

# the basement

in which i reach out to my past selves for comment

*The following essay contains spoilers for The Sisters of [Dorley](#).*

*It contains references to sexual harassment.*

*It briefly discusses Chapter 24: Everything Must Go, which in itself contains references to suicidal ideation, gender dysphoria, and eating disorders.*

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**22 February 2012**  
**Wednesday**

36 ██████████ Street has a non-descript, marble-lined facade like any other in the city centre; its brown stone unremarkable in a neighbourhood that hosts the city's management university and school of the arts. Sitting next to a line of bars and cafes — and the Elections Department — the building has got to be a decade old, turn-of-the-century office space.

Its second floor contains an office for a company that runs Large Group Awareness Training (LGAT). Participants go through four programmes, entitled Basic, Advanced, Leadership and Mastery — and auxiliary life coaching programmes, all in a 7,000 square foot floor.

It's not a front for a cult, but it might as well be, as the boy would learn.

He has been rushing from the station, travelling from his home in the northwest of the city, an hour-long journey. He wouldn't be conscripted for another week, not yet, but he'd accrued a bit of a tan; dressed in a soft cotton shirt and cargo pants, he'd taken strides into the lift and pressed 2.

On the second floor, his sponsor had been waiting for him; a small woman, with a bit of an overbite, young, but old enough for the boy to look up to.

LGATs claim to increase self-awareness and bring about desirable transformations in the personal lives of individuals who take part. They may usually involve several hundred people at a time, and trainings usually last from a few hours to a few days. In the city, LGATs are expensive — trainers usually claim that the financial barrier exists purely to make the program worthwhile, and compare them to similar life coaching programmes for large multinationals in the city.

The boy is here because he doesn't understand himself. Months earlier, after his GCE 'A' Levels, he'd joined up with some new friends to train as a facilitator for a local company offering learning journeys to school-age children.

There, he'd felt a fundamental lack, one he'd always felt in high school, one that he'd always been unable to understand.

He carried a strong hate towards himself. Not strong enough to hurt himself — besides, how could he, given that he lived with three other sisters and had nowhere to hide — but it was still there, simmering. He wasn't very present, most of the time; once, leading a gaggle of secondary school students around a block of public housing, he'd stopped to pet a cat, and completely forgotten what he was supposed to say.

Puberty wasn't great for him, either. It didn't ravage him, turn him into something he didn't want to be. But he was never a big strong boy; scrawny, short, with a tinny voice that never broke, he'd been constantly put through hell in high school. Called names. Dragged to the toilet, to be splashed with water, laughing with his bullies, and then returning to his seat in the climate-controlled classroom, freezing. Left alone.

He remembers a girl crying after he found the water balloons that she'd planned on throwing at him. How hilarious.

Despite that, he wasn't a saint. He'd get onto fights online, call people names. Write elaborate, mean, cruel caricatures of his classmates. He'd try to fight back, even though countless teachers and his mother told him not to.

He never felt like himself. He'd lose hours of time, maybe, when something triggered him; once he'd been accused of walking into the girls' toilet despite never having any recollection of doing so.

And he was so jealous of the girls. Sure, being one would be hell in his high school; he sat next to two girls in class in the front row, who were constantly pushed away from the other girls in his class, and saw first-hand the bullying they experienced. But he longed to be pretty, to be happy. He mistook some of the jealousy he felt for love, and wrote elaborate love letters, one, he winces as he recalls this, embarrassingly intercepted and photocopied and posted on the walls — those were the most mortifying days of his life.

In junior college, on a whim and eager for a fresh start, he ran for student council. He was disruptive in class; in a way that suggested that he lacked a single modicum of self-awareness.

But he wasn't entirely stupid — he excelled at the English language, the colonial tongue that he had to learn since he was a kid, that his parents encouraged him to be good at, and he really loved Chemistry, because he'd been clinging on to his Chemistry teacher in high school. She was an island in a sea of abuse from his classmates, and he resolved to impress her. A thing he did; latch on to authority figures. A habit he couldn't drop.

LGATs, too, aren't entirely alien to him. Being a graduate at a tuition center that taught General Paper essays to 17 and 18 year olds, he'd joined a 'centering' session. To his tutor and mentor he wrote:

I feel that I really do need help because I guess it's the main thing that's impeding me from being amiably sociable due to a lack of inner emotion. I think I seem fake because of this and hence I can't really communicate clearly this way.

It's why he's here at this non-descript building, really, because he thought there was something wrong about himself.

He resolved, like his father always asked him to, to try to fix it. He resolved, like his facilitator trainer and his new friends asked him to, to never be a victim again.

He resolved to be whole.

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The Sisters of Dorley is a 45-chapter original story and ongoing series by trans author Alyson Greaves, published in three books (with an upcoming fourth book in the works). A subversion of the forced feminisation genre, the story explores a secret underground programme where young boys — often unruly, often misogynistic — are reformed through their unusual (and some would argue cruel) transformation into women.

It follows a closeted young trans woman who attempts to infiltrate the programme, Stef Riley; her childhood friend vanished under Dorley Hall when he enrolled into college, and so did a number of other boys — most of them students at the Royal College of Saint Almsworth in the United Kingdom.

In it, Stef discovers the extent of the programme — the boys it attempts to reform, the women (once 'men') who now run it, and the extent in which the programme is kept secret.

Under the basement of Dorley Hall, sponsors make young men confront the error of their ways and understand that what they did were wrong, and forcibly ejects them from the positions they occupy as often privileged, often cis het men as part of its reform. They remake these young men, break them down, and rebuild them into something new. Someone new.

