



"An essay is a short piece of prose in which the author reveals himself in relation to any subject under the sun."
J.B. Morton

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Leaves in the Fall

by WENDY FONTAINE on May 9, 2023 • 12:01 am

2 Comments

Leaves in the Fall

by Wendy Fontaine



Photo courtesy of Wendy Fontaine

My marriage ended a few weeks before Christmas, but my two-year-old daughter and I waited until spring to move into our own place. For a while, I hoped my husband might come back. He might leave his new girlfriend and her three children, return to us and our quiet suburban New Jersey home, which we'd recently purchased with savings and our first real loan from a bank. When he didn't come, our house became a prison of reminders that our lives were no longer going as planned, that things had gone way off the rails. So Angie and I moved home, to Maine, to the paper mill town where I grew up.

I found our apartment listed in the weekly newspaper: two bedrooms, heat included, six hundred bucks. The place needed attention. The windowsills held a layer of grime. The doorframes bore scars and scratches from years of people moving in and out. The wallpaper peeled at the corners

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Mark Liebenow on Walking West With a Mountain

and the carpet frayed, much like my nerves. Despite all that, there was something hopeful about the place.

Maybe it was the wide staircase in the foyer, which opened at the bottom like an old friend's embrace. Or perhaps it was the tin ceiling, adorned with a pattern of bells, vines and flowers so pretty and intricate it made me want to look up. And I desperately needed a reason to look up.

I paid the first month's rent using a retirement account left over from my time as a newspaper reporter, before I became a stay-at-home mom. If someone had told me then the money would be used to rent the bottom half of a house on the street where I'd gone to primary school, I wouldn't have believed them. But four months had passed since my husband, Matt, told me he was in love with someone else and wanted a divorce. Four months since I'd found her topless photo and flirtatious emails on the family computer, since I'd found credit card statements showing charges for flowers and gifts that weren't for me. After that, a person can believe just about anything.

The night before we left New Jersey, I drafted a one-page contract and asked Matt to sign it. The contract gave me permission to take Angie to Maine during our separation and to withdraw up to \$700 a month from our joint bank account, a figure that represented less than half of his monthly pay minus the mortgage but would help cover food, gas, diapers, and bills. I expected resistance, tears, maybe even second thoughts. I got none of that. He signed it, no questions asked. It felt like he wanted us gone, out of the picture. Angie and I left the next day.

We moved into our new place on a Thursday. It didn't take long, since we'd brought practically nothing – books and clothing, her favorite stuffed animals, but no furniture or household items. Taking fewer things made our situation seem less permanent, like a bad dream we'd all wake up from. We didn't need much because we wouldn't be there long. Matt would snap out of his stupor and see his mistake. Then we could all go home. We could pretend none of this had ever happened.

In the meantime, Angie and I did our best with what we had. I bought curtains at the dollar store and borrowed a fold-out kitchen table from my cousin. My father arrived with his air mattress, the one he saved for camping trips. Mom brought spare sheets, blankets and two pillows. My parents wanted to do more, but they both worked full time and lived in a small trailer with barely enough room for themselves. Instead of sheltering us, they brought what they could spare, like silverware and cooking pots, plus money from their savings account to help me retain a lawyer. On our first night in the apartment, Angie and I ate ham sandwiches on paper plates, then went to bed early.

At night, I lay awake thinking about Matt, about our life together. I remembered the night we met in a bar in Portland, Maine, where he was stationed in the Coast Guard and I had recently finished journalism school. I saw him playing pool with his friends in the corner, saw his dark hair and dark eyes, his soap-opera-star smile. He saw me drinking Rolling Rocks with my best friend, a tall blonde who normally got all the guys. This time, though, the cute guy in the bar wanted me. He sent a round of beers, then came over to say hi.

Mark Liebenow on Walking West With a Mountain
Debra Coleman on Ritual Bound
Su Cummings on Naming My Father
Elaine Palencia on Wandering Half Jew
Ken Meter on Strangely Wonderful
Sasha on Walking West With a Mountain
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Vivian on Naming My Father
Beth on Walking West With a Mountain
John Landgraf on Walking West With a Mountain
Gabi Coatsworth on Ritual Bound
Tim Bascom on Strangely Wonderful
Tim Bascom on World Without Animals
Jessica Fischer on Strangely Wonderful
Elaine Palencia on I Was the Buddha, the Bean, and the Frog
William on Naming My Father
Sarah on Naming My Father
KATHLEEN on Ritual Bound
Kathleen Melin on Strangely Wonderful
Kathleen Melin on Biology
Beth on Naming My Father
Burton Raabe on Walking West With a Mountain
Martha Short on Naming My Father
Vani on Naming My Father
J Hirschi on Spin It Again
Debra Coleman on Ritual Bound
Debra Coleman on Ritual Bound
Mark Liebenow on Leaves in the Fall
Pam M on Ritual Bound
Sandra Phенning on Is Your Kitty Like This?
Elaine Palencia on Right Here With E.T.
Ann on Right Here With E.T.
Ann on Maybe Tomorrow
Jillian Barnet on Strangely Wonderful
Denise on Right Here With E.T.
Susan on Right Here With E.T.
Vicki on Right Here With E.T.
Donna probasco on Right Here With E.T.
Jen Sage-Robison on Ritual Bound
Barry T Nagel on The Messenger
Debra Coleman on Ritual Bound
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Debra Coleman on Ritual Bound
Denise Milanese on Ritual Bound
Helen on Is Your Kitty Like This?
Patty Dann on Ritual Bound
Kathryn on Ritual Bound
Carol D. on Ritual Bound

