

HAPPINESS UNINTENTIONAL

A Neurodivergent Noir

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Love Dialogos

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Happiness Unintentional

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A Note on Language

Alex Breisburg keeps a notebook of phrases he doesn't understand. This book, in places, may ask something similar of you. His mind runs on vocabulary most readers won't encounter anywhere else — synesthesia, alexithymia, the specific mechanics of a nervous system built differently than the one telling most stories. That vocabulary isn't decoration. It's the only accurate way to describe what it's reporting.

You don't need to know any of it to read this book. The story will carry you regardless. But if a term stops you — if you find yourself rereading a sentence because a word in it is doing work you can't quite place — a full glossary with plain-language definitions and further reading waits at the back, in *A Reader's Companion*. Flip there any time. It isn't a spoiler; it's a dictionary.

A Few Terms to Start With

Synesthesia — A neurological trait in which one sense automatically triggers another — a word registers as a taste, a name arrives with a color. Involuntary and consistent, and for Alex, often more trustworthy than what he sees.

Alexithymia — Difficulty identifying, naming, and describing one's own emotions. The feeling is there; the label often arrives late, or not at all.

Aphantasia — The inability to voluntarily create mental images. Alex cannot picture faces, including the ones he loves most; what he retains instead is data — measurements, textures, sounds.

Dissociation / Depersonalization — A sense of detachment from one's own body or actions, as though watching from outside. Alex's own term for it, used throughout this book, is "the meat suit."

Masking — The conscious or unconscious suppression of natural behavior in order to appear neurotypical. Often exhausting, often invisible, and rarely optional.

AuDHD — The combination of autism and ADHD occurring in the same person, producing traits that can look contradictory from the outside.

Autistic Burnout — A state of physical and cognitive exhaustion from prolonged masking and unmet needs, marked by the loss of skills that are normally reliable.

Interoception — The internal sense of one's own body — hunger, heartbeat, pain, emotional state. Many autistic and ADHD people experience this sense as unreliable or delayed.

This is a starting point, not the whole map. For the complete glossary — including citations, further reading, and terms specific to individual chapters — turn to A Reader's Companion: Clinical Terms and Resources at the end of the book. For deeper reading beyond this book, lovepsychotherapy.com maintains an ongoing catalog and blog on most of the topics referenced here.

Chapter 1: Happiness Unintentional

La Salles was Sarah's choice, not mine.

Before I registered anything else about the room I registered its palette: the warm amber of the wall sconces against a neutral taupe ground, the deep burgundy of the banquette upholstery pulling the eye down and inward, a color temperature around 2700 Kelvin, incandescent-warm, calculated to flatter skin tones and make food look better than it was. Someone had made deliberate choices here. Not an artist, a designer, which is a different thing and a lesser one, but at least a person who understood that color does work in a space. I remembered the first time I'd seen her truly happy. Not the performative happiness of our wedding photos, not the polite satisfaction of a dinner party well-hosted. Real happiness. We'd been driving back from her parents' house in Lake Forest, the twins asleep in the back seat, and Sarah had suddenly pulled the car onto a scenic overlook. She'd gotten out and stood at the guardrail, looking out over Lake Michigan, and laughed — actually laughed, a sound I rarely heard from her, bright and uncalculated. 'Sometimes I forget this exists,' she'd said, not to me, to the water. 'The actual world. Outside all the systems.' I'd stood beside her, not understanding, but wanting to. That was the thing about Sarah: she made me want to understand things I couldn't perceive. She was a foreign country I kept trying to visit, always arriving without the right currency. I never asked what systems she meant. I was afraid the answer would include me.

What I have never told anyone is that I got the frisson that day — the specific, involuntary cascade down the back of the neck and arms that the literature calls aesthetic chills, that I have privately catalogued since childhood as one of the only sensations I trust completely, because it cannot be faked and cannot be performed, arrives or does not arrive with no input whatsoever from the part of me that manages what other people see. Sarah's laugh did it. The unguarded, structureless sound of it, the water,

the word ‘systems’ — some combination I never fully isolated triggered eleven full seconds of gooseflesh from my scalp to my forearms, and I stood there translating an involuntary physiological event into the performance of an ordinary husband enjoying a view, because telling her what was actually happening in my body would have required a vocabulary I didn’t yet have and an intimacy I wasn’t sure either of us could survive.

I met her at a point in my life when I had already catalogued most of what a person could be, and she did not fit any of the categories. In the eleven months we dated before the wedding she was, in sequence and with total conviction: a woman training for a marathon she never ran, a woman who bought a potter’s wheel and produced eleven beautiful bowls and then never touched clay again, a woman learning conversational Italian from a workbook that still has a bookmark at chapter four, a woman who decided for three intense weeks that we were going to keep bees. I found this bewildering and then I found it magnetic. Each new thing arrived in her with the totality of a religious conversion — she would talk about nothing else, she would reorganize the apartment around it, she would wake me at one in the morning to tell me a fact about Tuscan verb conjugation or swarm behavior — and then, without any visible mechanism of ending, it would simply stop, and something else would begin, and she never once looked back at the thing she’d dropped with anything that resembled regret. I did not have a word for this yet. I filed it under: Sarah. The whole category was just her.

I noted the framing of the window through which the late sun came: a vertical rectangle of amber light that created a compositional anchor at the far end of the room, the way a strong value contrast anchors a painting. I noted the foreground element of the bar, the middle ground of the dining tables, the window in the back. A reasonable composition. Wasted on this food.

She liked the patio and the way their waiters wore black suspenders, their accents polish-ambiguous. I liked that the tables were far apart and the menu was consistent, but the rest was a gauntlet: the midday sun knifing through the trellis, the sound of

silverware on glass, the kid at the next table who, every two minutes, made a noise exactly like a smoke detector.

Sarah ordered for us, as usual. “He’ll have the blackened chicken sandwich, no tomato. I’ll take the arugula salad, dressing on the side.”

Arugula. The word arrived with a flavor — slightly bitter, green, something alkaline underneath, matching the actual taste of the plant, which my synesthesia does sometimes. I almost said something about it. Specifically about the fact that arugula — *Eruca vesicaria sativa* — was cultivated in Mediterranean gardens as far back as the first century BCE, documented by Columella and Pliny the Elder, who noted both its culinary and allegedly aphrodisiac properties, and the cultural history of its fall from common use in the medieval period when Church authorities apparently associated it with sinful desire, and its rehabilitation as “rocket” in Italian cuisine, the parallel British usage of the same term deriving from the French roquette, itself from the diminutive of the Latin *ruca*—

The waiter — young, dark-haired, the kind of attentive that restaurants train into people but can’t fully manufacture — had been writing down Sarah’s order without looking at the pad, which I noted as a small feat of trained multitasking, because he was looking instead at me, the specific unhurried look I had learned by then to recognize without being able to do anything useful with the recognition. ‘And for you, anything to drink? On the house, if you’d like to come back and tell me yourself.’ I heard this as an unusually generous drink policy. I said I’d have a water. He left. I registered nothing else about the exchange, because there was nothing else in it I had the sensors for.

Sarah’s fork found the table with more force than the gesture required. “You have got to be kidding me.”

“What?”

“Nothing.” She picked the fork back up. “Nothing, Alex. Forget it.”

I did not know, at the time, that I was going to spend the rest of my marriage occasionally forgetting things I was never told to

remember in the first place, because the telling required Sarah to explain a joke that had stopped being funny to her the third or fourth time she'd had to make it. I have since reconstructed, mostly from her sighs and from the specific quality of silence that followed men and sometimes women lingering a half-second too long near our table, that this had been happening with some regularity for the better part of sixteen years, and that I had been present for approximately none of it.

I did not say this. Seven seconds elapsed while I filed it. Sarah did not notice. This was one of the management systems: the delay created a window. If I could not initiate the infodump within the window the topic would be recategorized as internal-only. Most days the window worked. Some days it didn't and I would look up to find someone's face doing the thing faces do when you've been talking for eleven minutes about the medieval suppression of leafy vegetables. She didn't look at me while she did it. She didn't look at me much at all anymore. I didn't blame her. I'd stopped looking back, except for the moments when I caught her reflection in the car window and was startled by a stranger's profile.

The waiter left. I started counting the sesame seeds on the bun of my sandwich, because it was better than listening to the smoke detector kid. Seven. The red arrived with it — a flash of deep red at the edge of my vision, chromesthetic, involuntary, the specific associative response I have had to the number seven since I was nine years old and will have until I die. The red is not alarming. It is just always there when seven is. Seven was fine. Seven (red) was safe.

The smoke detector kid hit a note that tasted like cold aluminum foil with a faint sweetness underneath. This is not a metaphor. I have a condition — the clinical term is lexical-gustatory synesthesia with chromesthetic features — in which sounds produce taste experiences and words arrive with their own specific flavor profiles, involuntary and consistent, the way a reflex is consistent. The restaurant noise generally tasted of something beige and institutional, which was manageable. The kid's specific frequency was the aluminum-sweet thing, which I

could file. The word “Sarah” tastes like cold florals and something faintly metallic. I had never told her this. I could not imagine a context in which that information would be useful.