For Stef, transition out there is impossible — the UK NHS waitlists are years long, private trans healthcare is under attack by the UK public and expensive, and she risks violence everywhere she goes — so she decides to be an accomplice of the programme itself, to be protected, to be safe, to be new.

Greaves' story is full of vivid descriptions of dysphoria; through the eyes of the (often unrealised) trans women and cis men that end up in the programme, the reader is treated to a colourful and near-complete understanding of what dysphoria actually *feels* like, in a subversion of the often erotic descriptions that come from the forced feminisation genre. It is also an in-depth exploration of transness as a whole, of the positions trans women occupy in a stratified and changing British society.

I'm irresistibly drawn to it. I wasn't a bad boy, no, but I knew that I've hurt people before, from the positions that I used to occupy as a boy. Even when I didn't understand myself as a boy, when I hated being a boy, I did accept some of its benefits: being doted on by my grandmother, having more resources and money poured into my education, all because I occupied that position, of manhood and all that came with it.

There's a running theme of reconciliation with a past, with the trauma that trans women often experience. Of reconciliation between the child that was hurt, the teenager that chose to hurt, and the adult that chooses to grow out of that hurt. Of finding the child you used to be, and holding them close, and telling them that it's all going to be okay.

It is a difficult and yet riveting read, especially for people who'd experienced transmisogyny and dysphoria; in no other story (so far) has this experience been so completely encapsulated. The space where the Basic LGAT programme is held — as with its Advanced and Leadership LGAT — has very little windows, as with 36 [REDACTED] Street itself; all the windows are in its administrative offices, and thus the Basic programme is held in a seminar room, oblong, with three doors.

Outside, a wall with graduates' pictures greets visitors; each successful intake gracing each photo frame. Hundreds of faces, hundreds of success stories.

There's a reason why the seminar room looks like a basement, however: the lights are dimmed at crucial moments, where you're supposed to close your eyes and imagine a thing you could have done differently, or internalise that will to take control of your life, or reflect upon an understanding that your experiences are a result of your actions (the trainers helpfully explain that this doesn't apply if you were, say, raped).

It's these moments where the boy finds some calm. It is true that most of his experiences were a result of his actions: his inability to make quality connections in junior college a result of perceived ambition; his inability to fight back a result of his own weakness; his inability to function socially amongst a group of 16-17 year olds. Being bullied was a story he told himself, maybe, to make him look good.

Wasn't he sort of annoying? With that tinny voice, with that sensitive heart. It didn't take much to overwhelm him. Too much noise. Too much isolation. Not enough validation. Not enough kindness.

He shuts his eyes, listens to the hum of the air-conditioning and the soft music, and ponders.

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**10 August 2025**  
**Sunday**

The girl is frantically searching.

She knows that long ago, the boy that would become her yanked out huge portions of memory of that time. Yet another splotch of grey deadwood in what is now healthy forest, burnt to a crisp long ago, with nothing there left to grow.

Why was it key to remember?

She doesn't really grasp the utility of it all, not really, but the bits and pieces of who he was carried a certain allure to it, like a thread that needed to be pulled, to unravel, like the ticker tape machines the boy once imagined his mind to be, where spools and spools of memory lay unspooled on the floor to be discarded and burnt.

Maybe his trauma defined who she was, perhaps. Maybe the time he spent in the programme defined him. Maybe his mentor was right: that different people had different experiences and responses to the LGAT programmes, and that her trauma didn't mean that the programmes didn't work.

The LGAT was just a tool, she thought. A thing that stood in her way of her self-actualisation for a while, until she found herself.

She looked. Into the depths of the emails that were sent (an all-caps email from her sponsor in the Leadership LGAT meant to shock the boy's system, to get the boy to be more independent), the conversations with the boy's mentor (the Facebook chats where the mentor talked about his own experience in the LGAT and how he let go), and the logs with that girl who first expressed kindness to him in a long time (where he asked her out, and she flatly rejected him).

More pieces, more pieces needed to be found, she thought.

She thought of what a friend told her about that mentor, and the reasons why the collective he founded collapsed. She cringes a little at the disappointment she felt.

The former mentor didn't matter anymore; the girl just kept a mental note to keep a distance.

Night progressed to early morning, the neighbourhood quiet after the din of jets earlier in the evening. The city just celebrated its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a grand parade, and as it progressed to its 61st year, lights continued to burn outside the girl's window; lives illuminated by fluorescent light.

In five days, the girl will remake herself once more, as she goes under for her final step — an orchiectomy. One she consents to, unlike the boys in the basement of Dorley Hall.

Old chats revealed how the boy's struggles were the same as the girl's today. Vocal, principled, the boy had hoped for a career both as a socially involved activist and a journalist. He wanted

to be a social worker, at first, but his mother, terribly sick, expended a lot of her effort trying to dissuade him from doing so, and he heeded her advice.

The girl, too, tried to hope, but life (and capitalism) was forcing her to choose, once more.

Maybe that was why she was looking. To reunite with him. To hold him, to tell him that it would be okay, that he would find her, that she would be whole, as he resolved to be.

But with splotchy memories and disjointed selves and lack of access to a time machine, the only thing she could do was to find what he said in the moment, a simulacrum of a ghost of a boy speaking to her.

From her closet she yanked out her old college laptop, praying that the hard drive within still worked. Taking out the toolbox she grabbed the tiny screwdriver and began to work on the laptop's back plate, exposing the hard drive, which she ripped out.

She needed a [SATA](#) cable for this, and so she ordered one online.

