as Kim's
eviction date looms near.

Nov. 2024

My family spent months gradually cleaning out the latest house Abee bought for Kim. She left soon after to go to rehab.

My mom wouldn't let her back into it when she got out because there were bits of cocaine stashed and needles everywhere.

It was time to sell it. She's not coming back here for now.

Abee struggles to comprehend why Kim isn't living here.

What could possibly be wrong?

They pack up the last remaining things to drop off at Kim's apartment.

Sept. 2024









"Mom, why don't you eat your lunch outside and relax!"

My mom and my Aunt Suz were moving her out of her apartment and into an assisted living facility this day.

Each time the movers came back in from loading something onto the truck she would ask them if they wanted ice tea or a snack.

My mom finally told them while they were in the elevator to just say yes, so she would stop. It's what she does.

He said yes and she was relieved.



My mom is drained from repeatedly assuring Abee about her furniture placement before her move to a one-on-one care facility. Even with a diagram, Abee struggles to accept that some belongings must go into storage.

Summer 2024

My mom's note to Opa, five months
after he passed away.

Abee's toiletry box sits packed on the morning of her move.





Abee inspects my mom's growing bald spot on her head.

"I make you do that?" She asks.

"No mom, it's not just you."

Oct. 2024



My mom and her
cat India
before bed.

Oct. 2024



12/8/20 PLEASE FORGIVE ME

I started using on Oct. 2, 2020
It has been 14 yrs. Until I
met Hillary. I should have known
better. The best highs are
natural happiness that I have
worked so hard to find -
my family, art, photography,
dogs, Nature, academics.
Doing drugs will take all of
that away from me. I do not
want to die. I am GOING

to an AA mtg tomorrow
& get a sponsor. I have relapsed
I feel terrible about myself!
Kim think of yourself but
most of all others I have
NEVER injected before now.
Extremely addicting and
extremely depressing. I hate
~~me~~ this part of me.

I am better than this.
Go to the gym, exercise,
meet people, read, love
your dogs even more.
Put this energy into
working & more adventures
I DO NOT WANT TO DIE

Kim and Cooper at the
Niskayuna dog park.

"We try to go everyday.
Sometimes three times
a day, you get to know
everyone and I like that."

Oct. 2024



Abderall

Amorin

Abderall

Abderall

Abderall

Abderall

Abderall

Abderall

Paxil



Kim holds up a tunic stained with blood from injecting.
"All my clothes are ruined," Kim says. "It can take me hours to
hit a vein, I'll just squirt the blood anywhere I dont care."

Kim traces her doctor's handwriting in hopes of getting her
prescription refills sooner so she can either increase her dosage
or sell the surplus.

Dec. 2024

Addicted to Cocaine

14 years clean

→ Took Adderall

Family was all I had
isolated

watched movies every
night

shopaholic

OD → cleaning

→ lived in Apts. for awhile

Moved to Cooperstown ^{was the happiest}

→ Controlling Sister

missed my parents

still had a void in
my life

started trading

Adderall for coke

Spiraled out of
control

Lost family & friends

Lost house

Lost support from father



Kim collects pieces of her second to last
anxiety pill off the carpet.

Oct. 2024

Kim peels electrical tape off a vent in her apartment.
She put it there during a recent drug binge.

Cocaine makes her paranoid. She covers every hole in her apartment, convinced someone is watching. Usually the police.

"When your drug dealer tells you this isn't the drug for you, you should listen," Kim says.

"Have you tried a joint?" she remembers him asking. "It could chill you out."

Cocaine & Love/hate
relationship





Abee arrives home from the hospital with Kim to little Amy waiting, Dec. 1972

Kim and Abee have the same birthday. I find that so interesting when that happens in families. Especially since both Abee and Kim have Celiac disease.

"I always thought it would be Kim who would be taking care of our parents. Especially with how good she is with old people and her interest in healthcare.