Sarah was already on her phone, thumb scrolling, the blue light painting the underside of her jaw. “Jamie’s coming by next weekend,” she said, not looking up. “She wants to meet at the house. Can you be pleasant?”

“I’m always pleasant.”

“You’re always something.” She set the phone down, facedown, a gesture of temporary surrender. “She needs money again. The restaurant.”

“The restaurant always needs money.”

Sarah’s thumb found the edge of her phone case, worrying it the way she did when she was choosing whether to defend her sister or agree with me. “She’s never once had to make something work on her own. Daddy hands her the thing, it fails, Daddy’s disappointed, someone else covers it. That’s the whole cycle. She’s not stupid, Alex — she’s just never had to be anything else.”

“That’s not an argument for giving her more money.”

“I didn’t say it was. I just wish you’d stop making it my problem to manage.”

“Don’t start.”

I wasn’t starting. I was continuing. There was a difference, but explaining it would require energy I didn’t have. The smoke detector kid hit a high note. I focused on the sesame seeds. Seven. (Red.) Still seven. If I didn’t look at it, the number might change, and then I’d have to start over.

Sarah talked. I nodded at intervals I’d learned through years of practice — every fifteen seconds, a small hum; every forty-five, a word: “Right,” or “Sure,” or “I see.” The words didn’t matter. They were punctuation, not content. She spoke in paragraphs about Jamie’s lease, about her father’s health, about a friend from college who’d gotten divorced and was now, apparently, “finding herself” in Sedona. I pictured this woman, mid-forties, searching for herself among red rocks, not realizing she’d been there all along, just buried under layers of accumulated decisions.

I thought of Sarah's own version of this, the pattern I'd stopped mentioning aloud sometime around year twelve because mentioning it produced fights that lasted longer than the enthusiasms themselves. The pottery wheel, still in the garage, opaque with dust. The bread machine. The four unfinished novels on her laptop, each abandoned at almost exactly the eleven-thousand-word mark, a consistency I had once pointed out to her as an interesting data point and which she had not found interesting at all. The yoga certification she'd paid three thousand dollars for and used twice. Rescue dogs, three of them, over three different years, each arriving with the same declaration that this one was different, this one she was going to really commit to, and each eventually spending most of its life with my mother because Sarah had, by month four, moved on to something else that needed her more urgently. I had never told her I kept the list. I did not think the list would be received as love, though that's what it was. It was the only way I knew how to keep up with someone who was, by the time I fully understood her, already someplace else.

“—listening to me?”

This was not the first time she had used this specific phrase. I had heard it from her thirty-seven times in the last seven (red) years, by my count — I only started counting at forty. The first time, at age thirty-two, I had gone home and looked up whether cats actually took tongues and found the answer was no, they did not, and the expression was likely naval in origin or possibly from a practice of cutting out the tongues of liars which was documented in some historical contexts, and I had written all of this in notebook number eleven under “cat got your tongue — SA.” The SA stood for Sarah. I noted the speaker because the same idiom from different people sometimes meant slightly different things and I needed to track the variance.

The question came without warning. I'd missed the transition from monologue to interrogation. This was the gap between us, always: she spoke in a language of implication, and I heard only

the literal words, and even those I lost when the sensory input became too much.

I deployed the furrowed brow. It was a mask I'd learned in childhood, the same one I'd used when my father raged and I needed to look like I was absorbing wisdom rather than dissociating to survive. "Sorry. The sun's in my eyes."

"You're inside."

"Through the window."

She sighed. Not the sigh of exhaustion — I'd learned to catalog her sighs years ago — but the sigh of confirmation. I'd disappointed her again, which meant the world was still spinning on its axis. Predictable. Safe.

She set her fork down with a sound that was too loud, or perhaps I was simply attuned to it.

"I feel like I'm the project manager of our marriage," she said. "Like I'm managing you. Scheduling you. Translating you to the rest of the world." She paused. "I'm tired, Alex. I'm so tired of managing."

What she didn't say, because I don't think she fully saw it either, was that the managing went both directions. I was the one who tracked her overdraft alerts because she'd lose track of a subscription she'd started and forgotten in the same month she started it. I was the one who kept the emergency contact information current for three different rescue dogs because she couldn't remember which vet went with which era of her life. I built the systems because someone needed to, and by the time I noticed I had become the last stable structure in a house that otherwise ran on whatever had most recently caught her attention, it was too late to say so without it sounding like an accusation. Maybe it was one. I don't know. I only know that 'managing me' and 'managing the house' had, at some point, become the same job, and she was tired of both, and so was I, and neither of us had the language yet to say that the exhaustion ran in two directions instead of one.

The words landed somewhere in my chest with a pressure I couldn't immediately categorize. My brain offered labels — guilt,

shame, fear — but they were imprecise, like describing a color using only words for other colors. There was a delay, as always. I knew, in an abstract way, that I would understand what I felt about this conversation in approximately four hours. By then, it would be too late to respond correctly.

“I don’t want to be managed either,” I said, which was true but incomplete. The truth was more complicated: I wanted to be manageable. If I could optimize myself sufficiently — build systems that compensated for how I was wired — I could be a viable partner. But there was another truth underneath that one that I had less language for, which was that every demand Sarah made on me — the emotional availability, the real-time response, the presence she needed — registered in my nervous system as threat. Not because I didn’t love her. Because love was also a demand. Every relationship was a demand. And my nervous system, which had never once in forty-seven years distinguished between a threat and a demand, treated them the same way: avoidance, deflection, flight toward structure and away from the unstructured thing that was being asked of me.

I had been running from this particular demand for seven years.

The house was full of the architecture of that running. A viable person. That was the goal. Administrative survivability.

I tried to see Sarah’s face the way she needed me to see it. But when I closed my eyes I got data, not images. Brown hair. Blue eyes. A small scar above her left eyebrow from a childhood accident she’d mentioned once and I’d filed away. Facts. No image. I had read about this — aphantasia, the absence of a mind’s eye — and the word had arrived like a key cut for a lock I’d been struggling with for thirty-two years. I could not picture her. I could only know her. And apparently that wasn’t enough.

Then: “Alex! Alex over here!”

The voice came from somewhere behind Sarah’s left shoulder. I looked past her, scanning the patio, but there was no one. Just the smoke detector kid and his parents, a potted ficus, the glare of afternoon.

“Shhh,” I said, holding up a finger. “Someone’s calling me.”

“Alex, I was in the middle of—”

“Alex, you old dog!”

I leaned right in my chair, peering around Sarah’s head — figuratively speaking — and there was Jeffrey Benton, my business partner, standing at the patio gate in a suit that cost more than my first car. He was grinning. His teeth were very white. I’d always suspected they made a sound when he smiled, a faint ting like in commercials, though I’d never confirmed this.

“It’s a shame to see your ugly face on this side of town,” Jeff said, approaching our table.

This was one of Jeff’s oldest jokes, and it worked, when it worked, precisely because it wasn’t true — a fact Jeff enjoyed pointing out to waitresses roughly once a quarter, usually at a volume calibrated to be overheard. I have been told, more times than I’ve kept an exact count of, though I have kept an approximate one, that I am conventionally attractive to a degree most people feel compelled to comment on, which is strange information to receive about your own face when your own face is not something you experience visually — I know my features only as a list, the way I know Sarah’s, data instead of image. What I do experience is the reaction: the half-second-too-long look, the waitress who suddenly needs to refill a water glass that wasn’t empty, the specific quality of attention that arrives before I’ve done anything at all to earn it. I have never once found a use for it. It only ever meant more scrutiny in rooms where I already had more input than I could process, more people reading intention into a face that was, most of the time, simply idling.

Sarah’s posture shifted. Her shoulders went back, her chin up, the defensive posture of prey recognizing predator. “Hello, Jeff.”

“Sarah. Ravishing as always.” He bent at the waist, reaching for her hand, the gesture of a man who’d learned his manners from old movies. Sarah let him take her fingers for exactly one second before withdrawing. Jeff didn’t seem to notice. He never seemed to notice when people didn’t like him. It was one of his superpowers.

I know the mechanism, at least, even if I don't experience the effect. I am tall in the specific way that reads as elegant rather than merely tall — long through the limbs, narrow through the shoulders in a way that tailors well, the kind of proportions a men's magazine would call lean and a physician would call eunuchoid, because physicians have less poetic vocabulary and more precise diagnostic categories. I found this out incidentally, the way I found out most things about my own body: through a test that was not looking for it. Sarah and I had been trying, unsuccessfully, for a third child, and somewhere in the third year of specialists and blood draws someone finally ordered a karyotype, an obscure enough test that the reproductive endocrinologist seemed almost pleased with herself for thinking of it. Forty-seven chromosomes instead of forty-six. An extra X. Klinefelter syndrome, present since conception, entirely unknown to me for thirty-nine years, explaining, in retrospect, the height, the limb ratio, the sparse and late-arriving body hair I'd always filed under genetics-in-general rather than genetics-in-particular.

