



You look fine

(and Other Lies Trauma Taught Us)

jimi katsis

YOU LOOK FINE
AND OTHER LIES TRAUMA TAUGHT US



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For all of us who walked the path Trauma carved out, know that right now, in this moment, you can carve a path of your own.

Survival taught me how to keep breathing. Healing taught me how to want to

— JIMI KATSIS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book wasn't written in isolation, even though much of it came from the loneliest rooms I know.

To the people I've sat with over the years—clients, colleagues, fellow travelers—you've been my greatest teachers. Your courage to keep showing up has shaped every word on these pages.

To the friends who loved me without needing me to be fine, thank you for staying through the silences.

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To my family, chosen and otherwise, for teaching me that love can survive honesty.

And to every reader who finds a fragment of themselves here: you are why I wrote this. You are not alone, and you never were.

PREFACE

This is a book for people who look fine.

You keep the plates spinning. You are capable, useful, impressive when needed. You are the one others lean on, the one who can read a room and fit it like a second skin. You also carry a fatigue that sleep doesn't touch, a tightness you've learned to ignore, and a question that won't leave you alone: is there anyone here besides the performance?

I wrote this for you.

It isn't a memoir, though you'll see flashes of my life. It isn't a manual, though you'll find language and practices you can use. It is a mirror—a set of carefully angled surfaces where your story can come into view without being told *at* you or reduced to bullet-point fixes. You'll hear my voice, yes, but if I've done my job you'll mostly hear your own.

Here's the frame. Many of us learned early that love is something to be earned, safety something to be managed, and visibility something to be negotiated. We adapted brilliantly. We became watchful, competent, fluent in other people. The adaptations worked—until they didn't. This book lives in that turning: when the very skills that kept you intact begin to cost more than they give, and you suspect there's a person underneath the role who wants their life back.

A few terms repeat in these pages. The *watcher* is the part of you that monitors how you're landing and makes constant micro-edits. The *performance* is the persona you bring to a room so everyone else stays steady. The *steel shutter* is what slams down when it's no

longer safe to feel. None of these are pathologies. They are intelligent responses to the rooms you grew up in. We're not here to shame them; we're here to learn when to thank them and set them down.

What this book won't do: it won't call you broken, it won't prescribe a single path, and it won't pretend there's a version of healing where you never get triggered again. What it will do: give names to familiar sensations; trace the loops you've been stuck in without turning them into a verdict; offer ways to notice, soften, and choose in the moments that have historically chosen for you.

If you want a map, it's simple and circular. We begin with the performance—how it starts and why it's so hard to step off. We move into the body you live in, the one that keeps the receipts when your mind wants to keep the peace. We look at relationships built on old blueprints and the anger you're not supposed to have. We spend time with competence and busyness—how reliability becomes a prison and what happens when the strategy collapses. And then we arrive where we were always going: integration. Not "cured," but different. You will recognise yourself more often from the inside.

You don't have to read straight through. Start where your attention lands. If a chapter stirs more than you can hold, pause. Walk. Drink water. Put on a song that helps your body remember it exists. Come back when you can feel your feet again. None of this counts more because you push. If anything counts, it's the gentleness you bring to the work.

A note about stories. I offer pieces of mine the way a therapist might offer a steady hand: not to centre myself, but to help your nervous system trust that someone else has stood in similar weather and lived to describe it. You'll also meet composites of clients—carefully altered to protect identities—because patterns are easier to see at a slight distance. If any detail doesn't fit you, let it go. The point is not accuracy to my life; it's fidelity to yours.

You may notice a particular tone running through these pages: a *both/and*. You can be astonishingly capable *and* extraordinarily tired. You can love people *and* stop being the only regulator in a room. You can keep the skills you earned in hard places *and* refuse to live as if you're still there. We are not replacing one rigid identity with another; we're giving you more room to move.

One more thing, because it matters. Anger will show up as you read. So will grief. They aren't proof you're failing; they're proof you're telling the truth. If you need support

beyond these pages, take it seriously. Talk to someone qualified. Bring a friend into the process. Nothing about this work requires you to go alone.