And waited.

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## 25 January 2013

### Friday

The [Ee Peng Liang](#) building has that slightly modern look to it; it wouldn't be too weird to imagine it as a school or a community centre, the boy thinks, what with the flagpoles and the national flag and the Scout flag fluttering in the wind.

Never mind that, the boy's here on a mission. They've bundled into a [coursemate's](#) car, out for a brief field trip during the Advanced [LGAT](#), to the Scouts building to procure a new uniform for a costume thing. Someone — one of the sponsors, probably — fancied him a Boy Scout, and a Boy Scout he would be.

The boy doesn't understand, for now, why all the stuff the sponsors have given him haven't stuck. Robbie Williams's *Better Man*, chosen as a personal theme, written on a piece of mahjong paper where he wrote out his wishes for himself and his goals or whatever. It's playing in his head, tinny and... fitting, maybe, because all he really wants is to be a better *person*, but it's what he has to make do for now.

They're putting him in a Boy Scout uniform because there's some symbolism to it, and because there is going to be a bit of a costume show, where there is going to be some grand display of the boy's goals, and tearful reunions, and hugs, and a general understanding that, yes, *I will be a better man*.

The boy tries to internalise that, and it slips off him like Teflon.

It's cold, inside the office. There is some trepidation, maybe, but he does ask for a Boy Scout uniform in his size. Pity they can't put on any badges, and so it's completely blank, and no scarf.

They go back to the LGAT course room, the one back at ██████████ Street, and watch a copy of RENT, the musical adapted into a movie.

*Five hundred twenty five thousand six hundred minutes*, it begins.

The musical's history is briefly laid out to him, in the middle of the HIV epidemic, eight people struggle with their sexuality in the East Village, and life should be treasured as the precious gift that it is.

The gayness aside — several of his coursemates were from the LGBTQ community, and the boy is getting used to them — the lesson about the movie is that time is precious, and that you should make use of it wisely.

It's not lost upon the boy that he is in the middle of his National Service, a two-year conscription period that is meant to mould him into a man. That despite picturing himself dead at every turn and fighting that quiet, nagging urge to shoot himself with a rifle and a bullet from the armskote he's still survived, perhaps because of the course, perhaps because he is now more aware of himself now, of his body and his mannerisms and the way he acts and how it affects the people around him, and perhaps because despite everything he wasn't picked on that much at Basic Military Training.

All the boys around him want the exact same thing, he figures, to not be here. We're all in the same boat.

He has time, and time to spend wisely, he thinks.

Besides, he knows what he wants to be — a journalist, and he's gotten accepted into journalism school. It's these moments where he clings on to some hope, perhaps. That he can spend two years with his life on rails with no important decisions to make and then he can just be free.

The uniform will lay unused in the boy's closet for a very long time. He will think about burning it, all in those repurposed oil barrels they place downstairs during the Hungry Ghost Festival, along with everything that he's been gifted by his sponsors and coursemates. He will think about destroying it all.

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**24 June 2023**  
**Saturday**

“What should I call you now?”

The man before her has taken some cues, obviously, and isn't the young lawyer that she first met back in 2012, in that old office that overlooked the river.

She remembers the one time that he grilled her over her involvement with the LGAT, his questions about whether it was a cult. It was scary, a singular moment where she'd been so afraid, because *everything that went wrong could go wrong, and everything was going to fall apart.*

It takes her a few years to understand that maybe everything falling apart was the best thing that ever happened to her.

In the intervening years since they'd parted ways, since she went into university and he continued his fairly stellar career as a lawyer, the man had been an active player in getting Section 377A, that ridiculous law, repealed.

It's Pride, and as much as she's fond of the community that she's a recent member (and longtime observer and supporter) of, she is bracing herself for the crowds. And then there's the heat.

She drags her pink suitcase to the booth for the non-profit that she now volunteers at, as the man helps.

“Call me Ellis.”

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## April 2013

Everything that could go wrong has gone wrong.

The past month and a half the boy has felt out of place. The Leadership Programme LGAT course was supposed to make him more rooted to himself, to understand himself better, he thought. It was supposed to help him feel more like himself. It was supposed to make him understand his feelings.

And he theoretically understood all of them, and how, and all of the things he was supposed to do or feel. He was supposed to feel liberated after Advanced. Motivated. Happy.

There was once, teary-eyed, a coursemate called him, crying, frustrated at the fact that he just seemed like an unhappy blob. He was being yelled at, and he had no reaction. Being judged for being unhappy, even when he didn't understand what made him unhappy in the first place.

His sponsor, too. Calling, in the middle of the night, to cry and say that maybe she'd been wrong in her approach, maybe she shouldn't have yelled and commanded and sent all caps emails, maybe she shouldn't have been so harsh on him, but all he felt was a sense of bewilderment, and a resentment that he owed her now. That he was meant to grow as a man as a result of the efforts that people around him poured into him.

Everything that could go wrong has gone wrong.

He'd revealed why he set up a experiential trail and one-day course for the socio-political news site he worked at: because it was part of the Leadership LGAT, that it was one of the personal goals he was working on.

Ever suspicious, the lawyer who'd founded the site had looked it up, and is grilling him over whether he was part of a cult, whether he was part of a cult influence.

He insists, that, no, it isn't a cult, and that he's trying to genuinely improve himself, all while sitting down on the grey carpet in the corridor of the [REDACTED] Street office and wanting to cry, wanting to no longer exist, with coursemates next to him, offering some reassurance. No tears, obviously. He'd lost the ability to cry as soon as puberty rolled around, but so did his mother, and he didn't know why this was the case. He thought it was normal. But he wanted to cry.