I remembered our wedding day at a justice of the peace's house, when I dropped the ring and watched nervously as it rolled across the floor toward a heating vent. Matt grabbed it before it fell through, gone forever.

I remembered bike rides through Acadia National Park, Red Sox games on the couch, military reassignments up and down the East Coast. I remembered the day we found out we were having a baby, when we marveled at two pink lines on the home pregnancy test, then called everyone in the family to share our news. We'd been married eight years by then, and relatives wondered when – or if – we'd ever start a family. We'd spent those years focused on our jobs, working our way up into bigger and better positions, knowing that one day we'd be ready for a child. After we both hit our 30s, our one day came. I quit reporting and let pregnancy become my new occupation. Instead of writing articles, I wrote letters to our unborn child. I did yoga, rubbed lavender oil onto my belly and sang songs, just in case she could feel or hear me.

Mostly, though, I thought about the night she was born. With every room in the birthing ward occupied, nurses led us to a storage closet that happened to have an extra bed. My contractions slowed, and we both expected the midwife to send us home. But when she attached a fetal monitor to my throbbing midsection and learned our baby was lying on her umbilical cord, we knew we were there to stay. With each contraction, Angie's heart rate dropped precariously low. She wasn't getting enough oxygen.

In those moments, I was certain Angie was going to die. This baby that I had carried and sung to for nearly ten months was going to die, leaving nothing but an empty space. I prayed that if she died, I would die too. I wondered how Matt would live without us.

With my body in a never-ending clench, I focused on his warm eyes and soft voice.

"You can do this," he said, stroking my sweaty forehead. "I know you can."

As I labored, nurses came and went from the storage closet, retrieving bedpans and rolls of toilet paper. Eventually, the doctor used a suction cup to guide Angie through the birth canal. She arrived red-faced and screaming but otherwise healthy. Matt and I looked down at our daughter's scrunched face, awestruck by the sudden responsibility of her.

I'm going to take care of you. Those were my first words to my daughter.

I never went back to my job at the paper. Instead, I made Angie's baby food and sewed a pink quilt for her crib. I took her to play dates and story time at the library. I wrote more letters about how we were spending our days and what our future would bring. I promised to teach her how to read and write her name. I promised to show her the world. But few things in life work out the way you expect them to. Certainly not birthing a baby. Not motherhood, and sometimes not even a marriage.

The day after we moved into our place, the sky hung low and gray, like marble. Most of the snow had melted by then, revealing patches of grass and tangled autumn leaves previously concealed during the long, lonely months of

winter. Leaves don't decay beneath all that snowpack. The frost tends to preserve them. In the spring they reappear as fragile, lacy versions of the hearty foliage they used to be.

Our front yard held all the signs of change. Lime-green buds on tree branches. Robins with sharp, sweet songs. The first determined daffodil pushing up through thawing ground. But I barely noticed any of it. My mind swirled through the past, trying to make sense of things, trying to figure out how to manage on our own. I needed a plan. A plan I didn't know how to make.

We started with the little things. Angie and I hung our clothes in the closet. We went to yard sales to buy cups and dishes, a few more toys. We cleaned the front porch, clearing away leaves that had piled there over the winter. I didn't own a rake, so I used the broom from our kitchen. She helped in that special way toddlers love to help: by throwing her body into the middle of the leaf pile and rolling around like a puppy trying to scratch an itch.

"Watch this, Mama," she said, tossing flecks of brown and orange into the air. "It's raining leaves."

The shape of her mouth told me she was laughing, but the sound got swallowed up by tractor-trailer trucks passing our house toward the center of town. Livermore Falls was a bathroom break on your way to someplace else. A pitstop for gas and soda. Eighteen years since I'd left and the place still looked the same. Several storefronts stood empty. Streets crumbled in all the usual places. The same traditions held firm—high school football on Friday nights, boiled dinners on Sunday afternoons, parades with Girl Scouts and fire trucks to mark every holiday, from Fourth of July to Christmas Eve.

