Family Ecology

She settles into the long couch opposite her therapist. For a moment she feels like a kid planted on the bottom end of a seesaw with nobody at the other end to counter her weight.

“So, what’s been happening since we met last week?” her therapist asks, leaning in with a gentle curiosity.

She’s grown used to this opening question, a familiar icebreaker at the start of their sessions. The familiar question has the effect of feeling that there is suddenly some weight at the other end of the seesaw.

On the drive here, she rehearsed her response, wanting to sound impressive, studious—someone who fits the carefully curated identity of “Uni Student.” It’s exhausting, this constant shaping of herself, always shadowed by the nagging sense of being an impostor, never the “real thing.” She cringes when she hears herself say, “I’m at Uni,” in response to questions about what she “does.” What does it mean to be a Science Student, anyway? How should it feel? How should it look? How does a Science Student think?

Her good grades this semester should anchor her, but they don’t. The knowledge that she’s topped her lab group in some assessments dissolves like fairy floss on the tongue, leaving no lasting mark on her sense of self. The grades don’t weave into the fabric of who she is; they feel detached, like borrowed achievements.

For the past few days, she’s been studying forest ecology for her Biology exam. So, in response to her therapist’s question, she begins, “Yesterday, I walked my dog in the forest near my house. It’s beautiful right now—the winter rains have turned everything green, birds are darting through the trees, and kangaroos are grazing on new shoots during the day.” Her therapist listens with an open, expectant expression, a subtle cue that prompts her to reach for something deeper, something “insightful.” Feeling a flicker of self-consciousness, she continues, “I’ve been studying forest ecology for my exam, and it’s fascinating how, beneath the soil, there’s this hidden world of connection. Trees and fungi share chemical signals, nutrients, and a kind of interspecies cooperation. It’s a web that helps the forest thrive and adapt.”

“That’s beautiful,” her therapist says. “How does it feel to think about this interconnected, supportive web?”

“It feels… safe,” she replies. “Like a warm, nourishing network. My chest feels open, and I feel warm all over.”

Her therapist nods. “Where do you feel that safety in your body?”

“I feel it everywhere—warm, open, like I’m held.” But as she speaks, her focus begins to slip. The image of the benevolent forest tilts, and a familiar fog creeps in.

Noticing the shift, her therapist asks, “What’s happening for you now?”

“I’m getting that spacy feeling in my head,” she says. “That ditzy, fuzzy thing.”

“How do you feel it in your body?” the therapist prompts.

“There’s a tightness around my neck, like I’m buried in cold soil. My brain feels empty, vacant.”

Her therapist leans closer. “Something important is happening here. Would you be open to using the float-back technique we’ve tried before to explore this?”

She nods, settling into the sofa as her therapist guides her. “Close your eyes if you feel comfortable. Connect to that spacy feeling in your head, the tightness in your neck, the coldness. Now, holding those sensations—spacy, tight, cold—let your mind drift back over your life. Find a moment when you felt this same combination of feelings. As we’ve done before, describe the memory as if it’s happening now.”

Her mind drifts, like a magpie soaring over the landscape of her memories. Something glints below, and she swoops toward it.

From the present tense, as encouraged to do she verbalises: “I’m in grade two, at school. We just had a spelling test, and I’m terrible at spelling and reading. The lunch bell rings, and my teacher calls me to her desk. I’m terrified of her. My legs shake, and I am thinking that I might pee my pants. I stand, shifting from one foot to the other, trying to distract myself from the urge. She beckons me closer, her voice sharp, and asks if Mum is helping me with my spelling and reading homework. My neck tightens, my body goes cold, and my mind feels spacy, I can’t grab hold of any thoughts. I stare at the floor, unable to stop myself. She repeats the question. I shift again, desperate to pee. Finally, I pull a small ‘yes’ from deep inside, like a wriggling fish on a line.”

Her therapist reflects, “So this is your earliest memory of those sensations—spacy, tight, cold. You’re in grade two, standing at the teacher’s desk, feeling scared and exposed.”

“Yes,” she says, she feels as if she really is back in that moment. She continues: “I’m holding a secret.”

She elaborates: “Every day, Mum picks me up from school with the other parents. When the bell rings, we gather by the school bags, and the Mums chat. My Mum is the prettiest and funniest—she makes everyone laugh, and I’m so proud she’s mine. Today, like most days, we pick up my sister from her grade four class and drive home, singing along to Taylor Swift on the radio. It’s the best— singing together.”