It's weird, too.

Crying, hugging, expressions of emotion and physical love, all of them had been such a big thing throughout all of the LGAT. You were expected to be able to do it, when the lights dimmed, when the room goes quiet, when the sponsors tell you to turn your mind's eye towards something you could have done differently, to think about someone you loved, to connect with the people around you, to resolve to be better, but the boy couldn't do it. He never could, even when he understood the internalised restrictions that masculinity had placed upon him, about how crying was weakness, even when he felt the shape of these restrictions, even when he thought he'd broken them down. He never could shed a single tear, or let himself feel anything other than overbearing weight of existence, or find himself laughing in pure joy or mirth.

The questions last all morning, but afterward, as he walks back to the station, the lingering thoughts remain.

He was not rooted, or grounded, in the belief that the programme will help him be a better person, his coursemates and sponsor concluded. He was not grounded in himself. It's why he'd struggled to enrol new people into the programme: nobody trusted him, he lacked any confidence or credibility, and despite rushing to meet people in person and spending taxi fares on cross-island trips he'd not managed to get anyone to even come for a guest session.

The sadness and the frustration all coalesce into a dark ball, threatening to engulf him, but there is no outlet, no one to trust, no one who wasn't either stained by the programme, and no

one who wouldn't tell him to flee or run. No one to tell him that there was a secret third option waiting for him.

What did it even mean, to feel grounded?

His intake had set a virtually impossible goal on getting 20 people to come to Basic. Zero, from the boy.

His goals in the Leadership LGAT, too, feel so ridiculous.

Coming from a bored teen with too much time and too little things to actually work on. *Have a relationship where a girl unconditionally loves you. Have a 10/10 relationship with all five members of your family. Set up this stupid little writing programme and experiential trail.*

And was the lawyer really wrong? Sure, they didn't worship a central figure, but he was being made to (through peer pressure) enrol new people into the programme, and every time he tried to open his mouth and explain what would happen, he sounded like a crazy person espousing new-age beliefs.

"It will fix you," he'd say, ignoring the fact that most people would take offence at the idea that they needed to be *fixed*.

His life was slowly running away from him, and he really wanted to leave.

Such a disappointment.

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## 17 May 2013

### Friday

The bunk is dark.

It's Open House on the naval base he works in tomorrow, and he and his company squadmates and some of the coyline Transport Operators — drivers — are all in the bunk, and they're having fun at his expense.

The streetlights are glowing, dim, the silent whir of the fans quiet, when the conversation turns to him, about the people he might have a crush on, when someone grabs his Huawei (one of those cameraless models that he could bring into camp) and looks at the people he was recently texting.

*All women*, remarks this one man he despises so much, who had his phone in his hands, who'd been scrolling down his Facebook at the coyline computer one day and commented about how fuckable the women in his friend list was, who'd commented about his crush's sexualities ("if

your girl is bisexual means can have threesome lah!"), and commented about how weak he seemed, all the time.

The man — a rotund thing, a corporal, he noted, but with all the size and strength that would break him like a twig — scrolls to his sponsor's WhatsApp and instantly began texting her. He tries grabbing at his phone, wanting it back, while other men restrained him, held him back, as the man wrote so many stupid little messages.

A false declaration of love (yes, his sponsor had been pretty, but he was emphatically not into her), followed by a string of misogynistic shit that was sexual harassment, plain and simple, and his mind races through what she'd think, what she'd think of him, what she'd think of his position as a man and the fear that she'd had and the trouble that he'd be in, when his phone rings.

He doesn't remember what the sponsor says to him, except that one thing that she spat out, bitter and recriminative:

"Why didn't you stop them?"

She didn't understand, he realised, just how powerless he'd been within his fellow squadmates. She never understood.

The call cuts, and the man is touching him now, in all the inappropriate places, being suggestive, before he orders: "Get on your knees."

And what could he do? Punch the corporal? Sure, the sergeants at work know he's a piece of work, and he could probably have gotten away with it, but what *could* he do. He couldn't run away.

There's another year of this, another year of this shit with this man, and he'd have to spend time in an ops utility vehicle with him at some point, alone, and no matter the disgust, the anger, the revulsion, he will have to take it. He will have to take it like a man or he would be that pithy little thing that could survive, but he had to survive.

It was what everyone had to do, wasn't it?

This man spent his drivers' orientation with him, barking at him to keep to the speed limit or not cross the double white line lane markings or telling him about the proper way to park, and he was good at his job in all the ways he wasn't.

The one time he fought back, in high school, he got a concussion and several punches to the gut. And so he let himself be groped, he let himself be thrown onto the floor of the lavatory, he let his nipples be twisted, and he let himself be hurt.

Crude as he was, the man was going to spend nearly all of his remaining time in the army with him, and if sucking him off was going to keep him happy, he was going to do that.

So he gets on his knees.

There's a vague sense of satisfaction in the corporal's eyes, a fleeting moment of shock, and then a rebuke: never do that again. You have to treat your knees as something made of gold, he remarks in Mandarin. *Never bend your knee.*

The corporal says it in a self-satisfied way, as though that he was telling the boy to stand up and protect himself, as though he was imparting an important life lesson, as though his own father had told him that ages ago and that he was telling it to his own son.

With that, he is sent back to his bunk, and left to fester in his own emotions.

In his heart a fire, a fire that will consume everything in his path.

The fire in the Break.

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## 26 September 2016

### Monday

It takes a lot to distance yourself.