I never thought at this point I would have to be protecting my parents from their own daughter, my sister."

Amy

Summer 2023

Voicemail
Kim to my mom
Fall 2024

“

I did not take mom's
engagement ring. I did not.

I swear on Dad's grave.

I did not and I know that
I have a clear conscience.

”

Voicemail
Abee to my mom
Fall 2024

“

Hi, Amy, this is mom. I
just had a call from Kim,
and she's very upset,
because you think, you
think that she took my
wedding ring, and I've I
really don't think she
took it.

I took it off and I put it
in one of my drawers or
something.

I thought I knew where it
was, but I haven't found
it yet. But I know she
hasn't been here since
then.

She's just really upset.

”



My mom and Abee meet
with a detective
regarding Kim.

Fall 2024







My mom walks through Cooper Park outside of
the National Baseball Hall of Fame on her way
to mail Abee's 2024 taxes.

Oct. 2024



My mom in Austria, spring 1996. *The Sound of Music* is her favorite movie. She loves traveling and photography just like me.



My mom sleeps through the day. We all tend to do this sometimes.

Winter 2024

My mom's earrings sit untouched on her dresser. I haven't seen her wear them since I was little. She never let me borrow them, afraid I'd lose them or, worse, take them, like Kim had done when they were younger. Now she says she needs to get her ears re-pierced. I told her I'd go with her for her birthday in August, but I haven't followed through. It's a small gesture, something that could make her feel beautiful.

She is so stressed now. I watch her work away at picking that bald spot on her head daily.

Or she writes lists. I used to watch Abee keep meticulous lists on holidays and birthdays. Who gave what to whom and notes about why they are grateful.

My family taught me the importance of the written word. I really appreciate that. It's getting lost today.

My family writes everything down. Lists upon lists. Journals too.

My mom thinks it's our way of avoiding dealing with our issues.



A thank you card I wrote to my mom a few years ago sits surrounded by two packs of cards waiting to be written out.

Fall 2024



Before Opa passed, he sent out over 500 Christmas cards. He refused to narrow the list. The man who mowed their lawn 40 years ago. His old secretary from New York. The teacher from Thailand they once hosted.

Everyone deserved a holiday wish.

He treated everyone the same. Always with kindness.



My family tried for years to cut the list down.
My grandparents always resisted.

But this year Abee finally agreed to 200. Picking out the
card was stressful enough.

Just wait until it came to the envelopes,
but Abee just wants to be helpful.



The thank you card envelope mistakes sit on Opa's old dresser.



"Is it too cold for the plant in here? Did I water the plant?"

"Does the plant need more water, Amy?"

My mom decides it's time to move it to the communal plant room.

She can visit it.

Out of sight out of mind.





Abee and Kim, Glen Head, NY, 1995

"It feels like I am grieving two members of my family who are still living."

Amy

Voice-mails
Abee to my mom
Fall 2023

“

Hi Amy, it's mom. I'm on my cell phone, but I got a very disturbing message from Kim. I just wanted to talk to you. Okay, I'll take my phone with me on my walk.

”

“

Voice-mails
Abee to my mom
Fall 2024

Hi Amy, I am worried about Kim. I can't get ahold of her. I haven't been able to get ahold of her all week. I don't quite know what to do, but I'll talk to you after dinner. Okay?

”

Voice-mails
Abee to my mom
Aug. 2023

“

Hi Amy, happy birthday. Sorry to say this on your birthday, but I'm very worried about Kim, and I wonder if I could just ask you a couple questions. Okay, looking forward to seeing you later.

”



"You both are really big triggers for me."

Kim

"We are here to help you we are here to do it together it was hard for me to come too but we are here because we love you. Let's try to be positive and do it together."

Suz

"I need my family to do this with me. I need support. Tough love always isn't the way. I am going to need you guys to play a role in my recovery."

Kim

"Well it's obviously going to be a long period of time until we are going to be able to do that after these past few years."