“Your little self sounds so joyful,” her therapist says. “It sounds like she feels loved and loves being with Mum.”

“I do,” she agrees, her voice falling forward from the depths of her little self. “But when we get home, everything changes. My sister and I race to the kitchen, fighting over the last biscuits. We settle in front of the TV, watching *Rick and Morty*, laughing and pinching each other for fun. Mum is sitting on the back patio with a glass of wine. As it gets darker. We get bord and go and play Barbies in my room. I hear the fridge door, then the clink of an empty wine bottle hitting the recycling bin. In the distance, there’s the glug of Mum pouring another glass. It’s dark now, and we’re hungry. I hear Dad come home, his voice sharp with anger, then the muffled sound of him ordering pizza.”

Her therapist clarifies, “So Mum is drinking, and while she’s drinking, she’s in her own world, not doing things like making dinner or helping with homework. What else is happening?”

“My sister and I take care of ourselves after dinner,” she continues. “My sister runs a bath, and we play with our bath toys, making bubble beards and giggling. I dry off and snuggle into my sister’s bed, and she reads me a story. Homework isn’t crossing our minds. I know things are different at other kids’ houses. I hear them talk about their parents making them do reading and spelling, about rules, chores, rewards, and being grounded. We don’t have any of that.”

“So you’re starting to sense that your family is different?” her therapist asks.

“Yeah,” she says. “It’s like a sour smell—something off that we all know about but don’t name. There’s an unspoken pact to keep it hidden, to protect it from the outside world. That smell, and the act of hiding it, is like glue holding my family together. When someone gets too close—like the teacher asking about homework—I feel that tightness in my neck, the coldness, the spaciness. My mind can’t hold onto anything solid. It’s like the spaciness is part of our family’s ecology, a way to protect us from outside threats.”

Her therapist nods. “As a child, you were realizing Mum was both there and not there, that something you needed wasn’t being met. What was the threat you were protecting against?”

“That others would see Mum isn’t like other mums,” she says, her voice trembling. “That she forgets to cook dinner, forgets to help with homework, sleeps in. That they’d call her a bad Mum. But she’s not bad. Bad Mums don’t love their kids or know how to care for them. Mum is beautiful and funny and knows all the words to the best songs. If I could just remember to do my homework, teach myself what I need for school, I could make her the best Mum. But I forget, and I’d rather play with my sister. If I could be better, the sour smell wouldn’t be so strong, and no one would come sniffing around.”

Her therapist offers, “That’s what little kids do—they can’t accept that a parent might not be capable in some way because they know they depend on them. So they make themselves the problem to protect their parent. You took on shame and inadequacy to preserve Mum’s identity.”

“It’s not Mum who’s bad—it’s me,” she says. “If I were smarter, no one would ask questions. If I were more like the other kids, there’d be no suspicion. It’s so confusing, and my brain short-circuits. It goes fuzzy, and all I want is to play Barbies with my sister.”

“Would it be okay if I speak to little you?” her therapist asks. “The little you who feels so much shame?”

She nods.

Her therapist kneels, as if addressing a child. “I’m bending down to look at you, little you. You’re such a delightful girl—so funny, so imaginative with your Barbie games. You’re so grown-up, taking care of yourself after school, getting ready for bed. And you’re smart! I see how you solve problems for your family’

The therapist continues on: “I know you’re struggling with reading and spelling at school. But that’s not because you’re not smart. All kids need practice at home, and they need adults to guide them. Your brain just wants to play and have fun—that’s what little kids do. It’s the adults’ job to help you with homework and learning.”

The voice of the therapist is direct yet soft at the same time: “Mum’s drinking, her forgetting about dinner and schoolwork—that’s not your responsibility. Her drinking too much is something she needs other adults to help her with, not you. I don’t know all the reasons why Mum drinks or forgets these things, but deep down, I think she wants to be the Mum you need. She’s probably sad and angry at herself for forgetting. We need to get help for Mum so she can be the Mum she wants to, and you can have the care you deserve. Her drinking isn’t for you to fix.”

Tears well up as something fragile and deep is touched. Her chest opens, her throat softens, and a warm wave of grief washes over her—for her little self, for Mum, for the unspoken weight of their family’s ecology.