The word on the report was mosaic, which I looked up before I looked up Klinefelter itself, because I wanted to know what qualified a condition to earn that particular adjective. Mosaic meant not every cell had gotten the memo — some fraction of mine, undetermined and apparently undeterminable without more testing than anyone was inclined to order for an incidental finding, carried forty-six chromosomes like everyone else, and the rest carried the extra X, and which cells ended up doing which job in which tissue was, as far as the endocrinologist could tell me, mostly a matter of early developmental chance no one gets to audit after the fact. This explained, she said, why I hadn't presented as textbook — why I'd cleared puberty at a normal enough pace to raise no flags, why nothing about me had ever screamed diagnosis to the room full of pediatricians who'd looked at a tall, quiet, unusually flexible child and seen nothing more specific than tall, quiet, and unusually flexible.

I had, once I started actually measuring instead of estimating, a body that ran almost entirely along what the charts would call

the wrong axis. My iliac crests sat at a width the same charts would flag as female-typical rather than male-typical, and the geometry that follows from a wider pelvis follows all the way down: my knees meet at an angle — the actual anatomical term is the Q-angle, and I have, predictably, memorized the acceptable range for both sexes — that sits inside the female range and outside the male one, the same structural consequence gynoid rather than android, in the specific vocabulary of people who study fat distribution and skeletal geometry for a living. My inseam runs thirty-four inches; my outseam, forty-four; the ten-inch difference is rise, and mine is short for the leg length attached to it, which is its own quiet confirmation of the same underlying architecture. Underbust, thirty-three and a half. Chest, thirty-six to thirty-seven — a gap of only a few inches between the two measurements, which is not a gap a men's department has any language for, because men's departments do not print an underbust measurement at all. Shoulders, sixteen point eight inches, narrow enough that a tailor has commented on it twice, both times phrased as a compliment.

None of this involves what a stranger would assume it involves. Nothing about my internal anatomy is anything other than what it has always been. What I have instead is a skeleton built on a blueprint that never fully committed to one set of specifications — a plasticity, structurally, that predates any of the psychological questions I'd spend the next several decades asking myself about gender, though I wouldn't have the vocabulary to connect the two for years yet. The body got there first, the way it usually did, filing the information and waiting, with its customary patience, for the rest of me to catch up.

It also, statistically, tends to explain infertility, which was the whole reason we were looking. Ironically, in our specific case, it did not. The actual answer, when it eventually surfaced, was Sarah's — a mosaicism, a small enough percentage of her cells carrying the relevant variation that it had taken three years and a specialist with an unusual level of thoroughness to find it. My extra chromosome turned out to be entirely incidental, a piece of

information about myself I gained for free while looking for something else — which is, now that I write it down, the story of most of what I know about my own neurotype as well.

The idling I mentioned is not indifference. I want to be precise about this, because it's the piece most people get wrong, including, for two decades, Sarah. Most of the time I am not fully in the body that people are looking at. I have described this before as a balloon on a string — the specific sensation of being tethered to the meat suit rather than occupying it, floating somewhere in the ether just above and behind my own eyes, present enough to operate the machinery but not present enough to feel the weather on my own skin. This is not a metaphor I chose for effect. It is the most accurate description available to me of where I actually am for the majority of my waking hours.

Being perceived — really perceived, not just glanced at, but actually seen, and specifically seen with intent, the unmistakable weight of someone registering me as a body rather than a function — does something to the string that nothing else does. It pulls me all the way down. Every system that is usually running on a slight delay from every other system — the meat suit, the processing, the nervous system underneath both — snaps into the same instant, synchronized, all at once, for the first time in however many hours it's been since the last time it happened. The sensation is not pleasant. It is closer to a low-voltage current run through the whole apparatus simultaneously, an electric hum starting somewhere behind the sternum and reaching the fingertips before I've had time to prepare a response to it.

My face, I'm told, goes somewhere else entirely during this — blank, unfocused, the specific ten-thousand-yard stare that gets read, depending on who's doing the reading, as intensity, or coldness, or a man thinking about something very far away. It is none of those things. It is a man who has just been forcibly relocated into his own body without warning, doing the only thing available to him in the interval before the rest of the systems catch up: nothing, visibly, while everything, invisibly, goes off at once.

Toothpaste. It has always been toothpaste with Jeff — clean, minty, slightly chemical, the taste that means morning and function and someone who maintains themselves. I have never told him this. I have a strong feeling he would enjoy it too much.

What Jeff actually said, once he'd settled into the chair across from me and Sarah had gone back to her phone, was: 'You know your waiter back there? Guy's got a thing for you. It's genuinely pathetic to watch.' He laughed the way he laughed at most things, a percussive sound with no real amusement load-bearing underneath it, and clapped my shoulder twice, hard, the way men clap each other when the gesture is meant to establish something rather than express something. I did not understand, at the time, and would not understand for years, that this was not really a comment about the waiter. Jeff made some version of this comment at semi-regular intervals I never thought to track until much later, always delivered as a joke, always slightly too pointed to actually be one, always followed by some unrelated assertion of his own — a new watch, a story about a woman, a detail about the car — as though the two things were connected and he was the only one who could see the wire between them. I have since read enough about narcissistic injury to suspect that Jeff experienced my particular and involuntary category of attention as a tax levied against a resource he considered exclusively his, and that he had been quietly, incessantly furious about it for the entire fourteen years I had known him, in a register so far below his own conscious access that he'd have denied it if I'd ever had the nerve to say so, which I never did, because I didn't understand what I was looking at until it was far too late to be useful information.

"Well, Alex," Jeff said, turning to me with a look I knew well: eyes askew, motioning slightly with his head toward the street. "Let's get to that meeting, shall we?"

I understood immediately. This was the rescue. This was the extraction. I didn't know what meeting he was referring to, but I didn't need to. "Right. God, I completely forgot."

"Wait." Sarah's arms crossed. "We were supposed to do a movie after lunch."

“This has been planned for months.” I stood, already feeling lighter, the weight of the patio and the smoke detector kid lifting from my shoulders. “Big client. I’m sorry, hun. I’ll make it up to you.”

Her expression said she knew I was lying. Her expression said she’d known for years. But she also knew the script: I’d apologize, she’d accept with martyred grace, and we’d both pretend this was normal. “Fine. Go. Do what you must.”

I kissed her cheek — she turned slightly, so I got mostly hair — and followed Jeff across the cobblestones to where his BMW waited. He’d parked with three empty spaces on either side, as always. The car was black, convertible, with a geometry I could appreciate the way I appreciated all objects with good geometry — not aesthetically, in the way Jeff appreciated it, which involved some emotional response I couldn’t replicate — but mathematically. The proportions of the hood to the cabin. The arc of the roofline against the negative space of the sky. There’s a reason engineers at that price point get the numbers right: they’re optimizing toward the same principles I use, they just don’t call them that. The interior was the color of a Band-Aid. I tried not to think about the calves.

“Thanks for that,” I said, sliding into the passenger seat.

“No worries. That’s what partners are for.” Jeff started the engine.

I wrote it down. The notebook was in my left breast pocket, the small black Moleskine, number twenty-three in an unbroken series going back to a school composition book I filled at age twelve when I realized that other people were operating from a shared instruction manual I hadn’t been given. The notebook was where I kept the phrases I didn’t understand, the expressions that arrived in conversations with the structural confidence of meaning while meaning nothing that I could map.

“Partners for.” I underlined it. Wrote: *literal: unclear. A partner is for a business function. The phrase implies a broader category of functions, unspecified. Jeff means: I will rescue you from social situations without being asked, because this is what we have*

established we do for each other. This is probably also called friendship. I need to cross-reference "friendship."

I put the notebook away. Twelve cylinders. Everyone in a two-block radius turned to look, which was exactly what Jeff wanted. "So. Where are we going?"

"I thought you knew."

"I will when we get there."

He revved and popped into third, cutting off an old woman in a Yugo. I hadn't seen a Yugo in years. I wondered if she'd bought it ironically.

"Balls dropped back into your sack yet?" Jeff asked.

"You're enjoying this too much."

"I'm enjoying it exactly the right amount."

There was a name for another piece of it too, though I wouldn't have one for years: demisexual. I do not experience attraction as a response to a face or a body in a room, the way Jeff seemed to and the way, I gathered from context clues over decades, most people did. For me it required something else first — time, specific knowledge of a person, the particular kind of closeness that comes from being trusted with someone's real texture rather than their presentation — and only then, sometimes, did anything arrive at all. This made me, in the language I'd eventually find for it, sex-favorable: not indifferent to sex, capable of wanting it and enjoying it once it was happening, but never the one reaching first, never the one for whom desire showed up uninvited.

There was a second half to the demisexual part, one I didn't have language for until even later: whatever arrived, once it arrived, showed no preference at all for the body it arrived in response to. I have loved women and I have loved men, and the mechanism ran identically each time — the same slow accumulation of trust, the same delayed ignition, the same complete indifference to which specific arrangement of parts happened to be attached to the person I'd come to trust. I have never understood the alternative, though it has been explained to me, patiently and more than once, by people who found the explanation self-evident: that a body's particular configuration

should function as a gate before anything else gets to happen, should in fact be the thing that happens, arousal firing directly off geometry rather than off a person you've spent months or years learning to trust. I call it, privately, the parts party — the ongoing referendum everyone else seems to be invited to and voting in, sorting bodies into columns before the actual person attached to them has had a chance to arrive, and I have never once located my own invitation.