I never expected to come back to this town, but my whole family lived there. It seemed like the safest place for us. After Angie and I left New Jersey, I sat her on my lap and told her we wouldn't be living with Daddy anymore. "We live here now," I said. "Just you and me."

She looked back with wide eyes and said, "Okay, Mama." Then she asked for a snack. Since her father often spent weeks away from home, she probably assumed his absence was just another work trip. I never told her otherwise. I didn't know myself what was happening. How could I explain it to her?

Most nights, they talked on the phone. Either he'd call from his girlfriend's house to say good night to her, or we'd call him if she asked me to. She prattled about her day, about the book she'd found at the library or whatever animal she was pretending to be.

"When are you gonna come visit me?" she asked.

"As soon as I can, hunny bunny," he answered. Sometimes I held the phone up to my ear to listen to him and his new family, eating dinner or watching television, laughter in the background. I felt like a ghost. I told myself he'd get tired of playing house eventually. Then he'd come back to us. He had to. The alternative was too much to bear.

Livermore Falls had one traffic light, two ice cream shops, and three take-out pizzerias. In the center, a turret clock chimed the hour. On the north end, one paper mill stood dormant, shuttered after the world began to go digital. Beyond that, another mill endured, churning smoke and the scent of rotten eggs into the air. Jobs were few and far between, mostly part time and mostly minimum wage.

A few days after renting our apartment, I managed to snag one of those jobs and was thankful to have it. With our divorce petition slowly winding its way through Family Court, money was tight. Finding work meant Angie and I could stay in our apartment another month, maybe longer, though I tried not to look too far ahead. I applied for food stamps and assistance from WIC, a nutrition program for families with children under the age of five. I enrolled Angie in daycare for \$90 a week – a bargain by national standards.

My new job put me in the local supermarket, the same place I'd worked back in high school. Those days, I'd bagged groceries on nights when I didn't have field hockey or basketball practice. Now I was a 35-year-old technician in the store's pharmacy, filling prescriptions for \$8.15 an hour.

It rained on my first day, which was also Angie's first day of daycare. The weather let up just long enough for me to take her picture in the driveway. "Smile!" I said. But she didn't, and neither did I.

She looked big in her pink fleece jacket and her sparkly Hannah Montana backpack, which we'd picked out the day before at Wal-Mart. She and I had decided to call it school instead of daycare. That way, we both felt better about it. For her, it sounded exciting and grown up. For me, it sounded more purposeful, like a choice we were making instead of the cross we were bearing.

When I dropped her off that day, we said goodbye at the daycare center door.

"Mama loves you," I whispered into her ear. She nodded and walked with her teacher, Lorraine, over to the carpet, where children took turns with giant, colored blocks and puzzles with chunky shapes. She did not look back at me and I did not look back at her, but when I got outside, I leaned against the door and cried. I let the rain soak me. I let it punish me for leaving her behind.

At the pharmacy, I wore a white smock that made me look more knowledgeable about prescription drugs than I actually was. I couldn't fill prescriptions right away. First, I had to wait for my technician's license to come in the mail. Meanwhile, I stocked shelves. I helped old ladies find their calcium supplements and stool softeners. When my license finally arrived, the pharmacist let me stand behind his workbench, where I counted tablets and bottled them into amber vials. Anti-depressants. Thyroid medications. Vicodin, Vicodin, Vicodin.

Mostly, though, I watched the clock, watched every minute tick by and wondered what Angie was doing. Ten o'clock – was she playing with toys? Eleven o'clock – was she getting ready for lunch? Twelve o'clock – was she settling down for a nap? Each afternoon felt like a month. Lorraine was kind and grandmotherly, and I knew she would take great care of my baby. Yet somehow, dropping Angie off at daycare felt like leaving her on the side of the highway. I am abandoning my daughter, I thought, just as I have been abandoned.

I counted pills by fives and tens, hoping Matt would eventually come for us. That one day I'd look up and see his brown eyes searching for mine. Then this nightmare would finally end. Our lives would go back to normal. I knew I could forgive him anything, even this. We could do marriage counseling, therapy. But the only eyes I saw belonged to old men waiting for their Lipitor.

During breaks, I went into the ladies' room, locked myself in a stall and cried some more. I cried because I wanted to be home with my daughter. Because I was sad and scared and missed my husband. Because the world felt wrong without him. Just beyond the ladies' room, coworkers enjoyed their egg salad sandwiches and a few minutes of *The Young and the Restless* on the break room TV. And I blubbered, like a dam letting go and flooding

the town. I wanted to jump in and swim away.

Between those crying jags came glimpses of something startling, something hard to admit. While Matt's affair had taken me by surprise, it probably shouldn't have. In the years right before and after our daughter was born, he and I had stopped having sex almost entirely. We didn't go on trips or date nights or do any of the things we'd done before. We told ourselves it was because we were busy. We were tired. We had a new baby to care for, a baby who took all our time and energy. But now it seemed clear: We'd grown apart, inch by inch, day by day, until it was too late. We'd both given up. I sought solace in caring for our daughter. He'd found it in the arms of another woman. That realization didn't justify his affair. It didn't make what he'd done all right. But at least I understood.

