

ES-016 When You Stop Pretending You're Fine — Estate Story

ES-016 – When You Stop Pretending You're Fine

Shields, Storms, and the Hope That Begins the Moment We Tell the Truth

A signature publication of the CHIA-TEA Estate.

This Master Edition brews E016 into the same blended shelf style used for the revised ES-007 through ES-015 manuscripts so it can sit naturally alongside the first six Estate Stories.

Part I – The Sentence That Usually Means the Opposite

Why This Story Matters

There are phrases people use because they are simple, social, and efficient.

Fine is one of them.

How are you?

I'm fine.

The exchange is so familiar that most people never stop to ask whether it is true.

But sometimes *fine* is not an answer at all.

It is a shield.

A quick wall.

A sentence that protects pain from being seen before we know whether the room is safe enough to hold it.

This story belongs in the Estate because so many people are walking through storms while speaking fluent fine.

Addiction.

Cancer.

Mental health.

Grief.

Fear.

Exhaustion.

Seasons where life grows heavier than the heart expected, yet the mouth keeps offering the same reflexive reply.

When You Stop Pretending You're Fine preserves the deeper truth that healing often begins not when life becomes easy, but when someone finally tells the truth about how much they are carrying.

Chapter One – The Joke That Only Works Because It Hurt First

For years, my daughter and I have had matching T-shirts that say,

I'm Fine. It's All Fine. Everything Is Fine.

Now every time one of us says, I'm fine, we cannot help but laugh.

We even say it with a little redneck drawl.

I'm FIIIIINE.

The joke only works because we both know what it really means.

It means the exact opposite.

It means one of us is carrying something too heavy to put into words.

Those shirts have become little reminders hanging in our closets that sometimes we are simply not okay.

And that is okay for a little while.

But there was a season when nothing about those words was funny.

There was a time when my daughter disappeared deeper and deeper into addiction, and every time someone asked me how I was doing, I answered exactly the way so many of us do.

I'm fine.

The truth was I was not fine.

Not even close.

That is the cruelty of reflexive language.

It can hide pain so efficiently that even the person speaking it begins to forget how much truth has gone missing.

Chapter Two – The Storm That Changed the Landscape

There were days when I honestly wondered if I would ever be okay again.

Even more frightening was wondering whether my daughter ever would be.

During those years we probably lied to each other more than anyone else.

She would tell me she was okay.

I would tell her I was okay.

Neither of us believed it.

She was fighting for her life in silence.

I was slowly breaking apart because no matter how much I loved her, I could not rescue either one of us from what addiction had become.

People who have not walked this road sometimes imagine addiction as a difficult chapter.

It is not.

Sometimes it feels like being knocked flat onto your face without warning.

And if you eventually manage to pull yourself back up, you realize you are not standing up as the same person who fell down.

That image matters.

Because some storms do not merely interrupt life.

They alter the landscape.

They leave marks.

They change your nervous system, your prayers, your sleep, your language, your idea of what strength even means.

Part II – The Lie That Strength Means Carrying It Alone

Chapter Three – Old Storms Do Not Make New Storms Easier

Years before all of this, my husband struggled with addiction too.

We survived losing our home.

We survived losing trust.

We survived rebuilding a marriage that would never quite look the same again.

I learned something then that I did not fully understand until much later.

Some storms eventually pass.

But they still leave scars across the landscape.

I thought surviving that season had prepared me for anything.

I was wrong.

Watching your child slowly lose pieces of herself is a completely different kind of helplessness.

Parents spend a lifetime believing they can protect their children.

Then one day life reminds you there are battles you cannot fight for them.

There are nights when hope feels impossibly far away.

There are mornings when simply getting out of bed deserves more credit than anyone else will ever know.

And somehow, every day someone asks,

How are you?

I'm fine.

That repetition becomes its own loneliness.

A daily performance so practiced that it begins to feel like part of the burden itself.

Chapter Four – Doomville and the Cost of Silence

The hardest part was not pretending for everyone else.

It was pretending long enough that I almost believed I had to carry everything by myself.

I did not reach out to a friend.

I did not look for a support group.

I did not ask for help.

Not for months.

Not even for a year.

If I am being honest, it was probably close to three years before I truly let someone into what I was carrying.

That is how long pain can live inside a person before honesty finally finds enough room to breathe.

Ironically, it was not until after I built the CHIA-TEA apps that I finally began using the very philosophy I hoped would help other people.

Sometimes life has a funny way of teaching us with our own lessons.

Little by little, I began applying the same tools I had created.

I learned to slow down.

I learned to reflect instead of react.

I learned that hope is not something we accidentally stumble across.

Hope is something we practice.

One small choice at a time.

I lived in what I jokingly call Doomville for almost three years.

I would not recommend the neighborhood.

And I certainly would not want to invite anyone else to move in beside me.

Pain deserves to be acknowledged.

It does not deserve to become your permanent address.

That sentence may be one of the most important truths in the whole season.

Part III – Recover Loudly

Chapter Five – The Day Fine Became True Again

Eventually I noticed something had changed.

One day someone asked,

How are you?

And for the first time in years I answered,

I'm fine.

And this time I meant it.

Not because life had suddenly become easy.

Not because every problem had disappeared.

Because I had learned something important.

Storms eventually pass.

Some last a weekend.

Some last a season.

Mine felt more like a five-year plague.

Those kinds of storms do not end overnight.

They ask for every ounce of your strength.

They demand your patience.