Amy

Suz and Amy arrive at Kim's to go with her to tour a rehab facility. They want to make sure that she makes it to her appointment on time, but Kim hasn't seen Suz in months and is stressed over the change of plans. She didn't realize both her sisters were coming.

Nov. 2024



The Otesaga Resort Hotel



My mom & Kim



Abee holding Suz

Gratitude list

Walking dogs

feeding dogs

Dishes

family/parents

spending summers w/
in Coop.

Step 1. si

→

step 2. 1 a

1 a

No

1 a

si

step 3. 1 a

← 1 a

← 1 a

1 a

1 a

Step 4. acc

~~~~~

Λ



"Maybe it's time to say goodbye to Cooper," my mom says referring to Kim's dog. What Kim sees as her therapy dog my family sees as an excuse. We think he keeps her from going into a long-term program.

Nov. 2024









My mom and Suz take Cooper for  
a walk while Kim finishes her  
appointment at the rehab.

She didn't end up going here.

We felt the program lacked enough  
structure for her.











My mom sits on our dining room couch after a call with Abee.

Oct. 2024



My mom told me she was depressed today. I've known for awhile cuz she's been taking the brunt of my aunts relapse the past two years. She says she needs me this summer more than ever. I want to be there for her and I hope I can figure out how.

My journal entry from May 2022





My mom cuts my fingers nails before I drive back to Rochester for school.

