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Autonomy Is Not the Absence of Love

For me, autonomy is the right to exist fully—professionally, personally, and spiritually—without needing permission, accompaniment, or justification. It is the freedom for women in medicine to define their own lives, to stand whole on their own terms, and to choose partnership not out of necessity, but out of desire.

As a child, I learned early that womanhood often came with conditions. I was raised in poverty, in a home without floors, walking into school days without food, navigating a world that felt fundamentally unprepared for girls like me. Yet alongside material scarcity, I inherited another lesson just as persistent: that a woman was rarely expected to stand alone. That she existed as a “she-plus-him.” That progress, safety, and legitimacy were often tied to having a man at her side.

Even as a young girl, this expectation felt unsettling. It suggested that my future was constrained—to the home I grew up in, or to the home of a man who might simply reproduce the same limitations under a different roof. I watched the women around me carry the cultural weight of this belief—pausing their ambitions, softening their voices, and delaying their moves until partnership made them “complete.”

Something in me resisted. I took jobs that were never meant for women like me. I swept the floors of homes I could never afford, valeted cars I had only seen in movies, and learned how to move through spaces that were not built with me in mind. I was loud. I was rugged. I was unapologetic in taking up space. Autonomy, even then, was survival.

Later, I found love—not the kind I had been warned against, but the kind that felt safe. He was gentle, grounding, and supportive in ways that allowed me to step more fully into myself. For the first time, partnership did not feel like erasure. It felt like expansion. It was breathing at full lung capacity, a calmness that quieted a chaotic world.

And then he died.

Grief forced me to confront a question I had never truly had to answer: if I had learned how to be a “we,” could I return to being an “I”? At the time, the answer felt bleak. I could not wash my hair, so I cut it. I could not return to our home, so I stood at its door and locked it. I could not bear the remnants of our life together, so I placed them in a trunk that still sits in my closet.

I returned to my medical training carrying grief I could not set down, learning quickly that medicine does not pause for loss. Moving forward was not about replacing what was gone or pretending it never existed. It was about learning how to live with a new normal. In medicine, women are often told we must choose—career or family, ambition or softness, independence or love. Loss stripped those binaries bare. I learned that autonomy is not the absence of partnership,

nor is it diminished by love. It is the ability to keep moving forward even when the ground disappears beneath you.

I continued with broken pieces in my arms, never quite able to hold them all as some inevitably fell away. Over time, I realized I would never recover every piece—and that this, too, was okay. We are not measured by perfection. Some days, our ten percent surpasses someone else's hundred. Autonomy gave me permission to keep going anyway.

Dr. Linda Brodsky's lifelong work—to ensure women physicians can pursue meaningful careers, equitable compensation, and full lives—embodies this vision of autonomy. Gender equity is not about narrowing women's choices, but expanding them. It is about creating environments where women can lead, love, grieve, and grow without their worth being questioned or their ambition constrained. Autonomy is what allows women not only to remain in medicine, but to shape it.

As I continue my career in medicine, I carry autonomy with me as both anchor and compass. I will advocate for equitable compensation, transparent promotion, and workplaces that honor women as whole people. I will mentor women navigating training alongside grief, caregiving, or nontraditional paths, so survival is never mistaken for failure. I will lead with compassion, practice with integrity, and model a life where strength and vulnerability coexist. And I will remember—especially in moments of doubt—that autonomy means I am already whole, capable, and complete.