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Some things, like the smell of freshly cut grass, the distant rumble of a four-wheeler, or the steady beat of hooves on the ground, unexpectedly take me back to my younger years after losing my grandma and two close family members. Like a soft breeze, every memory takes me back to Erwinville, the peaceful rural town where my inner child still resides.

I didn't grow up in a crowded neighborhood or in a noisy home. Rather, I was raised in the peace and quiet of country life under my grandmother's roof. My days were never in a hurry. Time passed at a pace that allowed a child to observe every detail, such as how the sun faded into the fields every evening or how the dirt roads curled like hidden trails that were only available to those of us who lived there. Now when I think about it, I smile in a way that I didn't always let myself. Looking back is a necessary part of healing, and I've been attempting to do just that lately.

The outdoors was my playground when I was little. If I wasn't riding horses, I would be speeding down the trails on a four-wheeler, laughing excessively as the wind slapped my face. The handlebars between my fingers are still visible, dusty from the dirt and warm from the sun. Freedom, excitement, and joy were all woven into every turn as my family and I spent our

weekends seeking that feeling. Not often was there a dull moment. I didn't even know what wholeness was, but I felt whole out there in the open.

Living with my grandmother made everything feel softer for me as the first grandchild and niece. She moved through life with quiet wisdom, stabilizing me in ways I didn't realize until much later. Her home smelled like safety itself, a blend of cornbread and laundry detergent. She never rushed me or attempted to shape me into someone I wasn't. She was, in many respects, the first to teach me the meaning of love without ever having to use the word.

As I search for my inner kid and cling to the memories of TJ and Black, the close family members I lost way too soon, I now willfully go back to those times. I picture myself barefoot in the yard, the cold morning grass between my toes. I see the old fences, the rusting gates, and the huge pastures that used to seem unending. I hear my own young self-laughing loudly and carelessly. These memories serve as a reminder that healing is about embracing the aspects of the past—people like my grandmother, TJ, and Black—that shaped, protected, and supported me rather than trying to change the past.

Healing can often seem like getting back into the saddle of a horse I haven't ridden in months: familiar but soft, steady but emotional. I'm discovering that the youngster I was then is still waiting to be seen someplace inside of me. And every memory—every ride, every weekend spent with family, every peaceful morning spent at my grandmother's house—brings me one step closer to realizing who I am now.

Erwinville reminds me of the version of myself that found adventure in even the tiniest parts of the world, smiled freely, and trusted others. That kid is still here. And I'm learning how to return them home, piece by piece, memory by memory.