And yet the boy did it anyway, after the fire consumed him: he cut off all contact with the LGAT except with his mentor and the coach in the facilitator company, and is slowly trying to shed off all contact with his friends who he once worked with when he was a facilitator.

Some he thought of endearingly — the girl who was the first to show him kindness, for one, another girl who's now in medical school, who was charming, down-to-earth and cute — but others not as much; the boys in his facilitator batch were all natural leaders, having been officers or people who took initiative, and not an echo of a human trying to be more in a militaristic system.

He's in a Starbucks at the university in Hong Kong, luxuriating in a tea latte and scrolling through his laptop before his next class, trying to settle in. Moments before, he thought he heard a Singaporean accent, whipped his head (and his hair, which frankly was growing long and thick) around, and saw two girls walk out of the cafe, but he couldn't muster the courage to say hello.

He's in his third year of college, and he's been unable to make any real friends. And so he's in Hong Kong, all alone, by himself, taking classes from the professor he adored, hiking in its rolling hills and lush mountains, taking the train anywhere he felt like, and learning how to be by himself. Learning, two years after his mother's passing, to be a little at peace.

The Starbucks is nestled on the second floor of the School of Continuing Education, quiet but with a view of the walkways outside and below, where students shuffle between classes and their time at the nearby dorms. Students come and go, speaking Cantonese and sometimes English, and he pays them no mind. He looks like them, anyway, and nobody's staring, he's not out of place. Nobody knows him here, save for the professor.

Another fresh start. Not that he needed it, and he'd have to return to his home city for his fourth year anyway, so it didn't really matter.

He scrolls on his computer, cycling through social media platforms, and that's when he sees it, that Reddit post:

| *Has anyone heard of the LGAT programme? Should I stay away from it?*

Somehow the anger within him breaks, and he composes a long reply. *Stay away*, he says. *I was constantly questioned, why I wasn't happy all the time, and what I was trying to do to bring in people.*

The memories come back: the sponsor crying on the phone. The coursemate who was sure he was being closed off deliberately, that he was making himself emotionally inaccessible, even though he felt a strong difficulty in trying to deal with his own feelings, in trying to get a grasp on his own feelings in the first place. In even knowing what they were. The email that tore at old wounds.

There were things he kept, words that were still there, still present, scraps of memory that gave him brief glimpses about himself at that time, even if it still felt raw four years in.

Chats with his mentor:

*-- I don't feel angry towards the LGAT program anymore.*

*-- I just know that I'm not going back.*

*- That's nice.*

*- People change. Things change.*

*-- Actually I should still be honest with you. I still don't trust them. I may be ambivalent toward people there but I don't believe the program and training has changed. Thus I don't trust people going through the program.*

*-- I'm not going to support anyone going through it.*

*- Why are you telling me this, though?*

*-- Because I don't want you to think that I trust the program there.*

*- I don't think you ever gave that impression.*

*-- I should tell this to hopefuls who are in there. haha.*

*- Sure. And that would be as arrogant as any other idiot who believes that their experience is more accurate and true than anybody else's.*

*- There are several people whose lives have inherently changed for the better*

*because of their version of the programme.*

*- And there are also several others, who like you, swear it is an inherently flawed programme that does more damage than good.*

*- I don't know why you spend so much energy thinking about this position. It's like your whole life has become about positions and stances and angles.*

*- I would be more than glad to walk in with you to ask for your money back.*

*... thank you*

*... I don't spend a lot of thinking about it, but I occasionally stumble upon people who are thinking on going through this journey, people who ask me for my experience.*

*... I turn out giving them my opinion instead.*

*- And you're entirely entitled to it.*

*- I've had good and terrible experiences there. I hate the brand. I avoid some people like crazy. And I won't go for events unless I need to be there. But still there are some who walk out with very good stories to tell. And other friends like you who had terrible trust eroding experiences that make me doubt and question.*

He wonders about his position now, that of the screaming little shit who regrets everything.

The main reason why he never took his mentor's offer up on barging into 36 [REDACTED] Street and demanding his money back was that he could never actually feel like he could win that argument, that it never changed his life, or that it changed his life for the worse. The intervening years were hard, sure, but he lived; he improved upon the life lessons that the LGAT imparted onto him, and he was successful.

He'd spent a dizzying year as president of the campus cat association, and while that was intense, he was mostly the one fuelling the intensity, lending his fire and remaking the school club from scratch.

He'd spent two years living his dream, to be a journalist. He was going to succeed, like it or not. He wanted to do better. To change the world for the better.

And what were these things, if not material improvements to his own outlook in life?

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**12 August 2025**  
**Tuesday**

Of course he's not here.

She pats her old self on the back, realises just how thorough he had been about the Break, about burning everything away. She remembers how he'd glower at the Boy Scout uniform each time he saw it in the closet.

The badgeless shirt, mint green (the colour she hates), hung there for a full three years, years after the big poster and the associated handouts and the heartfelt letters and cards were all thrown out. Or was it four? She can't remember.

Either way, it never went into a fire, and it was merely thrown out during a deep-cleaning spree.

Of course he's not here, because the first thing he did whenever he was particular angry or troubled was to shut out the aspects of himself in which he disliked.

The choices he was forced to make, the choices he regretted, the person he hated in the moment. Often they were memories, memories of a past he wanted to forget but never forgive.

She laughs a little at the acid in his voice, when he once told a high school classmate that he didn't want to see any of them again, that he'll remember all of them, that he'll never forgive what he went through.

He, who was voted "most likely to be a school shooter" in high school, whose only salvation was that the city was incredibly harsh with guns, whose only salvation was that he'd been too timid to explode like a time bomb. More like a dud.

