

Alyssa's Letter Part 2: The Beautiful Phoenix Is Still Healing

This is an update and continuation of my previous letter from late last year. Please reread that letter before reading this one.

When I wrote my letter late last year, I was still healing a lot compared to where I am today. The letter took me so much longer to write than I originally thought, because it was a draining yet therapeutic exercise and experience for me. It was the first time I felt clear headed enough to stand up for myself and document the pain and abuse I've been put through. The letter was also a love letter to my family saying that I'm finally doing well enough mentally and I want to catch up with everyone! I want to learn more about my father, and get closer to the family I have left! Sadly, the responses I got from that letter were so lackluster or nonexistent it made me question who fully read it. It feels like everyone doesn't want to address, talk about, or help support me through my depressing life thus far, because it bums them out? If it bums you out then imagine living through it for your entire life. Grandpa is speaking on a national basis in an anti-suicide crusade with my dad's story at the helm, while I, Michael's daughter and only surviving blood, feel like I'm an unwanted burden to the family.

I'm hurt and frustrated that the people who are supposed to BE and FEEL like family know I need help and choose not to help me. My childhood was far from that of a typical grandchild. Unfortunately, the dice rolled for me were horribly depressing, traumatic, and disadvantaged compared to Ally, Kayla, Hanna, Drew, Lydia, Kyle, Issac, and Ben. I didn't choose the life circumstances I was dealt, no one would. I did not ask to lose my dad at such a tragically young age, which I am only just beginning to understand and learn how to properly grieve over, because I'm finally doing well enough to feel anything at all. I did not ask to live with a mother who is still TO THIS DAY causing me continued stress and mental anguish and I don't know how to make it stop. After finishing and sending this letter I don't get a reprieve or break, instead I'll be researching my options for renewing or beginning a new restraining order against my mother. It's so exhausting to do the legal route again (referenced in my last letter) yet I have PTSD of her tracking me down at my home or business. Earlier this year, she left me a voicemail saying she's going to be in town for a weekend, which skyrockets my traumatic anxiety about the situation. I've been no contact with my mom for many years at this point, yet she incessantly tries many different channels of communication to try and get a response out of me. It hurts that at least one person gave her my new phone number, which she name dropped in a voicemail, presumably to try and create any discourse that she can. As some of you may have heard, my Grandpa Leroy passed away at the beginning of June. My mom is trying to use the situation to guilt me into reconnecting with her, and I'm stressing about how I will be able to

pay my respects to my grandpa at his memorial while avoiding any interaction with so many toxic individuals.

I haven't had a full day off in so long. Ryan juggles everything so well, and is always either boosting me or giving me more time to heal while he continues to work. Being invited to poolside family vacations while I'm drowning in bills at home is a 'We've got a game plan, either keep up or keep quiet.'

It hurts and shakes me to my very core to be told by Grandpa that 'any help I give you, I need to give equally to the rest of the grandchildren; I need to treat you all equally.' Because our lives have never been equal. A person with a serious or terminal disease at times is more of a financial burden on their support system than someone who is fully healthy. It's as if I was battling terminal cancer for my entire life, and Ryan and I's lives crumbled around us yet I miraculously really started improving during the COVID lockdowns (referenced in previous letter) and now I'm a survivor and I have so much drive and energy to 'catch up' on life and the treasures it holds. Our business hasn't had a chance yet because my healing has impacted every aspect of our lives, but the reason our business is behind is the same reason I'm still alive. Our landlord understands and respects Ryan so much that he has worked with us throughout this entire journey; he is rooting for us and is on our side. Ryan also installed and does maintenance on the entire camera, security, and networking system in the multi-tenant building that our landlord's very own business is a part of.