Before Sarah there was Theo, four years of him, and if you'd asked me at any point during those four years whether I intended to marry him I would have said yes, and meant it with the same flat certainty I mean anything. We got as far as a ring and a date before it ended, and it ended for reasons that had everything to do with the same mismatch I would later find with Sarah and nothing to do with which of us had which parts — he wanted a spontaneity I didn't have, I wanted a precision he found exhausting, and we ran out of runway before either of us learned the other's language. I have never once, in the years since, thought of that relationship as a phase, a detour, or a question I was still resolving. It was simply the first time the mechanism fired on a man instead of a woman, and it fired exactly the same way it always has, before and since. Between Theo and Sarah there was Vicki — four more years, a small apartment on Winicker Street, a globe with a goddess inside it — and if this account keeps arriving at her sideways, it is because she is the one entry in the registry I have never managed to file as closed.

Sarah was the opposite in every measurable way — sexual in the effortless, spontaneous, appetite-driven manner I only understood by analogy, the way I understood colors I couldn't dream in. She wanted me the way I have been told wanting is supposed to work, immediately and without prerequisite, and I arrived at desire the way I arrived at everything, several steps behind and by a different road, sometimes not arriving at all, and only ever getting there — when I did — in response to her, not ahead of her. Sex-responsive is the other word I'd eventually learn: capable of desire once something had already started,

incapable of originating it. Sixteen years of that particular mismatch had its own casualties, quieter than the others but no less structural.

The casualties had a shape, and the shape repeated. It never surfaced when things were good between us — some other mechanism entirely, apparently, governs a person who's just been embraced without qualification — but in the specific chemical aftermath of a fight, in the hour or two after we'd each said the cruelest true thing available, the question would surface, always some version of the same one: who is she. Not really a question. An accusation wearing one, and timed, without her meaning it to be cruel about the timing, to land exactly when I had the least capacity in the building to answer anything correctly.

I tried to explain the mechanism itself more times than I can count, in enough different phrasings that I eventually kept a private tally of the phrasings, the way I keep a tally of everything: that the wanting arrived only after closeness, never before it, and that when the closeness wasn't there — when we'd just spent an hour doing what we'd just done to each other — then neither, reliably, was I. Sarah heard this as an excuse assembled after the fact, or as a truth delivered too calmly to be sincere, or, on the worse nights, as confirmation: a man who didn't want his own wife on demand must want somebody else instead, because in the accounting she'd been handed, there was no third option on the form. Men wanted. That was the whole of the entry. "A real man doesn't need to be earned back every single time," she said once, three years in, and I wrote the sentence down later — not because I agreed with it, but because I was still cataloguing back then, still hoping enough data would eventually resolve into something I could act on.

The line only sharpened as the marriage did. Early on it was a question. Then a joke with an edge welded under it. By somewhere past year fifteen it wasn't dressed as anything at all — she stopped asking who and started asking why not, which was worse, because there was no name I could produce that would turn not wanting a person on schedule into a fact instead of a

verdict on whether I'd ever wanted her at all. I told her, gently and then not gently, in every register I had, that closeness was the precondition and not the obstacle. She heard a man defending himself. I was describing a nervous system. We were both right about what we heard and wrong about what the other one meant, which is, I've come to think, most of what a marriage actually is.

Somewhere in the middle of the why-not years, she found a third hypothesis, and once she found it she couldn't put it back down. She knew about Theo — I had told her early, the way I told her everything early, back when I still believed information volunteered honestly would be received the same way it was given — and for the first decade she'd filed it exactly where I'd filed it myself: a true fact about my history, not a live question about my present. Somewhere past year fifteen the filing changed. "You're probably just gay," she said once, not shouting it, which was somehow worse than if she had — said it flatly, mid-argument, the way you'd point out a data error, and went back to what she'd actually been saying before I could construct a response. She said some version of it three or four times after that, always in the same register, never quite an insult, more like a theory she was testing on me to see if it would finally explain the whole equation. It wasn't wrong so much as it was aimed at the wrong axis entirely — she had the right instinct, that something about my wanting didn't sort the way she'd been told wanting was supposed to sort, and the only shape she had on hand to put around that instinct was the one culture had issued her, a closet with a door, when what she was actually looking at had never had a door in the first place, only a mechanism that had never once checked which side of a binary it was firing on.

Some nights the wrong word did something else entirely — not an argument so much as a trapdoor. She'd reach for whatever was closest and sharpest, the way people do when they're not aiming so much as swinging, and every so often what was closest happened to be shaped like my father's voice, or the specific cadence of being screamed at in a kitchen with the lights off, and the whole apparatus would drop out from under me at once,

four-hour delay and all, straight back to being seven, the belt already rising. She never knew which words did it. Neither, most nights, did I, until the string had already gone slack and I was watching the argument from somewhere up near the ceiling, waiting to find out what the meat suit would say next.

We had gone to a couples counselor exactly once, four years before the divorce that never technically happened, a woman named Dr. Aldrich with an office that smelled like a candle store and a whiteboard she was fond of. She had watched us for forty minutes and then, without much ceremony, told us we had managed to exhibit all four of what she called the Horsemen inside a single session — criticism, contempt, defensiveness, stonewalling — which she said, not unkindly, was a personal record in her professional experience. Sarah cried in the car. I did not cry, because I was still three hours from knowing how the session had made me feel, and by the time the feeling arrived we were home and the moment for crying together had passed, the way it always passed, on a four-hour delay that never once managed to be early.

This was before the diagnosis, which meant Dr. Aldrich had nothing to work with except my behavior and her own frameworks, and her frameworks did not have a category for a nervous system like mine, so she reached for the nearest one that fit the shape of what she was seeing: narcissism. Not the diagnosis, not formally — she was careful never to say the actual clinical term out loud — but the word hovered under every session anyway, in the vocabulary she chose. My ‘need for control.’ My ‘difficulty with empathy.’ My ‘preoccupation with my own frameworks at the expense of my partner’s feelings.’

I have since read enough to know how common this particular mistake is, and enough to know there’s a cleaner name for what Dr. Aldrich was actually measuring without knowing it: cognitive empathy versus affective empathy. The first is the automatic, unbidden ability to infer what someone else is feeling without being told. The second is whether, once you know, you’re actually moved by it. Mine has always been backward from what a session

like that one is built to detect — my cognitive empathy runs on the four-hour delay, arriving too late to register as evidence in a forty-minute appointment, while the affective part, once the data finally lands, is often disproportionate, occasionally overwhelming, and reliably invisible to anyone who left the room before it arrived. Flat affect reads as coldness. Need for routine reads as control. A special interest, delivered at length, reads as self-absorption instead of what it actually was in every version of it I ever gave Sarah, which was the closest thing I had to saying: I trust you enough to let you see what my mind actually does. Dr. Aldrich was not a bad therapist. She was an undiagnosing one, working from an incomplete chart, and she filled the gap with the label that fit best from where she happened to be standing, which was nowhere near where I actually was.

Hair was its own recurring line item, and its own recurring argument, though ‘argument’ undersells what these actually were, since I was rarely trying to fight and Sarah was rarely trying to teach, and somehow both of those failures produced the same shouting. Sarah spent, in an average year, more on her hair than I spent on the car, and I did not understand this, and my not understanding it was, itself, one of the most reliable ways I knew to make her feel completely alone in a marriage.

I have spent a genuinely embarrassing number of hours reading about sexual selection, because Sarah’s hair budget sent me looking for a framework the same way everything else did, and what I found only confused me further. Across most of the animal kingdom, the ornamentation runs the other direction. Male peacocks carry the tail. Male birds of paradise do the dancing, the strutting, the elaborate, metabolically expensive displays that exist for no purpose except to be looked at and selected. Males fight for dominance, males grow the antlers, males are, in the overwhelming majority of species with any sexual dimorphism at all, the ones who pay the biological cost of being chosen. Human women, in the culture I happened to be born into, pay it instead — the hours, the money, the specific cocktail of chemicals required to keep hair a color it does not grow in — and the men mostly just

show up. I could not find, in any of the reading, a satisfying explanation for the inversion beyond several centuries of accumulated social architecture that nobody had actually designed on purpose, which is the least satisfying kind of explanation there is, because it means there's no mechanism to argue with, only a pattern everyone is enacting simultaneously without anyone being in charge of it.

To me, disconnected as I generally am from my own meat suit and, separately, constitutionally unable to intuit a social hierarchy that everyone else seemed to absorb by osmosis, hair was never going to be more than what it actually is: dead keratin. Protein, synthesized, extruded, already biologically finished by the time it exits the follicle — no different, structurally, from what covers a bird or a bear, and less useful than either, since ours doesn't even keep us warm anymore. I did not say this to Sarah in those words, not the first time. I said something adjacent to it, some version of 'it's just hair,' and I watched it land on her the way a physical blow lands, and I did not understand why, and by the time I understood why — years later, mostly through reading, the same way I understood everything — the specific argument was long over and several hundred more just like it had already taken its place.

We drove to Reprece's, Jeff's latest "hot spot," which meant it was downtown, expensive, and staffed by women Jeff found attractive. The hostess was twenty-something, blonde, wearing a dress that seemed to defy physics. Jeff leaned across the podium to hug her. I watched from behind, noting the wink he threw me over his shoulder.