Nov. 2024



"My beautiful daughter you've ruined your beautiful face."

This is what my mom has been telling me.

Just like she picks her scalp, I pick my face. Any pimple or scab that arises I rip off. It is definitely a coping mechanism. It calms me down but by the end there's blood dripping down my face. What 23-year-old girl wants to have pimples and scars? Definitely not me. I've tried everything. My mom and I even got bracelets to zap us when we raise our hands to pick. That didn't last long.







# FLAT RATE ENVELOPE

ONE RATE ★ ANY WEIGHT\*



PS000001000001/

EP14F July 2013

CD 105-05



A blood-stained envelope in Kim's apartment.



**UNITED STATES**  
**POSTAL SERVICE**









Kim appears at Niskayuna Town Court for when she fled from the cops last summer.

Nov. 2024









Vocemails  
Abee to my mom  
Nov. 2024

“

Hi Amy, this is mom concerning the dinner reservation for Thanksgiving. Just keep Kim in too. Okay, she's coming. Okay, thank you.

”

Thanksgiving dinner 2024 at the Clara Welch Thanksgiving Home where Abee lives. A seat is left open for Kim who did not end up making it.





My mom, Suz, and Kim, late 1980s





My mom, Abee, and Suz at the Clara Welch Thanksgiving Home after Thanksgiving dinner.



You need to protect your mom. Are you moving her to a different town?

Yes, from LI to Cooperstown.