He, who dutifully, gleefully, went to a high school reunion way back in 2014.

Hell, she's itching to go for one this year, now that she's herself, whole. To say: "Fuck you for making me miserable. *I'm thriving.*"

She expected this, really, as she disconnects the hard drive from her college laptop: there was nothing important in there. Nothing from that time.

There's a reason she went searching for that simulacrum of a ghost of a boy. Not just to hold her, but to reconcile herself with the incompleteness she felt as a teen. It'd bugged her when she finally understood herself, because this could have been exactly what he was missing, just that he could never admit to himself at the time.

She understood. The pressures of compulsive masculinity was hard to escape in his formative years. When he finally shed them off in university, wearing soft cotton tees and pastel berms and hanging out with gay friends and being a huge rainbow flag-waving ally, something else took its place: shame.

It wasn't a powerful shame, no; he'd freely admitted to the women he dated that he wanted to be a girl, that he wanted to indulge in gender swap fantasies.

But it was a quiet shame, about how he felt largely okay with his body; about how he never felt that anxiety or dysphoria so intensely that he wanted to die; about how even though he was resigned to his masculinity he was trying to make the best use of it, aware of how he was to the others around him, aware of his *privilege*.

He was a man, shaking his head in vehement protest of the position he held; who resented his position in the patriarchy; who held out his identity like it was a smelly sock away from him and thought of even that act as performative; and all this time, the alternative was nagging at him, invading his fantasies, and he never took the leap.

No, he *did*, she corrects herself. She wouldn't be here if he didn't.

But she knows he never chose to forgive.

That one day in 2015, when his sponsor emailed him, he chose simply to ignore her. That he erased that email, because she can't find it.

It probably took him a lot of willpower to not reply, to run through all the possible things that he could have said, and to realise that everything that he'd had said or done would be counterproductive at the time.

She's wondering if *she* should forgive, but she's not sure *what* she should forgive. Of course he deleted that email. He didn't want to be tempted, and he didn't want to reply.

*There is something I need to forgive and I just hold too much anger that I can't*, he had told his mentor then.

She makes a mental note to be kinder to him. Even if he erased that simulacrum of a ghost of a boy.

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## 21 October 2016

### Friday

- hey!
- *jdk why we're suddenly not friends on Facebook*
- *but i'm just curious if your mentor told you about the LGAT*
- ... *I went there*
- ... *it was bad*
- ... *end of story*
- *ahh*
- okay
- ... *are you going?*
- *haha ya*
- *actually I'm already in the leadership LGAT*
- ... *then we'll continue not being friends*
- ... *sorry*
- *you don't like to be associated with us?*

*-- were you trying to enrol me?*

*- no i was just curious*

*- curious to ask if your mentor mentioned the LGAT to you*

*-- be honest*

*-- I still talk to him. I still work with some of them. I just don't want graduation photos on my feed.*

*- lol i'm being honest.*

*- I saw his reply to you*

*- I wondered if you've been through the programme and if it helped you*

*-- My mentor mentioned the LGAT but he also mentioned a lot of other things.*

*-- The programme was terrible for my emotional growth.*

*-- It was not the ideal thing I was suited for.*

*-- It did not allow me to grow and make mistakes.*

*-- I can't get past it. I can't get past it in love, or exercise, or work.*

*-- My boss back then thought it was a cult.*

*-- He bombed the things I was trying to make.*

*-- No one stopped me, because someone thought they could make their enrolment quota.*

*- that sucks.*

*-- Leaving was the best part.*

*- do you have support from anyone to get over this?*

*-- yes*

*-- it's why I left the facilitation company. Because so many of you were going to the LGAT for no reason.*

*- have you forgiven?*

*-- no*

*-- why should i?*

*- because it makes you a bitter person.*

*-- I don't mind.*

*-- You guys deserve this.*

*-- you know when my grandfather died, the LGAT folk sent me a wreath, and everyone was asking who these people were*

*-- I was afraid that the same thing would happen when my mother passed away*

*-- that I have to explain why I spent this much money on something they don't understand*

*-- As long as I'm reminded of how much my life spun out of control, as long as I'm reminded of how long it took for me to get it back together, I will be bitter.*

*- Why do you generalise to 'you guys'?*

*-- the thing with asking me to not be bitter, is that you guys benefit from me not being angry at you. I won't stop people who are going to the training from going because doing so is a bitter thing and it would take too much effort. you guys get to enrol people. the end.*

*... it's a choice. I choose to tar and feather everyone from the LGAT. I don't trust them, I don't trust their intentions, and I don't trust you.*

*... today was supposed to be a good day. you ruined it.*

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## 22 October 2018

### Friday

*... lol. hey. i'm sorry*

*... I revisited this conversation for some reason*

*... because LinkedIn recommended one of the sponsors to me.*

*... I've reconnected with another grad and we've been griping about this whole experience a lot.*

*... I wanted to apologise for not being able to let go*

*... I've been gradually trying to do that for a while now*

*... This was still a harmful experience to me. But I'm happy I'm able to move past it*

*- I'm glad.*

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## 15 February 2022

### Tuesday

It's a relatively calm day, but she is panicking inside.

Her newsroom is girding itself for the Russian invasion of the Ukraine. They don't know it yet, but war is just about to start; the conflict is seemingly about to boil over, with calls prepping for the eventuality of war and how it would pan out in the newsroom.