"Nicolette," he said. "Wonderful to see you."

"Mr. Benton." She giggled. The giggle sounded practiced. "When can we get together again?"

"This weekend. I promise."

I followed them to our table, trying not to calculate the age difference or the ethical implications. Jeff was married. Jeff was always married, and always elsewhere. At the table, he ordered wine with the seriousness of a man conducting surgery, swirling, sniffing, bird-chirping the air into his mouth. I drank mine in two

gulps. The alcohol hit my empty stomach like a warm hand on a cold shoulder.

“Order me the pinot noir,” Jeff said. “Bottle. I have to powder my nose.”

“Do you have to do that here?”

He saluted. “Sorry, mommy. I’ll be good.”

“Jeff—”

But he was already gone, weaving toward the back, pausing to swat Nicolette’s rear as he passed. She yelped. The sound carried. An old woman at the next table — purple hat, purple dress, face like a dried apple — turned to stare at me.

“Well I never,” she muttered.

“You’ve heard worse,” I said, not looking at her.

“I beg your pardon?”

“At your age. You’ve heard worse.”

She stood. Her chair scraped. I still wasn’t looking at her — I was tracking Jeff’s trajectory toward the back of the restaurant, half my attention on the wine that had arrived, running the arithmetic of how much I could drink before the cab became necessary — and so I heard her before I saw her, and what I heard was the dress hem catching the heel of her shoe, and the specific three-syllable sequence of sounds that followed: the soft first contact of her hip with the corner of the neighboring table, and then the rotation, and then the floor.

The floor made a sound I was not prepared for.

I have a good auditory memory. I catalog sounds involuntarily the way I catalog everything involuntarily — cross-referenced, indexed, assigned a synesthetic note. The sound the floor made when the back of her skull struck the terrazzo was not a sound I had in the catalog. It was not the thud of a fall. It was not the crack of fracture. It was a wet, dense, overripe sound — the specific acoustics of a skull whose structural integrity had been catastrophically and instantaneously revised — and it sat in the lower-middle frequency range and it lasted less than a tenth of a second and it was going to be in the catalog forever. The synesthesia gave it a color before I could stop it: a deep

brownish-red, not quite maroon, the color of the inside of something that should remain inside.

There was a beat of absolute silence in the restaurant. The kind of silence that isn't absence of sound but presence of a different kind of event — the room's collective nervous system registering that something had changed in the irreversible direction.

"Oh my God," someone said.

I stood.

She lay on the terrazzo with the specific arrangement of limbs that bodies have when no muscular system has negotiated the landing — every joint at an angle determined purely by gravity, the purple dress pooled around her, the purple hat three feet away under the next table, rocking slightly on its brim. Her right arm was underneath her at an angle that arms are not supposed to occupy. Her left hand was open, palm up, fingers slightly curved, a posture of offering.

The blood came from beneath her head. Not a trickle. A spreading — the specific unhurried expansion of a large-volume bleed on a level surface, moving outward in a circle that found the grout lines between the terrazzo tiles and followed them, thinning at the edges into fingers, darkening as it moved from the arterial brightness of its source toward the brown-maroon of exposure to air.

My synesthesia registered the word "blood" as pennies — cold copper — before I had consciously named what I was seeing. This is the thing about the lexical-gustatory form: it arrives ahead of intention. The word fires, the taste fires, and only then do you know what your brain has already decided to call the thing in front of you.

She was not moving. Her eyes were open. The specific open of eyes that are no longer performing the function of eyes — not the glassy fixed stare of movies, but something more ordinary and more terrible, which is the expression of a face that has simply stopped having an expression, that has released the long muscular effort of being a face that someone lives inside.

“Someone call an ambulance!”

“I’m calling now.”

“She’s not moving, someone needs to—”

I walked toward her. This was the expected response, the socially scripted response for a person who has witnessed a medical emergency and is not themselves incapacitated, and I performed it because performing the expected response was at this point a survival mechanism with fifteen years of muscle memory behind it. My legs covered the distance. My body arrived at the proximity where action was required.

Up close, the smell was immediate.

Copper, yes. But not only copper. The sweet-wrong note was already there — not the deep biological sweetness that takes hours, but an immediate something, a volatility that the impact had released from somewhere interior, an olfactory signal that was not blood exactly but was the thing that exists in the same taxonomy as blood, the broader category of which blood is only one member. My synesthesia translated it in a register I did not have a name for: not the penny-cold of the word “blood” but something older, something that predated language, a taste-sensation from the part of the brain that existed before the part that names things.

I stood at her feet and looked at the back of her head and could not look at the back of her head. The structural situation there was one my visual processing cataloged in a single pass and then refused to revisit, declined to bring forward into focused attention, shunted to the peripheral processing that handles inputs the central system cannot currently manage. The blood had reached my right shoe. I registered this as data: the leading edge of the pool, still moving, now in contact with the Berluti leather, and I stepped back but the stain was already there, a dark crescent along the outside edge of the sole.

A man in a gray suit knelt beside her. Two fingers to the neck. He held them there for a long time. He looked up, face carrying the specific expression of a person who has just been assigned information they did not apply for. “I can’t feel a pulse.”

The woman at the table to my right was crying silently, both hands over her mouth, watching the blood spread with the horrified fascination of someone who cannot look away and cannot look toward and has found no resolution to this problem. The restaurant noise had dropped to a frequency I can only describe as held — everything muted, the silverware and the music and the ambient conversation all continuing somewhere at a distance while the room's central processing occupied itself with the terrazzo and the purple dress and the spreading.

Jeff returned from the bathroom.

"Shit." He looked at the woman, at the blood, at me standing three feet from it with vomit-colored wine in my hand. "Alex, what happened?"

"She fell." The words came before I had decided to say them, from the management system that handles social output when the primary processing is otherwise engaged. "The hem caught her heel. She fell."

"In five minutes. I was gone five minutes."

"Yes."

The EMTs arrived. They moved with the specific efficiency of people who have learned to be efficient because efficiency is the only thing that helps in situations like this and also sometimes does not help, and from their velocity and their faces as they assessed and from the way one of them put a hand briefly on the other's arm, I understood that this was one of the situations where efficiency was not going to change the outcome.

They worked on her anyway. This is the correct thing to do. This is what you do. You do the correct thing because the correct thing is the only thing that can be done, even when the doing of it is also the performing of it, the theater of possibility in a situation where the audience already knows the ending.

Jeff and I moved toward the exit. Nicolette was crying, the mascara running in tributaries from the corners of both eyes, and she looked at me as I passed with an expression I could not parse, something between accusation and appeal and the specific

look of a person who has been standing at their station when something happened that their station did not prepare them for.

Outside, Jeff lit a cigar. "Interesting day," he said.

I said nothing. The maroon pool kept expanding in my mind, frame by frame, a film loop I couldn't stop.

"I know what'll cheer you up," Jeff said. "Golf. Jena Voir. I have a friend I want you to meet."

The drive took thirty minutes, or an hour, or no time at all. I couldn't track it. We arrived at a plantation-style building, columns and willow trees, the kind of place that required connections or membership or both. Jeff knew the valet by name. He knew everyone by name, or made it seem that way.

Inside, we found Don Chaefer's wife at the bar. She was seventy, maybe eighty, dressed in tennis whites and pearls, her head nodding toward the chestnut bar like a flower too heavy for its stem. The bartender was trying to cut her off. She was having none of it.

"Jeffrey," she slurred, spotting us. "Tell this man to give me a drink."

"Mrs. Chaefer." Jeff's voice shifted, becoming solicitous, charming. "Why don't we get some food? Fresh air?"

We carried her — literally carried, she was dead weight, her Versace heels dragging — to the lanai. Her head hit the table with a sound I recognized. Coconut. I flinched. Jeff laughed.

"Now that's drinking," he said.

"Should we do something?"

"She's a tough old bird."

We ordered. Jeff got clams casino, which he knew I hated. I got a steak I didn't want. The wine came, and I drank it too fast, chasing the image of the old woman's blood with alcohol. Mrs. Chaefer remained facedown, breathing wetly into the tablecloth.

Then: cigars. Jeff produced them like a magician, clipped the ends, lit them with two matches held in his teeth. He looked, in that moment, exactly like the devil I'd imagined as a child —

grinning, smoke curling from his nostrils, offering temptation with both hands.

I took one. I didn't know why. Maybe to prove I could. Maybe because the day had already gone so wrong that further wrongness seemed inevitable.

The cigar made me dizzy. I set it down, missed the ashtray, caught the tablecloth. A small orange flower bloomed. I threw my wine on it. The flame grew, leaped, found Mrs. Chaefer's hair.

Jeff laughed so hard he had to hold his sides.

I threw water. Ice bounced off her skull. The smell of burnt hair — synthetic, chemical — filled the lanai. I covered her head with a napkin just as the bartender emerged with our food.

"Smell's from my cigar," Jeff said, pointing at me. "Ask Alex."

I mumbled something. The bartender left. Jeff kept laughing, even as Don Chaefer arrived, even as we loaded Mrs. Chaefer — still unconscious, still smoldering — into a wheelchair for the bartender to wheel away.