About eight years ago, a few weeks after Ryan's Dad passed away, I had a mental breakdown and broke up with Ryan. I felt incapable of human connection, and was beginning to shut down, once and for all. Ryan not only fully paid for the remaining months of our apartment's lease, but he also bought me a bed, bedframe, and nightstand because I had nothing left after my parents had downsized during their last move. He then continued taking my cries for help seriously and was still my go-to for emotional support, even though I was so mentally damaged at the time I couldn't understand or reciprocate loving someone. I was living in a corner of Charlie's room with a curtain as a makeshift bedroom door and wall. I moved out of my mom's townhome as soon as I could into a duplex near the UofM with random roommates while I desperately tried to stay afloat in college, but I continued spiraling downward. I never connected with my roommates, and cried nearly every day in my room because I didn't want to be in the shared areas like the living room or kitchen with people I barely knew. I finally reached out to Ryan and basically said 'Hey, sorry this has been such a ****ing mess, I don't want to date right now (because I hate myself and don't want to be alive) but I also think I'm going to die without your positivity so I'm not sure what to do, can you help.' Ryan not only calmed me down, but he, through the grace of God if you believe, had stayed

strong and true on his own timeline and had coordinated, solo deposited, rented and organized a massive home in Como which had nine bedrooms, multiple living rooms, and he supplied TVs, speakers, furniture; everything. He even kept a little self serve shop in our dining room stocked with bottled water and various food options for FREE so any roommates, friends, or visitors always had the necessities, especially those who were also struggling like I was. His shop had a tip jar and the tip money would be used to order pizza for the house on the weekends. I couldn't get out of my current place quickly enough. He helped me load up and move my furniture from my place to his, and gave me my own bedroom (which he helped me paint), with my own things and with my own lock. I felt safe again. I had a home again. I still felt hopeless, but a little less so. He treated me just like all the other roommates, and did an amazing job integrating me into the social circle despite my DPDR, depression, and anxiety being off-the-charts and erratic still. He took things at my pace, and I'm still processing how lucky I am to this day. Ryan hasn't pressured me about marriage, picking a forever home, kids, none of it. I would have regretted doing major life events just to tick a life checkbox, or out of pressure from friends and family when every day I was clawing for my life. He has told me from the start that the number one goal is seeing me heal, and his actions have shown time and time again that he is a man of his word.

I've been continuously setback because of my trauma and now for the first time in my entire life, my day-to-day life isn't clouded by depression and it feels to me like no one in the Swansons actually soaks how absolutely incredible it is I'm still alive, and not only still alive but beginning to thrive mentally! Maybe it's because no one saw me struggling, which also feels like shit because there were so many signs!! The way things were going, I would have killed myself in 2015, 2016, 2017, etc. Could no one see or feel I was extremely depressed? Thankfully, despite the first thoughts in my head every single morning for so long being thoughts of death and hopelessness, I NEVER tried to take my own life. Ryan was the first person in my life I felt comfortable saying out loud 'I don't want to be alive anymore, I can't keep doing this' and he would tell me: *'I wish I could say a magic phrase, cast some spell, or do whatever else it takes to draw out the pain from your body, even if it means taking on the baggage myself. Unfortunately, that doesn't work in this world. I can't tell you when you will begin healing or when you'll be fully healed, and I love and respect you too much to lie and pick a random date in the future. No matter what, no matter how hopeless you feel, no matter how tempting the absence of pain in the afterlife feels, if you take my hand I will never let go, and I will continue to put my everything towards ensuring you have an incredible life; I promise you that, you deserve that.'* Ryan was the ONLY person who gave me the hope to keep going. Someone shouldn't need to attempt suicide or physically harm themselves for people to take depression and its complex and wide reaching damage seriously. I was taking double the recommended dose of a powerful antidepressant to try and stabilize my depression, and it still

felt like I was getting worse. Ryan deserves a Nobel Prize for curing my incurable disease and I deserve one as well for remaining hopeful and persevering through all of it. The sad reality is, I didn't feel comfortable telling the Swansons I was struggling with severe depression because how can I be open with you all when the response to me quitting college back in 2015, when I was at one of my lowest points, was disappointment and pushing me to keep my enrollment? Asking me at family gatherings if I've enrolled yet, and when the deadlines are?? If I would have continued my enrollment, I would not have survived. Why did no one inquire how I was feeling mentally? I still have trauma from the pressure and disappointment I felt from my family during this time.