He said you just ~~have~~ need to do it. And sell the house or houses. "Just do it." Just be done with it.

Notes from my mom's reading from a psychic medium channeling Opa a month after he passed.

July 2023



like  
24/7







My mom and Kim, 1974



There's some anger around you.

yes, my sister.

Your dad said you just need to take charge + make the decisions.

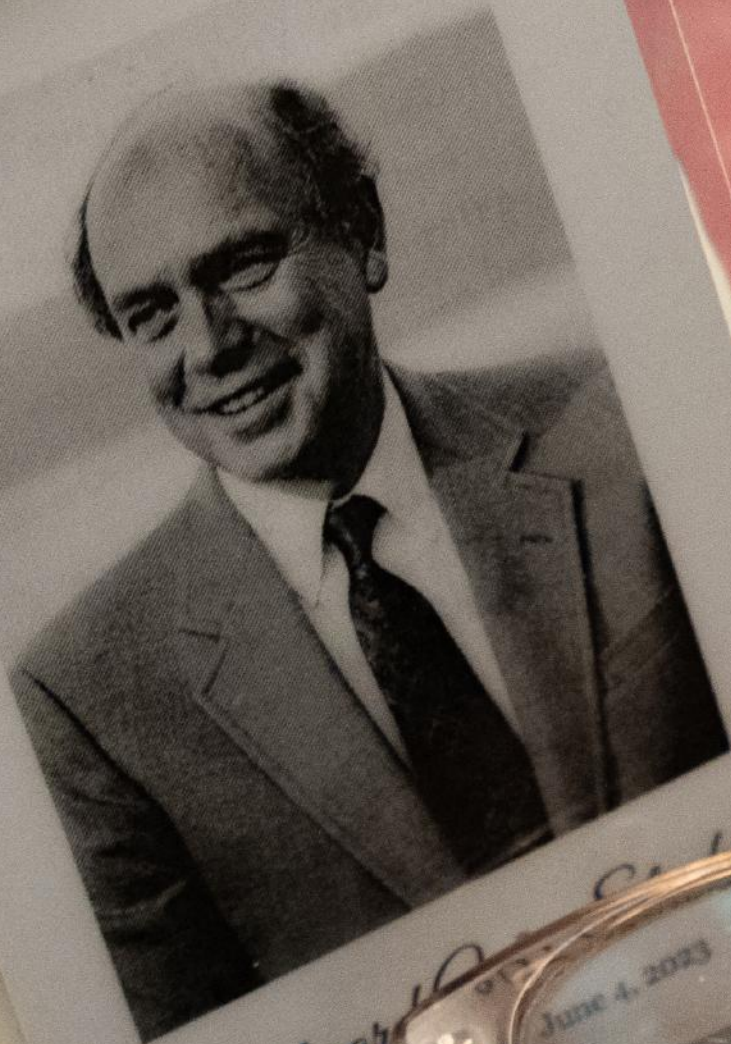
He led with his head. He made lots of decisions but he should have listened to his heart more.

You can use your head but you also use your heart. You need to continue. You are the only one who can do this.

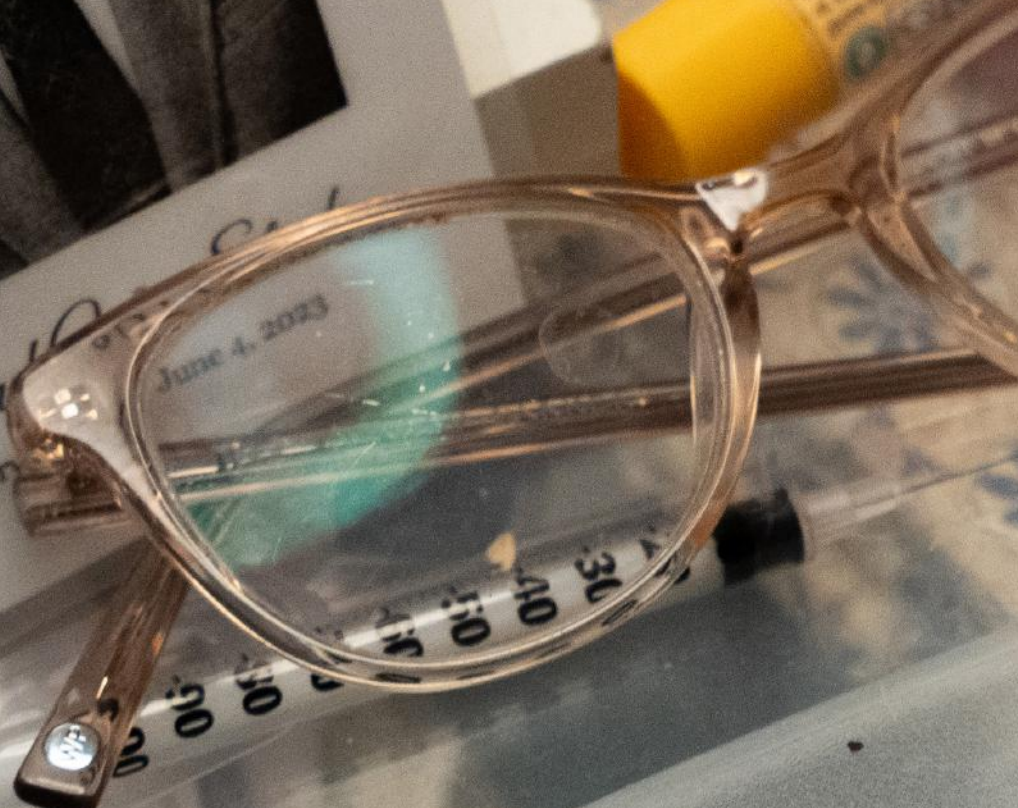
"The stuff" He said it's not what's important right now. Are you arguing about money or his estate?

Not yet. My sister is arguing but it is premature.

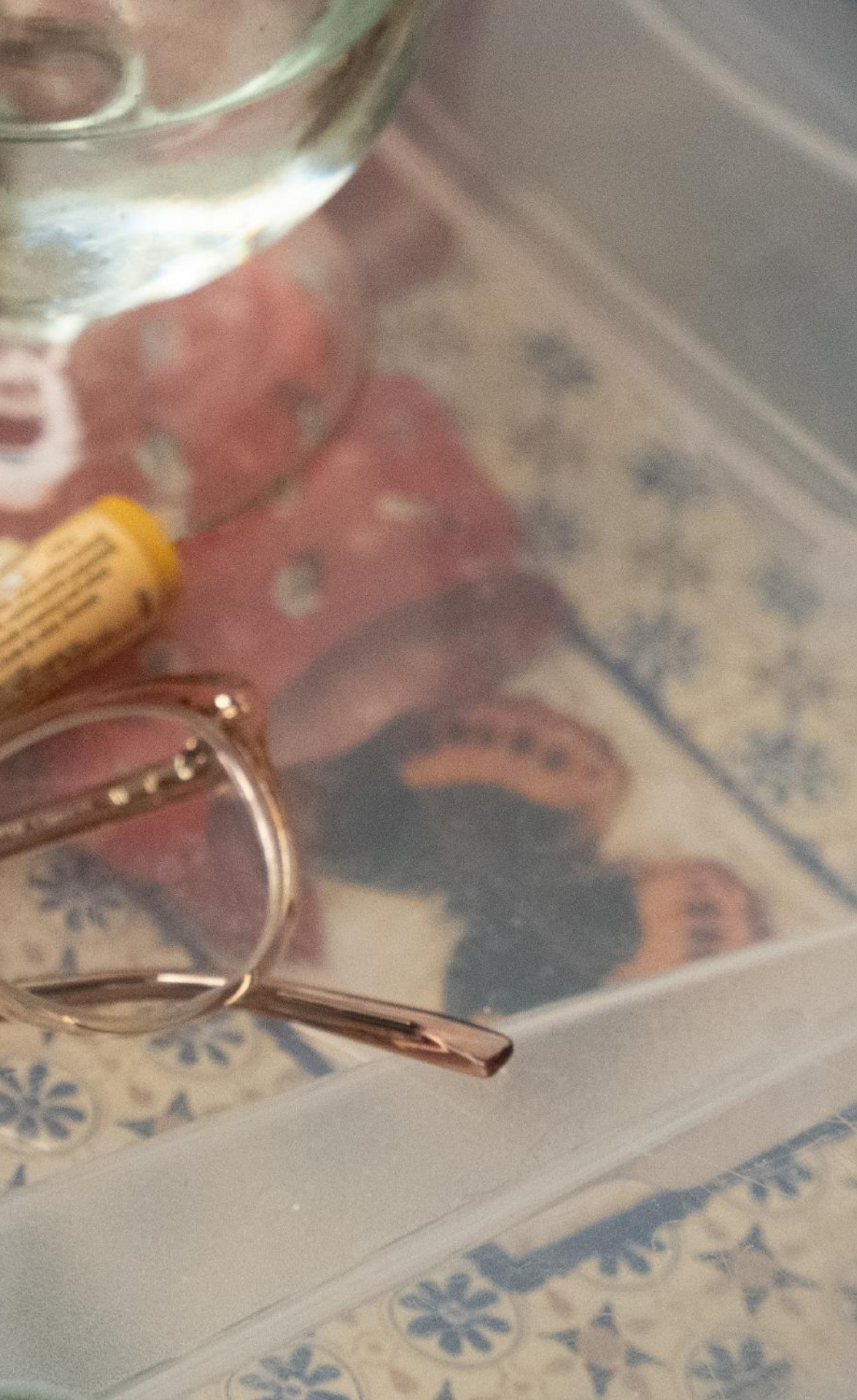




*Edward [unclear]*  
February 1912 - June 4, 2023







View of a plastic bin  
Kim uses as a bedside  
table the morning of  
her eviction.

Dec. 2024



Kim calls my mom after the movers finish clearing out her belongings on the day of her eviction to figure out what to do next.

She cried and yelled at my mom, begging for a hotel. Another apartment is off the table for now because Kim has sold the washer and dryer out of her last three. She needs rehab first.

Dec. 2024