What I hope for you here is modest and radical at once. Not a transformation that makes you unrecognisable, but a slow, durable shift in ratio: a little less watching, a little more being; a little less managing, a little more presence; a little less auditioning, a little more home. You won't measure it in epiphanies. You'll measure it in the ordinary softness of a jaw unclenching mid-conversation, in the sentence you don't say to prove your place, in a boundary you keep without needing to perform your reasons.

If you need a line to carry with you as you turn the page, take this one:

Let the performer work when needed—and keep walking back to the beginning of you; nurture that person, let them lead.

I'm glad you're here. Let's begin.

THE ONES WHO LOOK FINE



OR: WHY NO ONE'S GOING TO TELL YOU YOU'RE THE ONE

There's a scene in *The Matrix* where Neo goes to see the Oracle. He needs to know if he's the one—the person who'll change everything, who'll make sense of all the chaos, who'll prove that his life has meant something.

And she doesn't tell him.

She looks at him with those knowing eyes and basically says: If you were the one, you'd know. You wouldn't need me to tell you.

I've been waiting my whole life for someone to tell me I'm the one.

That I'm not just following my ego. That I'm not just responding to trauma dressed up as purpose. That I actually have a message that matters. That there's a reason—a real reason—for everything I went through. The beatings. The cigarettes stubbed out on my skin. The parents who never once came to see me perform, who never knew who I was, who made that money gesture when I told them I'd recorded my first song: Does it make you money? Because if it doesn't, it's worthless.

Thirty-five years working as a psychotherapist. Trained. Credentialed. Supposedly competent. And I'm still waiting for someone to look at me and say: You're not a fraud.

This matters. You matter.

No one's ever said that to me.

And here's the uncomfortable truth I've learned: No one's going to say it to you either.

Not because you aren't the one. Not because your life doesn't matter or your work isn't valuable or you're not capable of extraordinary things.

But because that's the wound.

That bottomless need for someone to finally see you—really see you—and confirm that you have value. That you're not performing. That underneath all the achievement and competence and getting-it-together, there's something real.

That wound doesn't heal because someone finally says the right words. It was created in the absence of those words— and no amount of external validation can fill a void that was carved out in childhood.

I know this intellectually. I teach this to clients. I've written about it, lectured on it, built an entire career around helping people understand their trauma.

And I still fucking want it.

I still want someone to look at me and say: You're the one. You're here for a reason. It wasn't all for nothing.

So this isn't that book. I'm not going to tell you you're the one. I'm not going to promise that if you just do these seven steps or adopt this mindset or heal your inner child, everything will finally make sense and you'll feel whole.

But I am going to tell you this:

I see you.

I see you behind the competence. Behind the achievement. Behind the mask you wear that shows nothing of what's actually happening underneath.

I see the soul in torment.

The person being wounded by a thousand cuts every single day—from the second you wake up to the second you finally fall asleep, if you can sleep. Living in a construct where the walls are made of your trauma. Where every choice, every relationship, every career move is filtered through adaptations you made when you were too young to know you were making them.

Performing so convincingly that no one knows you're drowning.

I see you because I'm still that too.

At 63. Still catching myself in trauma responses twenty times a day. Still driven by the need to prove I have value. Still being chased by my mother's money gesture. Still uncer-

tain whether anything I'm doing is authentic or just elaborate compensation for feeling worthless.

And maybe that's why I can actually help. Not because I'm on the other side of trauma—healed and whole and ready to guide you to the promised land. But because I'm in it with you. Still learning. Still falling. Still getting up and wondering if any of it means anything.

Here's what happened to me that changed everything, even though it didn't fix everything:

I was doing reflective work. The kind of philosophical processing you do when you're supposedly helping other people and realize you should probably look at your own shit for a change.

And I started examining why I'd spent decades working with traumatized young people. Why I was so impassioned about it. Why I would see these kids—these petrified animals hiding in corners with their tails between their legs, unable to trust anything or anyone—and feel this rage, this desperate need to advocate for them, to stand between them and a world that had already destroyed them.

I thought I was passionate because I cared about injustice. Because I believed children shouldn't suffer for things that weren't their fault.

And then I realized: I was looking at myself.

Every kid I saw, I was seeing my own childhood. The violence. The neglect. The complete absence of recognition for who I was or what I could do. The parents who never once saw me perform music even though I was on stage at 13. The mother who stubbed cigarettes out on me. The house that was terrifying. The brothers who were addicts and dealers and trying to kill themselves.