Almost ten years ago, Grandma and Grandpa wrote me an essay about how I should break up with Ryan and focus on school. It was cold and brutal, and I remember reading it with Ryan and crying in my room. So hostile and unwelcoming from the very start. Ryan has worked tirelessly for ten years to heal me and my mental health and we never knew WHEN or even IF I would get better. It still feels like the Swansons don't consider him family. Why is he treated differently than me? Why does Ryan get an empty card for his birthday, and I receive a check? It's not about the money in the card, it's about respect and equality. I think back to the first time I met Ryan's grandma, Ellen (Dad's side). We got together for Ryan and his sister Cara's birthdays, which are both in May. Ellen heard my birthday was in April and coordinated with Ryan's mom Teresa to learn a little about me to get me a thoughtful gift. When we met, she hugged me with the same love she shows Ryan and everyone else, and later on she gave me a present and a card with contents and value identical to Ryan, and treated me like I was a long lost family member returning home, regardless of the fact I was such a depressed shell compared to my current self. I want Ryan to be respected and fully accepted as family ESPECIALLY considering everything he's done. Ryan poured his heart and soul into healing me, simply out of pure love. I genuinely believe if Ryan didn't come into my life, I would have killed myself years ago. My Dad needed a partner like Ryan in his life and unfortunately he didn't get to have that. My Dad needed the right person who is patient, knows exactly what to do or say, and is willing to give as much as possible, unconditionally, to help heal their partner's mental illness. I wish my Dad could've met Ryan and the current me. C.S. Lewis once said, "You can't go back and change the beginning but you can start where you are and change the ending." That is what I am currently trying really, really hard to do. My Dad's death will forever hurt, but I want to use my experiences to make the best out of a tragic situation and help others in his honor, and in Ryan's Dad's honor too.

I try to reconcile the reality that I will never have a full and fair childhood with the fact that I'm grateful to be here and to be doing good now, and that I truly believe we have this one life and we need to make it count. I don't want the first 26 years of my life to define the rest of

it, but I fear I will forever be crushed under the financial and emotional debt caused by my lifelong depression. I was terminally depressed for 26+ years and I am still healing, physically and mentally. It's taken more time for me to heal than predicted from when we last spoke, as can happen with any critically severe mental or physical injury or illness. But even since the new year, I've continued to make enormous amounts of personal progress! We are creating and building a positive gaming culture in Minnesota, and have over 750 people in our Left Click Lounge Discord server (which is all from word of mouth). We already have made a massive difference and we're just getting started! The social events we've created are essential for our community and every time we do an event, I'm reminded of that from the gratefulness of our attendees. I don't understand how Ryan designed and custom built our wall computers by himself, I don't understand how he designed and built, with basic power tools, our beautiful tables that give our lounge so much warmth and character all while juggling my chronic mental health crisis, his friends' mental health struggles, and so many others around him. His previous employer has so much respect for him that they gave us thousands of dollars worth of new low voltage materials and supplies to Left Click, for FREE, no strings attached, as a parting gift.

Why haven't people asked for a tour of our property or visited during open hours to see what our business looks like? We frequently update our space, so a family showing zero interest in a business we've created and have been working on for years makes me ask, "*Where is the love?*" There are gamers in the family who haven't even seen our video game focused business, why?

We're behind with our business because Ryan did the proper thing by prioritizing my life above everything, and he STILL kept our business going and kept us safe and optimistic throughout the entire pandemic; including during times of protesters marching directly past our boarded up frontage in Dinkytown on more than one occasion. We received absolutely zero help or financial support from any of my family during the entire multi-year pandemic. Our lounge's original Grand Opening over five years ago was delayed more than six months because that was right when I was imploding from depression and college. Left Click Lounge started as Ryan's idea, of course, I was so depressed, I didn't enjoy anything. But now I can proudly say that Left Click is OUR business, and I understand the positive power video games can have on mental health, socialization, and friendships. My depression has caused countless MONTHS of delays over the years, and yet Ryan STILL boosts me and has never ONCE made me feel like I am to blame. He understands.