"Hair's not real," Don said, chuckling. "Chemo, twenty years ago. Wigs, ever since."

I stared at him. Jeff winked.

"You knew," I said, in the car later.

"I suspected."

"You let me—"

"It was funny, Alex. You have to admit it was funny."

I didn't admit anything. We drove back toward the city, Jeff smoking, me watching the suburbs blur past the window. The old woman at the restaurant. Mrs. Chaefer's burning hair. The pattern was becoming clear: I was present for disasters, complicit in ways I didn't understand.

"You're quiet," Jeff said.

"I'm thinking."

"Dangerous habit."

We stopped at La Salles so I could retrieve my car. Jeff tapped the briefcase Don had given him — a black leather case, contents unknown. "Birthday present," he'd said. "From me to me."

"You're going to get caught," I said.

“Caught at what?”

“Whatever you’re doing.”

He smiled. Ting. “Enjoy your night, Alex. Don’t think about the old lady.”

I drove home. The house was a mess — shoes in the hallway, dishes in the sink, the accumulated debris of a family that didn’t notice I existed unless they needed something. Sarah was at the kitchen counter, filing her nails.

“Have fun with Jeff?” she asked, not looking up.

“It was... eventful.”

“Jamie called. She’s short on rent again.”

“We need to talk about that.”

“Do we?” She set the file down. “She’s family, Alex.”

“She’s your family. And she’s taken forty thousand dollars from us.”

The number hung in the air. Sarah’s face shifted, the way it always did when confronted: first confusion, then tears, then rage. The three-act play of Sarah’s displeasure.

“You can’t—”

“I can. I am. No more money, Sarah. Your father can help her. He’s a millionaire.”

“You know she can’t ask him!”

“Then she can get a job. Like normal people. Like people who weren’t born with silver spoons in their mouths.”

Sarah stood. Her hands found my chest and pushed.

I hit the cherry cabinets behind me. My head made a sound — thud — and for a moment the room went fuzzy, and I was seven years old again, and Dennis was screaming, and my father’s belt was rising and falling. Then I was back, or almost back — there was the usual lag between the meat suit’s actions and my awareness of them, the gap that had gotten me in trouble my whole life, the way I was always catching up to what my hands were already doing. The string was long. I was up near the ceiling watching the meat suit handle the situation. Sarah was still pushing, still screaming, and I pushed back.

I meant to stop her. That was the thing I would return to, in the months that followed, the thing I couldn't file away or optimize into a different shape: I meant only to stop her. But my hands have always had a gap between intention and execution — the motor processing that arrives late, the proprioception that gets the angle wrong, the force miscalibrated in the translation from thought to body. I had learned this about myself the hard way, in a hundred small collisions with the physical world. I had never learned it in this way. But Sarah was off-balance, her bare heel catching on the rug, and as she fell she twisted, reaching for the granite counter, missing it. Her face struck the granite edge with a sound that split the air: not a thud, not a crack, but a sharp, hollow coconut, as if her skull were a thing both fragile and full of milk.

The impact shattered the zygomatic arch, sent splinters of maxilla and mandible plunging backward, the orbital rim collapsing so the left eye bulged and the right receded, a grotesque asymmetry blooming across her features. The bone beneath the skin was no longer a structure but a field of jagged tectonics, sharp enough to cut through muscle and the roof of her mouth. The skin ballooned, then ruptured, releasing a gout of arterial spray that painted the cabinets in a pattern as intricate and senseless as a Rorschach blot.

Her neck completed the fall a split-second later, vertebrae C2 and C3 shearing with a wet, fibrous pop, the spinal cord severed so cleanly that the body below seemed to lose all agency, arms and legs spasming in a last, primitive semaphore. The mouth opened, then closed, then opened again, lips already swelling, teeth clicking together in a final, mechanical rhythm.

“Sarah?”

The word “Sarah” — the taste of cold florals and metal — was wrong in the air, addressed to something that wasn't going to answer. The meat suit knelt before I decided to kneel. This is what I mean about the factory setting. I was still above somewhere, processing, and the meat suit was already down on the floor doing the things bodies do at crisis scenes, checking the pulse,

evaluating the blood spread, performing the procedural responses of a person in an emergency.

I was watching from a distance that felt like several feet and like infinite miles simultaneously. The string was almost fully slack. I wasn't here. The meat suit was here. The meat suit was handling this. I would catch up later, in approximately four hours, when the emotional processing completed its queue. The blood spread in a maroon pool — the word "blood" in my mouth tasted of pennies, copper-bright and cold, which it always does, which it has always done, which I understand now was preparing me for something — the same shade as the old woman's at the restaurant, but thicker, more viscous, as if something else were mixed in. I checked her pulse — thumb to wrist, the way I'd seen in movies — and felt nothing. I put my ear to her mouth. Nothing. And yet, when I pulled back, I could have sworn I saw the cheekbone shift, the fractured maxilla rotating beneath the skin like a tectonic plate, seeking a new equilibrium.

Her face was wrong. Asymmetrical. My brain tried to fix it, searching for the five differences like a puzzle, but there were too many. One, two, three, four, five. I couldn't stop counting. The left side seemed to sag, to melt, while the right remained rigid, frozen in the moment of impact. Between the two halves, a valley of crushed bone and exposed tissue, pulsing with a rhythm that matched my own heartbeat.

The smell hit the part of the brain that does not ask permission.

There was no intermediary stage. No pre-nausea, no time to categorize and make a decision. The olfactory hit — copper, the sweet-wrong note beneath the copper, and something further underneath that I had never smelled before and which I understand now was the very beginning of biological processes that do not wait for anyone's feelings — went directly from nose to body without consulting the part of me that is theoretically in charge. I turned her over to check the carotid, and her face came into full view, the caved side of it, the wrong geography of what

had been Sarah's face, and my body produced a response I did not authorize and could not stop.

I vomited with the force that is only possible when the nervous system bypasses every modulating system simultaneously. Projectile is the accurate word. It struck the collapsed side of her face and distributed across the blood-painted cabinet front in a pattern I can describe only as comprehensive. I had time to bring my hand up to stop it.

The hand created a distribution problem.

Covering your mouth mid-projectile vomit does not stop the vomit. It redirects it. The contained pressure found the gaps between my fingers and the seal at the jaw and the space above the wrist and went in several directions that a single open mouth could not have achieved. Sarah's hair. The cabinet hinge. My shirt collar. The floor to the left in a radius I had not predicted. The smell, which had already been nonmanageable, became something I have no language for — bile and blood and the sweet-wrong note of what was beginning and the bleach I had not yet applied, all of it simultaneously in a kitchen with the windows closed.

I dry-heaved. This produced nothing but the mechanics of vomiting without completion, which is worse, because the body has committed to the process and the process has no exit. Twice. Three times. And then on the third, something more arrived — less volume, different temperature, darker — and went onto the floor at my knees.

I need to describe what happened next precisely, because it is the kind of thing that is always happening to me, and because it happened at the worst possible moment, and because dyspraxia does not suspend itself for emergency situations.

My proprioception is unreliable. This is a documented feature of my neurological architecture — the spatial sense of where my body is relative to surfaces, the force calibration, the gap between intended and actual movement. I know this about myself. I have a file on it, cross-referenced with every broken thing and every

wrong-footed step and every door frame I have walked into. Knowing about it has never once prevented it from occurring.

I moved to stand. My right foot found the floor. My left foot found the fresh vomit, which had mixed with the spreading blood pool into a surface with exactly the coefficient of friction of zero, and my left foot went out from under me with the specific totality of a slip that is not gradual but immediate, the floor simply no longer there in the way floors are supposed to be.

I came down.

My hands went out — the reflexive catch, the arm that goes out whether you tell it to or not — but the floor was the same floor in every direction and my right knee hit first and then my left palm skidded and then my chest and then my face, and I landed across Sarah.

Specifically: across the upper portion of Sarah. Specifically: my right forearm landed across what remained of her face with a force that was not large but was not nothing, and my weight followed it, and there was a wet-soft resistance, and the already-wrong geometry of her face found a new configuration, and her head moved.

I will not describe the sound it made. I will say only that it was not a sound that should exist and that it took its place in the inventory of sounds I cannot file and cannot delete and that play back at irregular intervals without being asked.

I got up. This took longer than getting up normally takes, because my hands were on a surface they should not have been on, and my proprioceptive feedback was even less reliable than usual because my entire nervous system was running on a single emergency channel. I got vertical.

I stood in the kitchen covered in things that should have remained interior, having just fallen on my dead wife, and the string connecting me to my body was so slack it had no tension left, and the only functional information my brain offered was: the word “blood” tastes of pennies, copper-bright and cold. It always has. It always will. This is apparently what the brain considers useful right now.

The blood on the cabinet was darker than I expected. The blood is darker than I expected, I thought. That's interesting.

The thing about masking is it's load-bearing. You build these systems, these frameworks, these Covey habits and social scripts and spreadsheets, and they function as the architecture that holds you upright in the world. They are not optional enhancements. They are the whole structure. And when the load gets high enough the structure doesn't bend. It just, suddenly, isn't there. And what's underneath is not a more authentic self or a rawer version of your feelings. What's underneath is just the meat. Just the wiring that hasn't finished processing yet. Just a body in a kitchen, standing in its own vomit, next to a person it fell on, that doesn't know what it's feeling because it won't know for another four hours, and by then other things will have happened.

