

A portrait of a woman with long, wavy, reddish-brown hair, wearing a light blue top. She is smiling slightly and looking directly at the camera. The background is a soft, out-of-focus outdoor setting, possibly a field or beach.

# A Pocket of Chamomile

By  
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## The Cracked Teacup

I didn't break in a blaze. I didn't shout, slam doors, or walk out of the school in some grand performance. I simply stopped. Quietly. Like the tide pulling back without warning. One moment I was in motion, grading, answering emails, taking calls, solving other people's problems, and then I wasn't.

The morning it happened, I stood at the edge of my bed, fully dressed, and couldn't move. The sunlight was filtering through the blinds in weak lines, illuminating the laundry I hadn't folded and the bag I'd meant to drop off at the thrift store three weeks ago. My hand was wrapped around my travel mug, lukewarm tea inside. Everything in me said go. Move. Function.

But my feet refused.

Instead, I sat on the floor. Right there in my work clothes. In the silence.

I didn't cry. Not yet.

I imagined the school hallways already humming without me, my name called at the attendance desk, emails stacking up. The thought didn't stir urgency. It stirred something like grief.

That afternoon, I packed a suitcase without a list. A few sweaters. A pair of jeans. A worn scarf. And the chamomile sachet Mari gave me years ago, tucked in the inner zipper pocket of my coat, forgotten until I slipped my hand in by accident. I booked a train ticket. I didn't tell anyone.

I came here.

The cottage was always more Mari's than anyone else's. My grandmother's house perched just a mile from the coast, with faded blue shutters and the smell of rosemary clinging to its walls. It was the place we came to rest, though I hadn't understood what that meant when I was young. Rest wasn't valued. Achievement was.

But I was out of achievements. And all I had left was a tangle of breath and exhaustion.

The train let me off three miles from town, and I walked the rest of the way, dragging my suitcase through gravel and wet leaves. The road turned familiar just before it reached the bluff. The sea hid behind the trees, but I could feel its nearness. The air changed. Salt and something older.

The key still hung on the sunflower hook behind the fence gate, just like it had twenty years ago. I pressed it into the lock and whispered, "Please still work," like the house might have forgotten me.

It hadn't.

The scent hit me first, lavender, faint cinnamon, a trace of ocean air that had slipped in through cracked windows or memory. The floors creaked in familiar places. The old rug in the hallway was still slightly crooked. And then the kitchen: sunlit, dusty, and waiting.

A teacup sat on the table.

Chipped on the rim. Blue daisies faded to a soft wash of suggestion. I touched it like you'd touch an artifact in a museum, gently, reverently. Inside it, folded like a secret, was a slip of paper. My name in Mari's hand.

*You made it, little one.*

*Breathe. Nothing needs to be fixed right away. Just steep. Just rest.*

*Mari*

That's when I cried. Not the kind of crying you do in parking lots or bathrooms or in five-minute breaks between classes. This was the kind that leaks from your bones. That arrives without permission. That undoes you.

The house breathed with me. Or maybe it had been holding its breath, too, finally allowing itself to exhale.

I didn't unpack right away. I couldn't. I kept my suitcase in the hallway like a symbol of transience, even though I knew I wasn't going anywhere. I walked the house slowly, my fingers trailing over surfaces like a blind woman memorizing the shape of safety.

Mari's coat still hung by the back door, that heavy wool one with the wooden buttons I used to think smelled like soup and lavender and earth. I put it on. It still fit. It still carried her.

In the kitchen cabinet, above the mismatched mugs and glass jars, I found a tin labeled *Chamomile, Sleep & Soften*. The label was in Mari's curling script. I opened it and inhaled. The scent made my throat catch. This was not the chalky, over-dried chamomile of grocery store sachets. This was honeyed, golden, sweet and wild. I didn't even need the kettle, just breathing it was enough to soften something inside me.

"You left me everything I didn't know I needed," I said aloud.

The silence answered. A warm, knowing kind.

I made the tea slowly. Rinsed the cup. Boiled the water. Steeped the flowers. Sat at the kitchen table and watched the steam curl up like breath remembering itself.

That evening, I walked down to the beach. The path hadn't changed much. Still worn smooth by decades of feet and paws and wheelbarrow tracks. The tide was low, and

the gulls barked above the water like gossiping old women. The air was thick with salt and seaweed, and each step on the path stirred up memories buried under years of forgetting.

I walked slowly, deliberately, the way Mari used to. She never rushed. Even when the tide was coming in. Even when dinner was waiting. She'd stop to show me the patterns the wind carved into the sand or point out where the wild thyme grew in cracks between stone. I could hear her voice now: *"The land tells stories if you're quiet enough to listen."*

The beach was wild and unpolished. Jagged rocks interrupted the shoreline like half-buried truths. Mussel shells, slick and dark as secrets, glittered in the retreating tide. The gulls were persistent. The wind insistent.

The sea always had a way of revealing and hiding at the same time. It mirrored grief. It mirrored me.

I picked up a piece of sea glass, cobalt blue, shaped like a tear. I slipped it into my coat pocket without thinking. The same pocket where the folded note from Mari now lived. A beginning.

"I'm here," I whispered into the wind. "I don't know why, but I'm here."

Something about saying it out loud made it real.

I thought about the last time I saw her.

Mari had been thinner than I'd ever seen her. But her eyes still sparkled when I walked in, and she'd said, "There you are. My bird come home to roost."

We drank tea in silence that day. I didn't know how to ask her if she was dying, and she didn't volunteer the answer. But her hands trembled when she reached for mine.

"You carry too much, Elena," she'd said. "But you don't have to keep it all."

I didn't understand what she meant until now.

Her funeral had been small. I came late. I just couldn't face the others. Couldn't stand the pity in their eyes or the way they spoke of her like she was already memory. I stood in the back of the chapel, barely breathing, and left before they lowered her into the ground. I never said goodbye. I told myself it didn't matter. That she wasn't really there.

But now, standing on her beach, I felt her everywhere.

That night, I brewed the tea again. I chose a mug with a tiny chip on the handle and steeped the chamomile long and slow. It tasted like warmth and memory. I wrapped

myself in Mari's shawl and sat by the fire that barely caught, watching shadows dance like the ghosts of thoughts I'd forgotten how to think.

I spoke again, this time softer. "What do I do now, Mari? What would you tell me if you were here?"

And somewhere inside the flicker and quiet, I heard it:

*You don't have to do anything yet.  
Not a single blessed thing.*

I believed her.

But belief doesn't erase ache. I sat there long after the tea had cooled, staring into the embers, feeling the weight of all the years I'd spent giving parts of myself away to people who didn't even know they were taking. My students. My colleagues. The endless committees. The parents with their sideways complaints and glittering expectations.

And now?

Now there was no one. No partner. No children. No classroom. No one expecting my arrival. No inbox waiting for me. No hands tugging at my sleeve.

Just this house. This teacup. This wind. This night.

I thought, *What am I, if I am not needed?*

The silence held me like cupped hands.

That was the first night I slept longer than two hours in months. And when I woke, the teacup was still there on the table, the note still tucked inside it like a promise.

I pressed my fingers to its rim and whispered, "Thank you."

The kettle hummed behind me. The sea waited beyond the window. The mist rolled in low and silver. And in the far-off cry of a gull, I imagined a reply.

And somewhere in the walls of this cottage, Mari was still here.  
Still tending. Still guiding.

Just beginning.