Contrary to the disgusting things my Mom has done and said (referenced in my first letter), Ryan is the only reason I'm still in contact with any of my families. I've wanted to permanently cut contact with everyone so badly, for so long, because I feel such a lack of

connection and lack of love (not specifically blaming anyone, this is another symptom of extreme depression). He's also the only reason I am leaving an open door for my Mom to try and form a new, healthy relationship with me if she's willing and able to get the help she needs.

Ryan loves and respects our family so much that he recently spent his free time (while I was relaxing and watching shows) to read every single one of Grandpa's public blog posts, all 50+ of them. I don't have a great memory from when I was severely depressed (most of my life), so when I told him about the blog he took it upon himself to read it because he wants to help all of us, and because I am not in a condition to even try to do that. He even took pages of notes, I couldn't believe it. Grandpa, in your planned last blog, you write "I want to close by saying I am exceedingly grateful to FCA International for allowing me the opportunity to write this blog for the past five years; now it's time for me to be open and discover what comes next." I think Ryan helping our family heal is what comes next. I and so many others can directly attribute our healing to him. Once our schedule is stable and we're not working every day, I'd like him to write about some of his inspirational stories and experiences. Things that even his close friends don't know about, because he doesn't make it about himself.

I'll always remember way back when we first started dating; we were in my room, and I felt comfortable enough that I started opening up and showed him my small box of sentimental things from my Dad, something I am very emotional and protective over. He sat there and listened intently while I attempted to express myself and share stories of my Dad. When I started crying from being overcome with emotions, he calmly and warmly told me that it's not weird at all, and if my Dad was important to me then he'd love to learn more about him. Never, ever, ever did I think I would be looking back on that nearly a decade later. He's been the same this entire time.

In early June, I attended the wedding of one of Ryan's cousins. It was so beautiful to watch all of Ryan's younger cousins, who haven't seen us in years, come up to him and want to catch up, tell him accomplishments they are proud of, ask him his thoughts and opinions on current games and pop culture; and anything under the sun. It was so healing for me to talk with Randy, one of Ryan's uncles, who remembered me from when we last talked years ago pre-COVID, and who showed me the same respect and enthusiasm that he showed Ryan. Ryan's mom and sister glammed me up and even thrifted some beautiful dresses for me to try on, they said I could keep any that I liked! Both sides of Ryan's family continue to show me time and time again what healthy and loving families look like. They would give the coat off their backs if it meant helping someone in need.

Ryan's younger brother Mark also got married in late June, and Ryan was his Best Man. I cannot begin to put into words how beautiful and healing of an event it was for everyone involved. I'm so grateful that I'm doing well enough now to be able to have experienced and participated in such a wholesome wedding. I'm proud that I was able to help start the day out right by tying Ryan and Mark's ties which stayed in place the whole day! I loved spending the day with all of Ryan's family and getting to know the family of Mikayla, the bride.

Of course, it's not possible for me to attend a wedding without thinking about my dad. These two weddings have hit me hard. The first time I went to a wedding after my dad passed (I was probably sixteen), I unexpectedly started balling my eyes out when the father-daughter dance started; it surprised me and even now, I still get choked up, reflecting that I nor Cara will get to dance with our fathers on our wedding days.

This letter, as with the first, has been incredibly draining yet healing for me. It has also taken months longer than I thought. I've felt more emotions in 2023 than the rest of my life combined, and I'm still constantly emotionally drained because of it. I need help to stabilize and catch up; I won't need help forever. I've been waiting my whole life to get to this point, where I can actually feel emotions and my next step is to start living my dreams!

It's important to reflect and grieve for those we've lost, while making the most of the time we have left, that's what it's all about. I love all of you, and I know that as we heal we will only become closer and stronger, individually and as a family.

With love,
Alyssa Marie Shoultz