I'd built my entire professional identity around helping these kids.

And it never occurred to me—not once, despite being a trained therapist who should have known better—that I was one of those kids.

That everything I'd done, every choice I'd made, every passion I'd followed, every business I'd built—it was all trauma response. Not conscious choice. Not purpose. Survival architecture constructed by a child who needed to feel valuable because his parents made it clear he wasn't.

When I realized that, it exploded my entire world.

Because if that was true—if my whole life had been built on adaptations rather than

authentic desires— then who was I? What was real? What had I actually chosen versus what had my nervous system engineered to keep me safe?

And here's the thing that really fucked me up: I was good at it.

The overcompensation. The performance. The narcissism that was actually just a protective shell around a psyche that felt worthless. I'd built successful businesses. Forty staff. Extraordinary amounts of money. I'd been on stage, performed, preached in churches, run youth groups, recorded music.

Every single thing was about propping up my ego. Every single thing was about trying to attain some value for myself. Trying to make my mother see that I made something of myself. Trying to prove I wasn't worthless.

And I'm 63, and I'm still doing it.

So when I sit across from a client—someone in their thirties or forties who's high-functioning and successful and absolutely exhausted—I see something very specific.

I see the mask. The one they're showing the world. Professional. Competent. Got-it-together.

And behind that mask, I see the trapped person. The soul being tormented. Living in a construct where the walls are reflections of trauma— all the ways they learned to adapt, to perform, to be whoever the room needed them to be.

The thing is, they're so good at the performance that they don't feel the torment most of the time. It's there, but it's contained. Tensioned containment—like a muscle that never gets to relax.

Until they get triggered. Then it becomes visceral. Present. Undeniable.

The panic attack in the hotel bathroom during a work conference. The Sunday afternoon when they finally have unstructured time and completely fall apart. The moment their partner asks what they want for dinner and they realize they have no idea—not because they're being accommodating, but because the question doesn't compute.

That's when they show up in my office. And I see them. Not the version they're performing. The real person underneath.

I see them because I see myself.

Still trapped in some of the same patterns. Still uncertain what's real. Still catching myself and thinking: Is this authentic or is this the adaptation? Am I choosing this or is my trauma choosing it for me?

Here's what this book is about:

Not healing. Not transcendence. Not seven steps to becoming whole.

This book is about recognition.

It's about seeing what's actually happening. In you. In me. In all of us who look fine from the outside while being wounded by a thousand cuts on the inside.

It's about understanding that the high-functioning adaptation—the competence, the achievement, the performance—isn't wrong. It kept us alive. It got us here.

But it's also costing us our lives.

Because we optimized ourselves into corners. We built careers and relationships and identities based on who we thought we needed to be to finally be safe, to finally be valued, to finally be enough.

And now we're successful. And exhausted. And wondering why none of it feels the way we thought it would.

Let me tell you what I'm not going to do in this book:

I'm not going to pretend I'm on the other side of this. That I figured it all out and now I'm here to show you the way.

I'm not going to sell you some bullshit about how if you just heal your inner child or set better boundaries or practice radical self-love, everything will click into place.

I'm not going to tell you that your trauma made you stronger or that everything happens for a reason or that you should be grateful for your resilience.

And I'm absolutely not going to tell you you're the one.

Because that's what you're waiting for. That's what I'm still waiting for. And it's the waiting itself that's the problem.

Here's what I am going to do:

I'm going to show you what I see. In the clients who sit across from me. In myself when I'm being brutally honest. In the patterns that repeat across every high-functioning person I've worked with who's living with the aftermath of developmental trauma.

I'm going to name what's been invisible. The specific texture of trauma that doesn't look like trauma because it looks like success.

I'm going to tell you uncomfortable truths. About money and ego and performance and the fraud feeling that doesn't go away even after 35 years of supposedly knowing better.

I'm going to use my own life as the map. Not because I'm special. But because I'm not. Because I'm still in this, still navigating it, still falling over the same patterns I've been falling over for decades—just now I see them. And seeing them changes something.

Not everything. But something.

Here's what I want you to understand right from the start:

You don't have to wait to be healed before you're allowed to live.

You don't have to figure it all out before you're allowed to make changes.

You don't have to transcend your trauma before you're allowed to want something different.

You don't have to be on the other side of this to start seeing what's actually happening and making different choices when you can.