* * *

The kids didn't come out of their rooms. They were fifteen, twins, obese and sedentary, more interested in their video games than in the sound of their parents arguing. I was grateful for this, in a distant way, as I laid the blue tarp on the kitchen floor and rolled Sarah into it.

The body was lighter than I'd expected, boneless almost, her vertebrae so thoroughly disconnected that Sarah's head flopped against her ribs as I rolled her over the plastic. The crushed skull oozed a curdled, slow-spreading slurry that pooled beneath her cheek, seeping from the hairline in viscous threads, but that wasn't the worst of it. Under the skin, networks of white fibrous mycelia were already threading through the pulped tissue, mapping delicate circuitries across face and neck, the strands coiling and uncoiling in time with residual muscle twitches. The mouth, split and gaping, exhaled little bubbles of blood that expanded and collapsed with a wet, burbling rhythm, the segmented tissue inside undulating as if something were trying to speak, or breathe. I wrapped her in two layers of garbage bags, taping them tight, but as I did, her eyelids fluttered open — slow, almost deliberate — and for a moment I swore the blue irises were shot through with

something granular, motile, as if tiny organisms were swimming beneath the vitreous.

I looked away, and the room seemed to pulse, the overhead light casting shadows that bloomed and retracted like lungs. My own hands were unfamiliar, moving on their own, wrapping, taping, tucking, as if I were watching myself from the ceiling. The pattern on the cabinets caught my eye — the Rorschach blot of Sarah's blood seemed to shift, forming shapes I almost recognized before dissolving back into randomness.

I found more garbage bags under the sink. Duct tape on the workbench. I lined the minivan's trunk, working methodically, the way I'd learned to work through panic: one step, then the next, then the next. Bleach on the floor. Towels in the trash. The tarp made a scraping sound as I dragged it to the garage.

"Kids," I called down the hallway. "We're going to the cabin."

No response.

I unplugged their video game. They looked up, faces glistening with pizza grease, mouths open in protest.

"Now," I said. "Fifteen minutes."

They'd never seen me like this. I could tell by their faces — shock, confusion, a hint of fear. Sarah had always undermined my authority, undone my discipline, left me with these soft, demanding children who looked at me like I was furniture.

Not anymore.

They packed. I loaded the van — their bags in front, the package in back, bleach smell thick enough to make Page wrinkle her nose.

The body was heavier than it should have been.

I want to account for this practically. I had expected a hundred and forty pounds, approximately, based on what I knew of Sarah's build, and the resistance I encountered exceeded that estimate in a way I could not immediately explain. The tarp shifted as I positioned myself to lift, and the weight distribution was wrong — dense toward one end, shifting in a way that cargo does not shift, and I told myself: settling. I told myself: the wrap, the bags, the unevenness of the surface. I told myself what you tell yourself.

Through the blue plastic, the shape was Sarah-shaped and also not Sarah-shaped. There was a protrusion along the upper back that pressed against the inside of the tarp with the insistence of something that had decided on a direction. I did not look at this directly. I looked at it with the periphery while the center of my vision was occupied with the mechanics of the lift.

The smell that came with the movement was new. Not the blood smell, not the bleach — something underneath both of those, a biological warmth, faintly sweet in the wrong direction. My synesthesia translated it immediately: warm and organic and faintly floral in a wrong direction I did not yet have a referent for — I would have one within a day, in a hardware store, and the associative link between the two would arrive uninvited for the rest of my life — and I swallowed it and I lifted and I moved.

I loaded her into the trunk. The space seemed slightly wrong — the interior dimensions, the relationship of the ceiling to the floor — and I classified this under: exhaustion, alcohol, extreme stress, all of the above. I closed the hatch. The latch caught. That was the sound of it being done.

I went back inside and stood at the kitchen sink and ran cold water over my wrists for two minutes before I called the kids.

“Cleaning supplies,” I said. “Sorry.”

I said it the way you say something when your mouth produces words because words are what the social situation requires and the content is secondary. The smell was not cleaning supplies. The kids knew it was not cleaning supplies. Page’s nose had wrinkled as we loaded, and she had looked at the trunk, and I had not met her eye.

The word “sorry” tasted of nothing. Depleted. A word I had used in so many inaccurate contexts over the years that it had lost its synesthetic signature entirely.

We drove.

The cabin was sixty miles north, near Chain O’Lakes. I had bought it years ago as a retreat from Sarah and the city and the constant performance of normal life. She had never liked it. The

irony of this was not lost on me, though I filed it without completing the thought.

It was a Friday evening in October and the highway was clear and the minivan's climate system was running and none of it was sufficient. The smell reached the front cabin of the minivan at approximately fifteen minutes into the drive. I noticed it because my synesthesia registered it before I consciously placed it — a taste arrived that I had not had in my mouth before, something between the penny-cold of blood and something older and more organic underneath, a warm-sweet base note that the cold copper sat on top of. I identified this taste as: the beginning of a process. I filed this under: do not think about further.

Behind me, in the back row, Brian shifted. Then shifted again, his knee starting the rapid bounce that meant his nervous system had noticed something before his mouth had.

"Dad," Brian said. "It smells weird in here. Weird. Weird in here." The echo wasn't a stutter. I'd catalogued the pattern years ago — when the incoming data outpaced his processing, Brian repeated the tail end of his own sentence, buying himself a half-second the rest of us didn't need.

"It's the bleach," I said. "I was cleaning before we left. Bleach off-gasses. It's harmless."

Bleach has a specific smell — chlorine, chemical, sharp. What was in the van was not that. Brian apparently accepted the explanation because Brian was fifteen and still in the developmental phase of accepting his father's explanations, or because the alternative explanation was one his nervous system declined to generate. I did not turn around.

The tarp made a sound.

I want to be precise: the tarp made a sound that could have been the road vibration working through the cargo area, the suspension absorbing a divot in the pavement, the natural shifting of any wrapped object in a moving vehicle. I have a complete accounting of the ordinary sounds that cargo makes in a moving minivan and this sound was within the parameters of those sounds. This is what I told myself. The blue plastic settled and

pulled and a low friction sound followed it, the specific drag of tarp against trunk lining, and I gripped the wheel at nine and three and I drove.

Five minutes passed.

“Dad,” Page said. Her voice had a different quality from Brian’s. Brian’s had been incidental, conversational. Page’s had a quality I will describe as: reading the room. “What is that smell.” Her thumb found the silver ring she wore and began turning it, slow half-rotations, the specific tell that meant she’d already run three explanations and discarded all of them.

Not a question. A statement in question form. The inflection of someone who already has a theory.

“Bleach,” I said. “And the groceries. Some of the produce, maybe. I should have bagged it separately.”

“It’s not groceries,” Page said.

“The chicken,” I said. “I think the chicken may have—”

“We didn’t buy chicken,” she said.

There was a pause in which I counted the highway dividers because the counting was the only thing available to me that had any structure to it. One. Two. Three. The synesthetic red of the number seven arrived when I reached it and I focused on the red because red was at least a color and colors are things you can hold in the processing without them requiring anything further from you.

The tarp shifted again.

It was the road. It was the road and the suspension and the ordinary physics of cargo in a vehicle. I was certain of this. The sound was within parameters. And yet: my hands on the wheel at nine and three had gone white at the knuckles, and the penny-copper-warm-sweet taste in my mouth had deepened into a chord I did not have notation for, and from somewhere beneath the tarp and the garbage bags and the two layers of plastic and the bleach-soaked towels, there was a sound that was between a creak and a sigh, and it was in Sarah’s register.

Not Sarah’s voice. I want to be precise. It was not a voice. It was a sound in the register where her voice had lived — the

frequency range, the approximate resonance, the specific timbre that had occupied the passenger seat of every car I had ever driven with her in it. A sound that could have been anything. Road noise. The bagged groceries settling. The particular harmonics of a sixty-mile-per-hour minivan on an October highway.

“What was that,” Brian said.

“The tarp,” I said. “I told you, cleaning supplies. The bags settle.”

I turned on the radio. A talk radio station, voices, content I could not process but which occupied the acoustic space that had been occupied by the sound. I turned it louder than was necessary. Page said nothing more. Brian went back to his phone.

In the cargo area behind me, in the dark, something settled. Or the tarp settled. Or the road had a ridge and the suspension absorbed it and transmitted a vibration forward through sixty dollars of plastic and tape and the van made a sound that I was not going to assign an origin to.

Cold florals and something faintly metallic. The synesthetic taste of her name, arriving uninvited, persistent, not fading the way it would if she were simply somewhere else.

The word “Sarah” has always tasted of cold florals and something metallic. It always has. It always will.

I drove sixty miles an hour toward a shed I could not bring myself to open.

We arrived at 7:30. The kids went to their rooms, doors slamming. I sat in my brown leather recliner — the same model as the one at home, down to the product number — and drank a whiskey sour. The ice clinked against the crystal. I thought of Dennis, the way he’d looked at me that last night, the way I’d failed to protect him.

Not this time. This time, I’d protect myself.