Much of it isn't in her wheelhouse — she's technically on the night shift for the people in London, even though it's 10 in the morning where she is — and if something does happen, she will be on it. As much as she could be, anyway; things like these move so quick, the situation could change for the better or worse at a snap of a finger.

She has a bigger thing to worry about: it's merely been 104 days since she started transitioning, and the changes are starting to become a little obvious. She's caught colleagues staring, she's realised that her body is changing, and the way she presents herself will very quickly have to keep up.

A week earlier she'd sat at the office staring at the email from her trans boss, about how *she'd not been the only one who emailed her about this*, complete with a list of resources that she might ever need and a reminder that she would always be available for her.

She's kicking herself at how unproductive she seems today, but not much is happening anyway. So much is roiling inside: how fast everything seemed to be going, how little room she had to manoeuvre if she ever thought that she was making a mistake, how much she still feels like she's not properly considered everything, the complete implications of living as herself, before taking the plunge.

So she opens a blank Google Docs page, and starts to write.

It's lucky no one else is in the office, and that she's placed very far away from the TV desk where the hubbub is; nobody will notice if she slacked off a little, right?

She thinks about whether the wholeness she feels right now is real. A long time ago, *he* was told that *he* was supposed to feel this or that, and that *he* was supposed to be happy or content or sad or in control, and that's made her so... incapable of trusting herself and her heart.

*It's the idea that I no longer trust my brain, in a sense - I was gaslit so many times during the long three years with the LGAT, where I was told that I was supposed to feel this way or supposed to feel that way or supposed to be happy or supposed to be sad or supposed to be in control.*

*If this is generally supposed to make me feel better, what happens when I feel worse? If this is supposed to make me feel in control, what happens when I lose that control? Am I simply borrowing words from others to describe how I used to feel and how I feel now?*

She wants a breather, really. But at the end of next month she will be Ellis, instead of whatever name is in her email now, and if she ever regrets it or wants to go back her future self will just have to deal with that.

No, she has to be certain. She can't be, embarrassingly, the only journalist who *detransitioned*. And she's safe. How could she choose to turn back? Where she is, she is safe, she is loved, despite of who she is. How could she choose to turn back, when she's so resolute that she's *not cis*?

She closes the diary page, and makes a note to send it to her therapist.

And she goes back to work.

Chapter 24 of *The Sisters of Dorley*, titled *Everything Must Go*, follows the backstory of one of the main characters, who we'll call Em, for now (to keep this essay as spoiler free as possible).

Em's life in *Almsworth* hadn't been easy. As a child, she was subject to abuse and bullied; which eased up when she transferred to a school in *Almsworth*; her mother died when she was merely a teenager, and her only friends consist of a group of girls, the closest of which we'll call *Ess*.

Em hurts herself a lot. She is bulimic, because her depression has consumed her from within. She doesn't understand why she doesn't feel right within herself, and when puberty hit, she resolved to starve herself, make herself as thin as possible, to deprive her body of fuel, to stop herself from becoming someone she doesn't recognise in the mirror.

Ess is an upper-middle class girl who had a crush on Em; since Em's mother died, Em has had to fill in for that caretaker role, the *man* of the house, something that she evidently doesn't like. And so Ess takes her out of her house and brings her to Ess's neighbourhood, where her other friends are.

Time progresses and puberty is worse now, and so Em has constantly thought about no longer existing. About dying. About coming up to the woods behind Almsworth and leaping off a bridge; drowning herself in the river — it goes on.

Ess intervenes once, but she still doesn't know what's wrong with her: counsellors say 'things get a little turbulent during puberty' and shrug it off, psychiatrists aren't sure what to do, and she still doesn't see why she wants to hurt herself, why she wants to no longer exist, and why she no longer recognises herself in the mirror.

It's only when Em — disruptive, depressed, angry at the world — is brought to Dorley Hall and given estradiol when everything that's been clouding her head goes away, when she finally realises who she is, who she should always have been.

Em spends the rest of the series trying to distance herself from the people in her past — including Ess, but the whirlwind that's Ess brings Ess closer to her, and she reconciles with the skeletons in her closet.

It's a very potent story, and one of the heaviest narratives that I've encountered in the entire series. The story's exploration of how latent dysphoria eats at our hearts seemed so vivid to me that I had to put down my phone for a few moments to have a good cry.

There's a reason why the analogy — that trans people are trapped in their own bodies — has stuck in the popular imagination. It's the easiest way to describe who we are, and it's the easiest way to help cis people relate.

But it's a terrible analogy.

Yes, we are stuck here, in the most pedantic sense — swapping minds can't be a thing. No, we aren't truly *stuck* — being stuck implies that our bodies don't change, that they're an immutable facet of life just as our identities and presentations are, that none of them are fluid and ever-changing.

Our bodies change. We grow old. So do our identities: people migrate and adopt new nationalities, people join new communities, people change their names, people find their love of their lives, people grow.

Instead, dysphoria is more like a cloud in our brains; a cloud that makes it difficult to be ourselves. Our consciousnesses feel misaligned. There's a consistent revulsion to our bodies, a revulsion that extends to how we're seen as people. The world can feel unreal, and you can hate yourself with a passion, so much so that you hurt yourself.

I never did hurt myself, really, but Em's story, how vividly it is written, made me understand how it used to feel like for me — a constant weight in my heart, a constant pull downward.

My first puberty was slow for me: I transitioned as it was trailing off, before it could hit me with everything else, and I'm glad for that; I remember looking in the mirror and remarking that I got wider, that I had stubble, that I looked so ugly, that I didn't like what I was seeing.