Which won't be always. It won't even be most of the time at first.

But it will be sometimes. And sometimes is enough to begin.

Integration isn't arrival. It's ongoing negotiation.

It's catching yourself in the old patterns—the performance, the people-pleasing, the hypervigilance disguised as competence—and sometimes choosing differently. Sometimes not.

It's knowing the difference between what's yours and what's the trauma. Most days. Not every day.

It's holding both/and: I'm competent AND I'm driven by old wounds. I'm successful AND I'm exhausted. I do meaningful work AND I'm partly doing it for money and ego. I'm helping people AND I'm still trying to prove I have value.

All of that can be true at once.

You don't have to choose between being real and being functional. Between being vulnerable and being competent. Between acknowledging your trauma and building a life.

You can be both.

You are both.

The question is: Can you see it? Can you stop performing long enough to notice what's actually happening underneath?

Because that's where the work begins. Not with fixing yourself. Not with becoming someone different. But with seeing—really seeing—who you already are beneath all the adaptations.

I'm not going to tell you I've figured it out.

But I have learned to see what's happening. And I can show you how to see it too.

That's what this book is. Not a solution. A mirror.

Not a destination. Companionship.

Not certainty. But maybe—if we're lucky—a little less loneliness in the performance.

Because the loneliest part isn't the trauma itself. It's thinking you're the only one who's still in it. The only one who's still uncertain. The only one who's still being chased by ghosts while looking perfectly fine on the outside.

You're not.

I'm here too. Still catching myself. Still falling. Still getting up.

And if that's what you need to hear—that you're not alone in this, that someone sees what's actually happening, that you don't have to have it all figured out to start living differently—then keep reading.

We're just getting started.

THE PERFORMANCE



OR: WHEN BEING EVERYONE'S EVERYTHING MEANS BEING NO ONE
AT ALL

There are days I count the costumes on the floor by the bed like a forensic tech after a party. Work-suit. Partner-skin. Friend-voice. Family-face. Each still warm from use. Each smelling faintly of whoever needed me last.

At work, I am the man who makes hard things look easy. The email that would panic someone else gets answered in three lines. The meeting that might spiral stays tidy because I anticipate the spiral and build guardrails before anyone notices. If a colleague cries, I slide a glass of water into their hand without making a spectacle of it. Competence has a choreography.

With a partner, I am fluent in attentiveness. Scan for tension. Predict needs. The joke that loosens shoulders. The soft apology pre-empting conflict. The embrace offered before it's requested so I can believe it was my idea all along.

With friends, I'm the spark. The table-finder, plan-maker, remembering who's allergic to coriander, who's worried about their dad's test results, who needs the seat with their back against the wall. Laughter is a solvent; I keep it handy.

With family, I am laminated patience. Speak quietly. Translate intent. Triangulate

ancient grievances into something survivable. Keep the peace like it's a paying job and the salary is oxygen.

It looks like generosity. It reads as maturity. But beneath the surface there's a tiny switchboard operator yanking cables in a windowless room, trying to keep all the versions of me powered at once without blowing a fuse.

There's also the watcher. I don't know when he moved in; I only know he's older than language. He perches on my shoulder, bright-eyed, noting angles, calibrating tone. He's not cruel. He's vigilant. A guardian raised in a house where attention was the price of survival. The watcher isn't theatre; the watcher is risk assessment.

He narrates everything.

Say "I love you."

— Too earnest. Dial it back.

Smile at the joke.

— Not that loud. Don't look desperate.

Tell the truth.

— Not that one; that truth costs too much.

Sometimes I'm so busy reviewing the scene I miss the scene. I can be inside the kiss and three inches above it, grading myself for sincerity. I can be dancing and filing a report on my elbows. I can be alone in my kitchen and still performing for an imaginary camera that nobody installed but me.

When you grow up guessing which version of you will keep you safest—small? bright? helpful? invisible?—you don't drop the habit because the house gets quieter. You bring it with you like a carry-on that never leaves your hand. In adulthood it passes for emotional intelligence. It even wins praise. But it costs.