The shed. That was the answer. The old storage shed behind the cabin, cobblestone foundation, pine floorboards with gaps wide enough to see the dirt beneath. I could pry up a board, dig a hole, drop the package in. No one would find her. No one would know.

I finished my drink and went to the shed.

The brass knob was cold and slightly wet from where the fog had come in off the river. I put my hand on it. I stood there with my hand on it for a while. The lantern threw my shadow back at me against the tree line, long and wrong, and from inside the shed there was nothing. No sound. Which was correct. There was no reason for there to be a sound.

I turned the knob.

I opened the door.

I did not go in.

What I mean is: I stood in the doorway, and the darkness inside the shed was just darkness, just the shadows of an old boat and a workbench and the shape of what I had put in there an hour ago, and there was a smell that had not been there before, something organic and copper-sweet that I categorized and immediately refused to categorize, and my legs had stopped working in the sense that I could not make them carry me through the door.

This is the thing about demand avoidance that nobody explains right. It is not stubbornness. It is not laziness. It is your nervous system identifying a task as a threat and simply, completely, in the same way that you cannot decide not to flinch when something comes at your eye, refusing. The refusal is not upstream. It is not a decision. It happens in the same wiring that runs your heartbeat.

I had a shovel. I had the floorboards mostly loose. I had a plan, which was good, plans were good, plans were the structure that kept the processing from collapsing. And my body was standing in a doorway not going through it and the lantern was burning down and the kids were in the cabin.

Tomorrow, I thought. First thing.

I closed the door. The latch clicked.

I went back to the cabin and made another drink and sat in the recliner and did not sleep and did not think about what was in the shed and certainly did not think about whether I had imagined the way the tarp had looked when the lantern light caught it at that

angle, the way the shape of it seemed slightly different from the shape I had made.

There was a bookshelf in the cabin's front room, mostly Sarah's things she'd never bothered to move back to the house, paperbacks she'd meant to read on retreats we never took. Wedged at the end of the shelf was a book with a cracked spine and a dozen dog-eared pages: *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Kinley Group had sent everyone home with a copy after a leadership seminar in a hotel conference room I remembered only in fragments — a facilitator with a laser pointer, forty men in similar suits nodding at slides about paradigm shifts. I had filed it, at the time, under: material for people whose problem is ambition, not architecture. I did not open it for eight years.

Those eight years were not empty, though they left very little to show for themselves. I had a shelf of my own by then, in the closet, behind the coats, thirty-some books deep, each one purchased with the specific hope that this would be the one, each one finished or abandoned in more or less equal numbers and shelved either way, because none of them had been built to solve the actual problem, on account of nobody involved — not me, not the authors, not the two therapists I saw briefly in those years and left within a handful of sessions — knowing yet what the actual problem was.

The one about not giving a fuck was the best example, and I mean that as a genuine compliment to the book, which was well-argued and entirely wasted on me. I bought it because the premise appealed to me structurally: a finite quantity of caring, allocated deliberately, spent only on what earned it. I read it twice. I underlined generously. The trouble, which took me embarrassingly long to notice, was that I had never once given the fucks the book existed to help you stop giving. The social hierarchy at the firm. The networking mixers. The specific ache of hearing about a bar night after the fact and doing the math on who'd been invited and who hadn't. None of it had ever cost me anything, because none of it had ever registered as currency I was spending in the first place. By the book's own metric I had already

mastered the skill it was selling. What I could not do was walk into a grocery store on a Saturday afternoon without the fluorescent hum and the cart-wheel shriek and a stranger's perfume two aisles over assembling into something with the physical texture of a wall, and this, I eventually had to admit, was not a fucks-management problem, whatever else it was.

I tried the book on it anyway, because it was the tool already in my hand, and a hand in the middle of drowning does not stop reaching just because the tool is wrong. Maybe I can just decide not to give a fuck about the noise, I remember thinking in a parking lot, with the specific confidence of a man about to test a hypothesis that stood no chance of surviving contact with his own nervous system. Exposure therapy, essentially. Walk in enough times and the caring runs out. It did not run out, because the caring had never been the mechanism to begin with. I ran the same experiment on a coffee shop the following Tuesday, reasoning that if silence was the problem then noise might at least hold still long enough to be a controlled variable, and learned only that a variable is still a variable when your nervous system can't tell the difference between a deliberate exposure and an ambush. Both experiments failed in exactly the same way — completely, and without any usable data — because I had spent two afternoons running the wrong study on the wrong subject with an instrument built for an entirely different species of problem than the one I actually had.

I opened it three years ago, the week after a psychiatrist named Dr. Okonkwo-Reyes said the word 'autistic' out loud in a beige office with a white-noise machine running in the hallway to protect the privacy of whoever was in the next room having their own life reorganized. She said 'ADHD' too, in the same sentence, with the specific care of someone who has delivered this exact sentence enough times to have optimized it, and then she said a phrase I wrote down and have not stopped turning over since: 'You've been solving the wrong problem your entire life, and you solved it extremely well.' I did not cry in the office. I cried in the parking garage, in the car, for eleven minutes, which I know

because I looked at the dashboard clock when I started and when I stopped, because even the crying needed a container I could verify the edges of.

The three years since had been a research project, conducted with the same thoroughness I brought to everything: I read, I catalogued, I found the vocabulary — masking, inertia, the double empathy problem, the specific mechanics of a nervous system that had spent forty-seven years being graded against an instruction manual written for a different species of person. And somewhere in that research, unglamorously, sitting between a psychology textbook and a stack of forum printouts, was Covey. Not because the book had answers. Because it had structure, and structure was the only medication that had ever reliably worked on me, and once I had the diagnosis I finally understood why: I wasn't undisciplined. I was running the wrong operating system on hardware nobody had documented, and the seven habits, badly fitted as they were, were at least a scaffold I could hang the real work on.

The real work, mostly, was this: tracking where the money went. Not out of greed — I want to be precise about this — but because somewhere in that same three years of reading I learned that autistic adults are defrauded, underpaid, and quietly taken advantage of at rates that should be a public health statistic and instead are a rounding error nobody measures, because the same traits that make us bad at reading a room make us bad at noticing when the room is picking our pocket. I started a ledger. Not a metaphorical one — an actual spreadsheet, then a series of them, tracking every dollar that left my hands and whether it had ever, in any verifiable sense, come back. Jamie's forty thousand. The specific arithmetic of Jeff's expense account. I did not build this system because I was cruel with money. I built it because I had spent forty-seven years being the reliable, easy-to-read mark in every room I was in, and once I had a name for why, I could not stop seeing it, and once I could not stop seeing it, I could not stop counting.

I don't know what made me reach for the book that night specifically, except that my body needed a task it could complete, and burying my wife was, apparently, not that task, and the book was close, and books, unlike doorways, do not require you to cross a threshold to begin.

I opened it to the table of contents, which I already knew by heart, the way you know the contents page of a book you've returned to at two in the morning more times than you'd admit to a therapist.

Habit 1: Be Proactive. Habit 2: Begin with the End in Mind. Habit 3: Put First Things First. Habit 4: Think Win-Win. Habit 5: Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood. Habit 6: Synergize. Habit 7: Sharpen the Saw.

Seven steps. A finite, ordered, enumerable list, the exact shape of thing my nervous system had been starving for since approximately 5:47 p.m., when the coconut sound happened and the string went slack and nothing since had had an edge I could find.

I want to be honest about what I was thinking, because I don't think I get another chance to be honest about it: I did not believe this book could fix what I had done. I am not, whatever else may be true about me, an idiot. But I believed, with the specific desperate faith of a man standing over a threshold he cannot make himself cross, that if I went back to page one and started the sequence again, correctly this time, from the beginning, then something that had been failing my entire life, the distance between what I meant and what happened, might finally close. Three years of language hadn't closed it. Maybe the language had never been the missing piece. Maybe it was just the diagnosis, said again, in a different room, by a different kind of doctor — coroner instead of psychiatrist.

I already knew, by then, that the manual had not been written for a nervous system like mine. Dr. Okonkwo-Reyes had told me that in the first appointment, more or less, and I had spent three years confirming it empirically. Stephen Covey did not know I existed. He wrote for people whose paradigms shifted when asked

to; people for whom proactivity was a choice sitting in the gap between stimulus and response, available on request. He did not write for a man whose body had just spent an hour standing in a doorway, unable to make itself cross a threshold it had already decided to cross, because the deciding and the doing lived in two different rooms that did not share a hallway. He did not write for a man whose best intentions arrived, consistently, on the far side of other people, transformed en route into something he had never meant to send. I knew all of this already. Knowing it had not, apparently, been sufficient. I only knew that I was going to try again, because trying was a task, and tasks were the only thing my hands could still hold.

Begin with the end in mind, the book said, on a page I had read so many times the corner had worn soft.

I did not know yet how many ends I would fail to see coming.

I closed the book and set it on the arm of the recliner, where I would see it in the morning, where seeing it would be easier than deciding to look for it.

I had made a plan. The plan would happen tomorrow.

It would happen tomorrow.

Continue Reading

Chapter One ends here. The rest of Happiness Unintentional: A Neurodivergent Noir runs eight more chapters, an epilogue, and A Reader's Companion: Clinical Terms and Resources.

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