When I first started my little experiment 1,379 days ago, I wasn't entirely certain as to how I would feel, whether that weight in my heart would lift, whether that strain would disappear.

But it did.

It lifted like a veil. Like Em, I could see myself for the first time, and I could look at the mirror and not avert my eyes from it.

I started transitioning just when I was able to live with that self-hate that I carried. The one that made me so timid and unsure, in the newsroom, in my university, in the LGAT programme. The one that I thought kept me in check.

The years in the LGAT made me doubt if the wholeness I was feeling was even real. The tools it gave me helped in examining what I felt, why I felt what I felt, my intentionality, and helped me understand me and my place in the world.

But it also made it difficult to discern between my own thoughts and what I truly, honestly felt at times. It tore down my barriers and helped me construct new ones, new ones in which reason triumphed over emotion, in which my feelings were entirely separate from my function in life.

And so I thought: was it always there, that self-hate? Could something else get rid of it entirely? What could I do to fill that hole in my heart that wasn't sex or drugs or booze? With enough discipline, could I live with that self-hate? Was I supposed to live with that self-hate? Was I supposed to live with looking at the mirror and truly despise who I'd become?

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**29 June 2022**  
**Wednesday**

The doctor's office is new, and yet it seems so homely. Awards line the windowsill; the window faces other offices, all of which have their blinds drawn — enough to let in light but keep

prying eyes out. A small tree sways in the wind.

The doctor herself is a kindly woman. In her late thirties or early forties, she reasoned, but with that critical look — a gaze that would spear right through your heart if you weren't careful.

The girl knows who the doctor is: for a time, she was the only person that most of the trans people the girl knew could see at the city's mental health hospital.

She is *the* gender specialist in the city, and she is her salvation, because her father found out that she'd been crossdressing and was about to demand answers, answers that she couldn't explain adequately.

"You're a bit too old for that," the doctor says. "For me to explain to your father why you're trans."

And there's a grain of truth in that: the girl knows that if the worst comes she will have a reliable safety net in her partner, who's squeezing her hand. The girl also knows that she's 28, and too old to be called a *girl*. But she calls herself that anyway, because *woman* still doesn't quite fit.

She brings the doctor through her life story: about her time in high school, when she was being bullied, about National Service and conscription and how *that* was hell, about how she always thought of herself as another gender other than *a boy*.

It comes to her now: she is walking along ██████████ Street, next to the art school, on the way to her internship, when she reasons that she could be genderfluid. It's just a very stubborn *fluid* though. Like if her genderfluid was bitumen.

And she talks about the Large Group Awareness Training regime she was through. "I don't know if I can call it a cult."

"What's that?" the doctor asks.

"Well, it's life coaching."

"Yes, those are cults."

Within her there's a bit of a relief, that people understood what she went through, what he went through, why he did what he did.

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**12 August 2025**  
**Tuesday**

She thinks she can see the simulacrum of a ghost of a boy.

In snippets, of course; snippets of text, of messages sent to friends that weren't deleted or obliterated by the fire in the Break, glimpses of that person who sent it, a view of his mind at the moment.

Snippets where he tried to be vulnerable to people who weren't interested in him. Where he respectfully backs away. An impulsive, headstrong person, same as her now, who rushes forward with all his energy, and dedicates all his time, his strength, his commitment, to trying to make things better on his own terms, so much so that he can hurt and barrel you over if you ever so slightly stand in his way or fail at understanding his point of view. A whirlwind.

She's reached out to him before, while writing a previous essay, in which she described why the Break made her feel so disjointed, and how the LGAT had led to her pursuing intent and purpose.

Back then, she'd been trying to find a version of herself, really, that she could use to properly identify when her gender identity coalesced. Everyone around her knew who they were when they were *children* and she doesn't remember much from her own childhood; and that bothered her so much, as though some strange authority would come in and revoke her gender identity just because it wasn't formed in her early teens.

Now, she realises that he's a *construct*.

She's basing this on a version of him from the things he wrote.

Within those snippets lie love notes, scattered from that time in the Break, all ash in her memory — she does know who she loves now, and she's never letting go. Within those snippets lie a picture of a boy who was much like a cute little goat, headbutting his way through the world back then, who bleated at every girl who took interest. Within those snippets lie a picture of a boy who wanted to be happier, who wanted to be closer to the people around him. Within those snippets lie a picture of a boy who thought stories could change the world, who wanted to change the world with his stories.

She winces when she reads some of those snippets, of what he wrote.

She thinks he's stupid. And by extension, she's stupid, too, trying to find that simulacrum of a ghost of a boy.

He's just a story she can tell herself, just a tale, because there is no way to be certain as to how that boy was.

He was angry at the world, a lot, and that anger simmered. It boiled over sometimes, and it presented itself as outbursts. Tersely worded emails. Jeers online. Even when he finally found some peace, when he let go of all the shit that happened to him, it lingered.

He could control it — it never threatened to break him — but it was only gone when he found her, when she became whole, when she finally felt at peace.

But he was also happy. There was joy with the kittens and cats he rescued, real care in the work that he did.

There were people he loved, people he cared about, his partner (her future spouse). There were passions he held, for words, for stories, for journalism.

It's a story she can tell herself, for now.

For she knows how he was like, the gritty parts of him, the gritty parts of him that aren't incriminating but she'd still like to keep hidden, because God forbid a closeted trans woman has some wants or needs. She knows how he was like, immature and naive and unaware of how the world worked. She knows how he was like, wishing people would just be kinder to him but recoiling from kindness and love, believing it to be transactional.

It's a story she can tell to liberate herself.

And tell it she does.