A day the costumes fused

There was a wedding years back. One table told stories from the old job where I'd been the fixer. Another table belonged to a church I no longer believed in but could still speak fluently. A third table held musicians who knew me as a frontman who could hold a room with a look. All of them loved a different me. Halfway through the night the DJ switched tracks and the room dissolved into one big conversation. I could feel the cables crossing in the switchboard, smell the insulation heating. I laughed at the right places, nodded in the right cadences, offered three distinct versions of the same anecdote to three people standing in the same circle. It worked. It always works. On the ride home I could not remember my actual voice.

That's the interior cost: not just exhaustion, but erosion. When you're fluent in everyone else's language, your own becomes a dialect you forget to speak.

Where the watcher learned his craft

My mother's house taught precision. Keep the volume at safe. Keep the face at unreadable. Crying is gasoline. Need is a target. You learn to mute feeling not because you're dramatic but because you're efficient. When you can't alter the weather, you learn to pack for every climate.

The watcher grew muscles there. He protected me more times than I can count. He taught me the trick of becoming what was required before it was requested. He taught me to disappear inside capability. He taught me to pre-empt the slap with the right smile.

So no, the watcher isn't the villain. He's an old ally with outdated intel. The problem isn't that he exists; it's that he keeps running yesterday's playbook on today's field.

What it looks like in a room

If you sit opposite me and tell me you're fine, I believe you and I don't. I watch your throat. People forget their throats. I watch your top teeth rest on your bottom lip as if they were holding it in place. I watch the shoes—the ones that can be slipped off quickly in case your body demands escape.

Performers don't look strained. They look capable. But the body snitches. The shoulders wear earrings they weren't given. The breath negotiates short leases. The jaw files a tax return under alias. When I say "Where do you go when you go quiet?" some version of the shutter drops and I finally meet you.

What happens when versions collide

Nothing dramatic. No breakdown. Just a subtle lag. A half-beat delay when someone expects the familiar performance and you decide—for one minute—not to give it. They tilt their head. You panic and overcorrect. Or you don't, and the room goes prickly as their disappointment enters like weather.

Later, alone, you replay it and wonder which of you was the real one—the accommodating self who kept the peace, or the person who said, calmly, "I don't want that." The truth is less cinematic: they were both real and both partial. The performance isn't fake; it's incomplete.

What the mask protects and what it wounds

Protection: the mask absorbs impact. It keeps the insults from bruising the skin. It lets you attend the meeting, finish the dinner, survive the holiday. It is a marvel of engineering.

Wound: the mask repels tenderness, too. Praise hits laminate, slides to the floor. Your partner reaches for you and finds choreography instead of person. You go home after an evening where everyone laughed and realize you were not present for a single laugh you made happen.

Not a solution, a sightline

I'm wary of giving you exercises. You don't need more homework; you need permission to see. So this is not a prescription. It's a sightline you can check if you want:

Notice where your speech accelerates. I sell hardest when I'm furthest from myself. Notice which silences itch. Notice which rooms require more costumes than others. That's not a call to change. It's a map of the toll roads.

I am not cured of the watcher. I am on speaking terms with him. Sometimes I let him drive because the road is iced and we are passing the exit to childhood at seventy miles an hour. Sometimes I ask him to sit in the back and look out the window while I put both hands on the wheel.

There is a reason the next chapter is about the body. Performance is a story we tell with our faces. The body is the ledger where the numbers won't lie. When the versions multiply, the body foots the bill. Mine kept the receipts. Yours did too.

A taxonomy of masks (for the anthropologists among us)

There's the **competence mask**—bullet points, measured tone, eyes that signal containment. There's the **seduction mask**—not necessarily sexual; it's the warm tilt of the head, the attunement that makes people feel singular in your presence. There's the **peacemaker mask**—the smile that dissolves static, the sentence that reroutes conflict into logistics. There's the **comedian mask**—timing like a scalpel, the laugh placed precisely where tears might begin. There's the **saint**—generosity so immaculate it absolves everyone else from changing. There's the **ghost**—the version of you who attends the family gathering by leaving your body at home and sending an avatar in a pressed shirt.

We switch between them the way a bilingual child switches languages—effortless, automatic, invisible until an outsider asks which one is our mother tongue and we hesitate longer than feels comfortable.

When the watcher borrows my mouth

Sometimes the watcher speaks through me. He says "no problem" when my body is already calculating the cost. He says "I don't mind" while my back knots into a nautical map. He says "Take your time" and then keeps score in a ledger I pretend I don't keep.