I'm sick of Kim relapsing and tearing my family apart. She said that she uses drugs cuz of my mom and I. I'm so scared of my mom getting sick from the stress of it all.

My journal entry from June 2022



The moment we got back from dropping Abee off after Christmas dinner, my mom gets a text that Kim has totaled her car. This is her 7th car in about 5 years.

**Voicemail**  
**Kim to my mom**  
**Dec. 2024**

“

I need to go get my dog.  
He's sitting in the pound.  
You guys are not you're not  
taking care of me  
like you're supposed to be  
taking care of me. I need  
transportation. God damn it.

”





My mom around midnight.

Christmas 2024





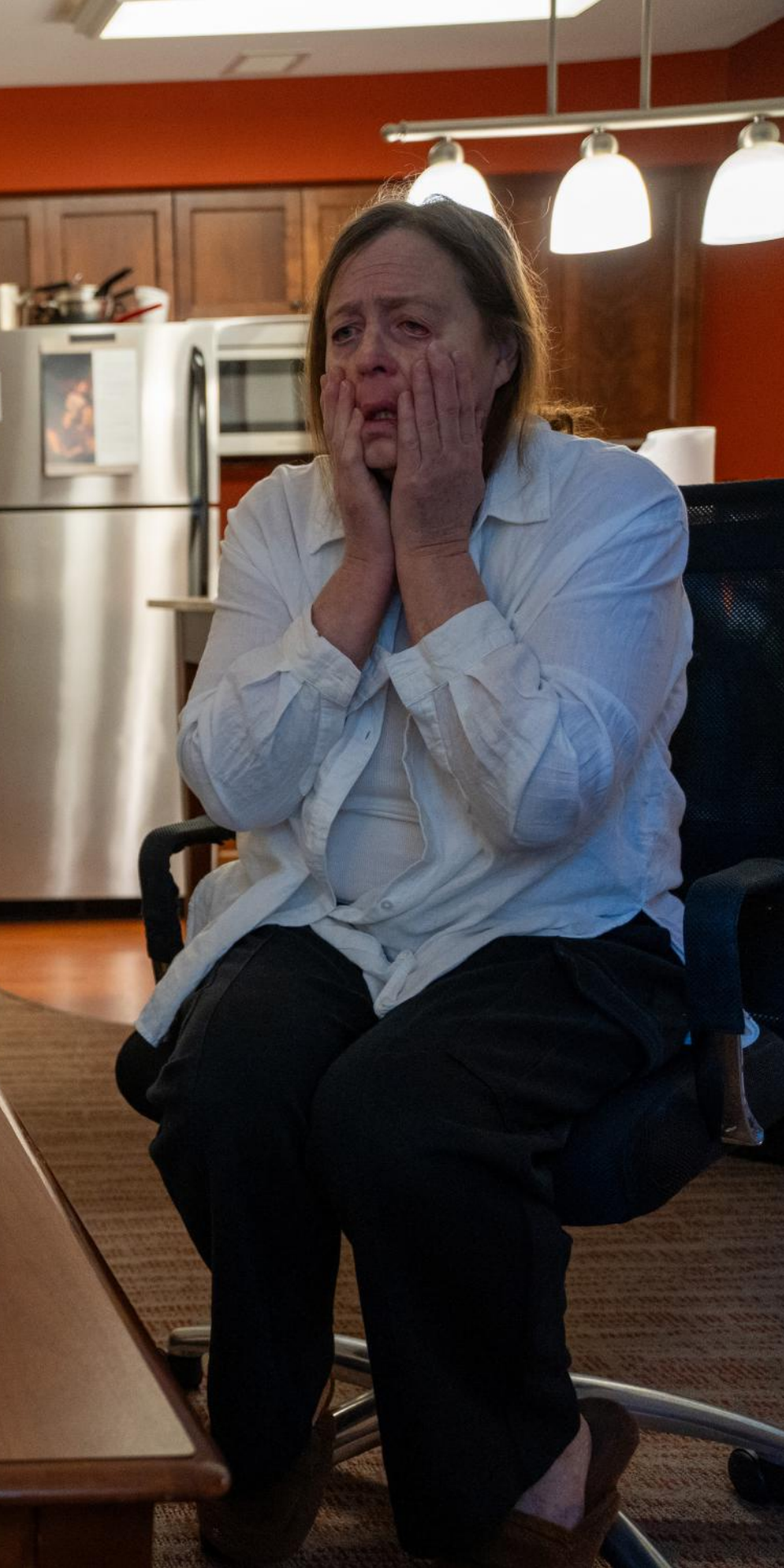












My mom and Suz went to talk to Kim in her hotel room after her car accident. They wanted to know what her plan was for entering treatment.

But they mostly talked about where Kim's money has gone.

Nothing much was figured out, as usual. It is a little more complicated with Kim's various pending charges.

Dec. 2024





The site of my accident right after I got pulled out of my car by retired firefighters in Kirkville, NY, halfway between Utica and Syracuse.

Feb. 2024



After wrapping up my last day of capstone fieldwork in Cooperstown I rolled my car on the thruway. I just completely lost control after hitting a patch black ice.

While working on this book I would commute back and forth between Rochester, where I go to school, and Cooperstown.

It's about a three hour drive.

I felt so bad when I had to call my mom, just another issue she has to deal with, but she was just happy I was alive.

It didn't phase me too much maybe because I see it happen so often with Kim. I was just glad I didn't hurt anyone else.





Abee at my mom's first photography class gallery opening, NYC, 1997



There are moments when I catch glimpses of them in myself.  
A sometimes restless energy, a need for control, the quiet  
rituals that soothe and unravel a person all at once.

The way we carry things without realizing the weight,  
the small things we do to distract ourselves from what's  
underneath.

It's easy to think I'm separate, that I've found a way out.  
But there are moments I wonder if it's all just a matter of  
time before I slip into the same patterns.

Because for some, I already have.









I'm not saying it's necessarily bad.  
Just scary. Especially as I begin to  
get treated for similar diagnoses. Am  
I just going to follow some of the  
same cycle, or all?

"I got ten good years left, until I  
start turning into Abee," my mom says.

Feb. 2025

Photo by Mackenzie Stevenson



"Look at the light going through your hair. Look at my beautiful granddaughter. Look at your beautiful hair in the light."

Abee





Picture captured by Amy.

Nov. 2024