They change who you are.

But they do end.

That does not mean the past vanishes.

It means the truth changes shape.

Fine stops being a shield and becomes a testimony.

Not a perfect life.

Not an easy life.

A life that found hope again.

Chapter Six – If We Recover Loudly

One thing I have never hidden is my daughter's addiction.

Some people wondered why I spoke about it so openly.

My answer has always been simple.

If we recover loudly, we keep other people from dying quietly.

There is no shame in surviving.

There is no shame in healing.

There is no shame in saying,

My family is struggling.

Because somewhere another parent is whispering those same words through tears and believing they are completely alone.

They are not.

When I finally called the one person I trusted with everything, we talked for hours.

She did not try to fix me.

She did not offer perfect advice.

She did not tell me everything would be okay.

She simply reminded me she was not going anywhere.

She accepted my silence.

She understood that sometimes pain does not have words.

That conversation taught me something else.

Not everyone deserves access to your deepest wounds.

Some people genuinely want to help.

Others simply want to satisfy their curiosity.

Sometimes what looks like concern is really gossip wearing compassion as a disguise.

Those experiences taught me to guard my heart wisely.

Today I choose the people who share my hope.

Those are the people who help me become fine again.

Chapter Seven – Pull Up Another Chair

The CHIA-TEA Estate was born out of those years.

Not because I had everything figured out.

Quite the opposite.

I built it because I desperately needed somewhere to put my own hope while I searched for it again.

HOPE's Anchor.

SOS.

ZENYA.

SHAT.

They were not created because I thought other people needed them.

They were created because I needed them first.

And every day I continue using them, they remind me that healing is not a finish line.

It is a practice.

Just like steeping tea.

You do not rush it.

You allow it the time it needs.

If you are walking through something similar today—addiction, mental health, cancer, grief, or simply a season where life has become heavier than your heart expected—I want you to hear me.

It is okay to not be okay.

It is okay to cry.

It is okay to scream.

It is okay to throw a pillow across the room.

It is okay to feel broken for a while.

But do not build a house there.

What if the bravest words you speak this week are not, I'm fine.

What if they are, I'm not okay today.

Who in your life has earned the right to hear those words?

Our support is not somewhere far away.

It is right here around this table.

Every Tea Sipper who has ever poured a cup understands that life is not always gentle.

Sometimes we gather because we are celebrating.

Sometimes we gather because we are barely holding ourselves together.

Both belong here.

That is what a community is.

We help one another harvest the hardest seasons so together we can celebrate the beautiful bounty that grows afterward.

Maybe one day you will own a shirt that says,

I'm Fine. It's All Fine. Everything Is Fine.

And maybe you will smile every time you see it.

Not because life never hurt you.

Because you will remember there was a day those words were only a wish.

And now they have become the truth.

Pull up another chair.

Steep the tea.

Stay awhile.

We will help carry the weight until you are ready to carry it again.

Brewmaster Insight

E016 is a finale in more ways than one.

It gathers addiction, illness, family pain, tools, truth-telling, and belonging into one final pour.

What makes this manuscript so powerful is that it does not treat hope as a mood.

It treats hope as a practiced honesty.

A willingness to stop using fine as camouflage.

A willingness to recover loudly enough that someone else realizes they do not have to disappear in silence.

Placed at the end of the season, this story feels like both confession and invitation.

It tells the truth about the years that made CHIA-TEA necessary.

And then it opens the door for the next person to enter without pretending.

Tea Leaves

- Sometimes "I'm fine" is not an answer. It is a shield.
- Storms can change who we are and still eventually pass.
- Pain deserves to be acknowledged, but it does not deserve to become a permanent address.
- If we recover loudly, we keep other people from dying quietly.
- Not everyone deserves access to your deepest wounds; choose the people who share your hope.
- Healing is not a finish line. It is a practice.
- The bravest truth may be admitting you are not okay today.
- Community helps carry the weight until strength returns.

Drops of Hope

- "Hope doesn't ask you to pretend. It asks you to take one more step."
- "If today you can't honestly say, 'I'm fine,' then don't. Tell the truth."
- "Sometimes belonging begins when someone simply stays."
- "A life can hurt deeply and still find hope again."
- "The shirt becomes funny only after the wound stops ruling the room."

Brewmaster Reflection

There is a kind of freedom that arrives the day fine stops being a performance and becomes a real answer again.

Not because pain never visited.

Because truth finally had room to live beside it.

This story reminds me that I never needed to become invulnerable in order to heal.

I needed honesty.

Practice.

Safe people.

Tools I trusted.

And enough courage to stop using one word as a hiding place.

Try This Today

Ask yourself:

If I answered honestly, what would I say instead of 'I'm fine'?

Write the real answer down.

Then ask:

- Who has earned the right to hear this?
- What one tool could help steady me today?
- What one next step would be honest and kind?

Let truth become the first act of healing.

A Letter Before You Leave

Dear Friend,

If you have been surviving behind the word fine, I want to offer you something gentler than pressure.

Permission.

Permission to tell the truth.

Permission to not be okay.

Permission to stop performing strength long enough to receive some.

You do not need to explain every detail to everyone.

But you do deserve at least one safe place where your real answer is welcome.

A place where your pain does not make people uncomfortable enough to look away.

A place where your healing is not rushed.

A place where you can breathe before you speak again.

If that is what you need today, pull up another chair.

We have been saving you a place.

Keep brewing.

— The Brewmaster

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