On other days, he saves me. A client's grief floods the room and my own history surges forward to meet it; the watcher taps the brakes just enough that I can remain a shore rather than a second river. We finish the session. The watcher nods. I go home and let the tide take me under in my own kitchen where no one needs me to be a shoreline.

Language tells

Performance loves certain phrases: "Does that make sense?" (translation: *Do you still like me?*). "It's fine." (*Please don't make me say what I need.*) "Whatever you prefer." (*I lost my preference the year I learned that wanting is dangerous.*) "No worries." (*I am worried but I have decided to be your convenience instead.*)

It's not that the sentences are lies. They're disguises. They let us stay while not quite being here.

Four small scenes from a single ordinary day

Morning, train platform. I rehearse three versions of how to ask a stranger to move their bag so an elderly man can sit. I choose the one that sounds least like confrontation and most like collaboration. It works. The watcher chalks up a win. The body chalks up another minute of holding.

Noon, video call. The lag between mouth and screen makes people interrupt each other by accident. I become the conductor—hands, eyebrows, micro-pauses. The meeting ends early. Compliments arrive. I feel the familiar aftertaste: the kind you get from sugar substitutes—sweet and vaguely unreal.

Evening, kitchen. Partner asks, "What do you want for dinner?" The question is a mirror I don't know how to look into. I offer three options that match their day's energy rather than my appetite. We eat something fine. After, I remember a dish I actually wanted. I don't say so. There's no catastrophe. There is a small grief.

Night, phone. A friend leaves a long voicemail about their breakup. I listen twice, then start recording my reply and delete it, record and delete, each take more polished than the last. The fifth one contains a single sentence that sounds like me. I send that one, raw at the edges. The watcher huffs. The friend texts back, "Thank you. That felt real." The body unclenches half a millimeter.

How performance colonizes time

Auditions extend the past because you keep rewriting scenes you already survived, improving lines no one will hear. Auditions invade the future because you storyboard conversations that may never happen. Meanwhile the present is a corridor you pass

through without seeing the paintings. Days get efficient and strangely weightless. You go to bed having administered your life rather than lived it.

When I ask clients what they remember from last week that wasn't work, they list outcomes, not moments. "We got through it." "No fires." "It was fine." In the archive, *fine* is a mislabeled box that contains three panic attacks, four acts of kindness, a sunset that tried to speak to you, and a song you didn't let yourself sing because the walls are thin.

What begins to change when we let the watcher sit instead of drive

Not a personality transplant. Small recalibrations. You answer a question at the speed of sincerity rather than the speed of competence. You let your friend be briefly disappointed without sprinting to fix it. You tell the truth about the small thing first so you don't have to confess a catastrophe later. You keep one promise to yourself even if it produces friction.

Presence grows in the microseconds you stop editing. There's a sound it makes—the ordinary sound of a person in their own life. It doesn't win applause. It wins Tuesday.

A brief liturgy for the un-performed

If I need to, I can still be brilliant. If I need to, I can still be soothing. But I will also allow the unspectacular truth of my wants to cross the room intact. I will not round my edges to fit your old map of me. I will let silence sit even when it vibrates like a pulled wire. I will not punish myself for being a mammal.

This isn't a vow. It's a permission slip I keep having to sign again. Some days I lose it and go back to passing. Some nights I notice. I take off the costume and put it on a chair. I stand in the doorway of my own life like a person arriving home without a line to say.

A last small rebellion

Before sleep, I choose a song that makes my body sway without asking my opinion. I let it move me gracelessly in the dark. No audience. No audit. The watcher sits on the dresser and, for once, doesn't file a report. He just watches, and maybe—just maybe—lets his foot tap along.

THE BODY KEEPS RECEIPTS



OR: WHY WE FEEL THIS WAY WHEN NOTHING IS “WRONG”

There’s a lever inside me that feels industrial. I didn’t know the word “dissociation” when I found it; I only knew the sound—metal on metal, clean and final. The steel shutter.

As a child, the more I cried the harder she hit. Information, then: tears escalate danger. So the system adapted. It taught itself to mute. Not a dimmer, a kill switch. When the shutter drops, I can go from technicolour to grayscale between one breath and the next. I’ll look the same to you. I’ll even talk. But I won’t be there.

