**The Gate Opens**

My friend texted just minutes before the scheduled pick-up time. She couldn’t go. I’d have to drive myself. Instantly my new foil, fear, sprang to life. The chatter in my head was loud and clear above my racing heart: *You don’t have to go. It’s dark. You’ll get lost. Just stay home.*

Stuck in place, I stared outside at my car. Ever since my husband died, fear has become an uninvited passenger. I knew grief had layers—like sedimentary rock, each one pressing down on the next. I expected sadness, even disorientation. But I didn’t expect fear, at least not like this. A layer so heavy it can stop me cold.

Fear crept in where confidence used to live. The safety of being a couple is invisible—until a “we” becomes an “I.” Fear of driving. Fear of the unknown. Fear of doing anything alone. These had become part of my daily walk in the aftermath of losing my life partner. We bereaved must nurture our courage to face our fears lest we risk getting stuck. So, one of my goals is to say “yes” to invitations, to push myself to do things even when I’m scared.

I am going. I’ll meet my friends at a venue offering wine and a painting lesson, a chance to sip, socialize, and create. I grab my keys, walk out the door, and get into the car. Fingers shaking, I plug the address into the GPS and set the plan in motion: driving downtown, alone, at night, despite my notorious talent for getting lost due to my nonexistent internal compass.

I keep telling myself my confidence as a solo operator will return. Before my husband became our default driver and navigator, I put a positive spin on my hopeless sense of direction. Back in the day, I’d fill up the gas tank, pile my two preschool sons in the car, and announce, "We're going on an adventure!” I didn’t worry about getting lost back then.

It's time to work on my atrophied courage muscle. Time to go on an adventure. Even if I’m the only one in the car.

I drive toward the venue, nerves buzzing but resolve intact.

I park downtown in a city garage, but as I walk the block, the address doesn’t match. My pulse quickens. In a flash, that nagging voice resurfaces to wreak havoc: *I knew I shouldn’t have come tonight! I should text them, admit I’m lost, and go home.*

Or, I could get back in my car and drive five blocks to the correct address.

As I struggle between retreat versus resolve, darkness descends, and a new dilemma arises: I can’t re-enter the garage. Inexplicably, it’s impenetrable. After circling the massive city block, anxiety rising at each locked entrance, I come to stop under a corner streetlight, feeling lost, marooned, on the verge of falling apart. My phone rings. Tears well up as I explain why I’m late. In a warm, steady voice, my friend suggests we walk toward each other. She reassures me they'll help me get back into the garage later.

Those of us in the midst of grief need friends like these who won’t dismiss our fears. Those who will quietly lend us their strength until we remember our own.

Together we sip our wine, swirl colors across our canvases, and laugh at our clumsy masterpieces. The warmth of the shared fun, food, and friendship steadies me.

Later, back at the garage, my friend points toward the car entry area and says, “Hey, what’s that?” Eureka—it’s the pay station. With the paid ticket stub in hand, we find a locked door that swings open after I insert the ticket.

"I've got this now," I say.

Alone again, I steel my nerves and step into the cavernous, vacant parking garage. My body switches on high alert, like I’ve walked into a *Lord of the Rings* troll cave. It’s dark and ominously silent until motion-sensor lights flicker on, then off, as I pass.

I push down my creeping unease while pacing the winding stretch of Level B in search of my car. Time drags. Fear sprouts. My nerves stretch taut as a tightrope. If my car isn’t around this next bend, I think I might truly panic.

It is. And I don’t.

I hurl myself into the driver's seat and slam the door lock like I’m activating a force field. Relief washes over me. I finally breathe.

I drive slowly in circles, searching for the exit—at one point even heading the wrong way toward an entrance. Finally, I spot the exit. I slide the paid ticket stub into the machine. It spits it back out. I flip it over and try again. Spit out. I try the original entry ticket. Rejected.

My body freezes. My mind races. *Am I really going to be trapped overnight in this urban cave?* My emotions swell like an overinflated balloon about to pop.

Instead, I pause. . . close my eyes. . . breathe deeply. . . let the mental chatter go.

From the stillness, I hear: *Try again.*

I insert the ticket.

The gate lifts, my spirit soaring with it.

And just like that, it’s over. I did it. I’m free.

Looking back, I'm both amazed and amused by what that night offered—a high-stakes showdown between me and my inner doomsayer, a shimmering opportunity to practice courage.

Maybe the surges in my chest weren't fear at all, but the sparks of anticipation. Maybe my body wasn’t trying to stop me; it was preparing me for the unknown. It ended up being an adventure after all.

Rebuilding confidence is like that winding search for the garage exit. It's slow, takes persistence, and the willingness to keep moving. Wrong turns don’t mean failure. They’re just part of finding the way.

And I know now how to slay that doomsayer: take the pause, breathe, reboot.

The real payoff ? When the gate finally opens—literal or not—it feels like flight.

Launched.

No telling where I’ll go next.