Angie's calls with her father continued. Every few months, he drove to Maine to get her, then drove back to his girlfriend's house for two or three days. I let her go, thinking I had to. How else would she see her father? For the few days she was gone, I felt hollow, dead, a shell of a human being. I worked and cleaned and slept on the couch instead of our air mattress. When she came back, she talked about Daddy's new friend, how pretty she was, how nice. I wanted to throw up.

Now and then, notices of divorce hearings arrived in the mail. I swapped my shift and drove an hour east to Family Court. My lawyer met me there, ready for a fight I wasn't entirely willing to wage on my own. She knew what to ask for, what I would need to take care of Angie for the next fifteen years, while I just wanted the whole thing to disappear – the divorce, the apartment, the long nights, and the uncertain days ahead. At any point I would have reconciled with Matt if he'd asked, if he'd shown even a hint of regret. I wanted to forgive him and forgive myself too. I wanted to keep this little family of ours together. But he never showed up at those divorce hearings. Not for mediation or custody or the final dissolution of our union. In the end, the judge granted me full custody, full parental rights, child support, and even alimony. Matt got the house in New Jersey, which was fine. I didn't want it.

On the ride home from that final court hearing, I felt no pleasure. No relief. I'd won, if you could call it that. But shame and guilt overwhelmed me. Matt and I had failed at something important. Angie would never again have both parents under the same roof. She'd see her father only sporadically, a few times a year, whenever he was willing or able to take time off. I felt sorry for him, for all he'd lost and all he would miss. For the things he'd never come to know about his daughter.

A few miles from town, I stopped my car on Kents Hill, a slope overlooking tree-covered mountains, farming fields, and the lake where my father took me fishing as a kid. Divorce was never something I wanted. But now, away from the drama of the courtroom and the bustle of the pharmacy, I knew it was something I needed. Matt had become a different person – someone I could no longer trust or depend on. If he couldn't show up for court, he'd never be able to show up for us in other ways, ways that mattered. Angie and I had been through a lot, with much left to endure. Her first day of kindergarten. First day of junior high. Holidays, homework, endless parenting decisions. I stood at the peak of everything, still ready to show her the world. The past, the pain – it would soon begin to fall away. Our lives would never be the way they once were. Or the way I'd imagined them. They'd be something else, a new kind of beautiful.

When it was time to go back to work, I took my place behind the pharmacy counter, bottling purple Premarin, blue Viagra, green Prozac. As the weeks wore on, I cried less and less, until one day I did not cry at all. I found myself laughing with coworkers behind the counter, joking about which pills smelled like ice cream and which smelled like baby shit. I flirted with the assistant manager of the grocery store, who was ten years younger than me. And I helped people. I packed their shingles vaccinations on ice to take to their physicians. I mixed cherry flavoring into cough syrup for sick children. I warned customers not to drink milk with their antibiotics or eat grapefruit with their cholesterol meds.

Angie and I went to therapy on our own, thanks to a sliding scale fee that made it affordable. She renamed all her stuffed animals Matty, which the therapist described as a perfectly acceptable coping mechanism for her father's absence. At some point, he and his girlfriend broke up. I didn't ask why. It wasn't my business anymore.

After every shift, I picked Angie up at daycare and kissed her whole face. Sometimes she was happy to see me, and sometimes she wanted to keep playing with her new friends. We went home to an empty house, no one there to greet us or ask how our day went. We took long afternoon strolls through the neighborhood, collecting rocks and sticks and whatever else caught our eye. We baked cookies, played music, and danced around that fold-out kitchen table. I showed her how to snip the ends off green beans for dinner, and she showed me how to sing "Little Bunny Foo Foo" before bed.

Every chance we got, we went outside to gather fallen leaves, and I finally began to notice the changes all around us. A shifting wind, an early sunset. An empty bird nest on the front porch rafter. Those fluctuations became a comfort, a reminder: Leaves are at their prettiest, their most brilliant, when they are dying.

As Angie played on the porch, I filled my arms with crumpled foliage and let it fall all around her. She giggled and grasped at each tender stem. I scooped and scooped until leaves heaped to her belly, until she laughed harder and louder than any of the trucks passing us by.

Editor's Note, 7/10/2023: This work was recently discussed in a videocast that includes the author. That discussion can be found [here](#).

2 comments



WENDY says:
Oct 11, 2023

Thank you, Mark!

Reply



MARK LIEBENOW says:
May 11, 2023

This is a moving, powerful, and complete essay, moving from loss, through dwindling hope, to starting over again. It's one of her best!

Reply

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