You want a scene? Seven years old, blood on my fingers from the back of my head after laughter turned to pain against the edge of a table. I show my mother the red evidence, expecting what children expect—hands, concern, the quiet miracle of being tended to. The slap arrives instead. Lesson delivered without language: need is punishable; revelation is risk. The body writes that down in muscles, not in memory.

Years later, the trigger is subtler—my partner’s face gone tight, a sentence shaped like accusation. The child inside reads the weather: threat. The shutter falls. Hearing narrows to a tunnel. My chest becomes a locked room. I can still reach for humor like a fire extin-

guisher—jokes as suppressant foam— but connection is gone. I will deal with the aftermath in private.

What it feels like, daily

High-functioning trauma isn't a dramatic violin score. It's a hum that never powers down. From the outside: reliable, responsive, the person who gets things done. From the inside: a mic that won't stop picking up room tone.

Tension lives in my whole body, but it rents different rooms on different days. The shoulders are regular tenants. The jaw sublets when I'm pretending not to be angry. The diaphragm holds its breath like it's waiting for the verdict. Sleep arrives on a handshake deal and disappears at the hint of negotiation. Food sits or it doesn't, depending on whether the body trusts the room.

When I'm triggered the breath shortens first, then the world takes on the contrast of a courtroom. Every sound is evidence. I become pre-emptive— preparing for a catastrophe that may never pay its deposit. The exhaustion isn't tiredness. It's the weight of readiness, the cost of keeping watch from a tower that once saved your life and now just ruins the view.

Clients who “don't have trauma”

They come with clean scans and messy lives. Migraines that show up on Sundays. Rashes that bloom during holidays. A back that spasms only on the way to their parents' house. “It's just stress,” they say, which is like calling a wildfire “a temperature event.”

I don't argue with the doctor. I speak with the body. I ask where the breath hides. I ask how they know the panic is coming before it introduces itself. I notice the ankle that can't stop flexing toward the door. I notice how many minutes it takes before they can feel their hands.

I translate: your nervous system made a promise to you when you were small and unprotected—*I will keep you safe by keeping you ready*. It has been keeping that promise for decades. It doesn't know the war ended. You didn't imagine this. You endured it. Your body remembers accurately.

How I stayed human

The shutter protected me, but it also boarded up the windows. I learned to pry them open with play. Not performative play for an audience— private play that looks stupid on purpose. Singing loudly enough to embarrass no one but the furniture. Drumming on the steering wheel until the forearms unclench. Dancing in the kitchen like a man who trusts the floor. These aren't hacks. They are declarations of aliveness.

After I rescued my kids from social services and they came to live with me, I discovered another function of the shutter: it can serve other people. When an adult's chaotic monologue began to cut my children open, the shutter fell not to protect me but to protect them. I went practical. Minimized her words. Made jokes I didn't feel. Got everyone out alive. Then I paid the bill later—in quiet, in private, in the ache of a tenderness I couldn't risk showing when it would've cost too much.

Making the lever less lethal

Age and therapy didn't remove the shutter. They wired in a dimmer. I learned to name it in real time: *I've gone away*. Not as accusation, not as drama—an inventory note. I learned to time my own return, to step into warm water, to put a palm on my sternum and feel breath meet skin, to ask the simplest discriminations: does this belong to today or to then? That sorting turns a blunt instrument into a tool.

Clients think progress means the symptoms vanish. Sometimes they do. Mostly it means we stop arguing with our bodies. The hum may remain, but we know its key. The panic might still arrive, but it no longer gets to drive. We learn which rooms turn us up and which people help us come down. We learn our own weather.

Why this matters for love

Because bodies choose partners before minds do. The murmur in my chest recognizes the familiar long before I can list values on a dating profile. If you want to understand why you keep ending up in the same relationship with different faces, don't start with psychology. Start with pulse. Start with breath. Start with the part of you that leans forward when it meets a storm it already knows how to navigate.

Which is where we're headed. Patterns are not accidents; they're physiology with a story. If the body keeps receipts, relationships are the audit. Let's look at the ledger.

An inventory of sensations (because the body is specific)

Where does the hum live today? Mine migrates. The jaw is a long-term tenant—masseter clenched as if chewing unswallowable news. The tongue presses the roof of the mouth like it's holding up the ceiling. Shoulders creep toward the ears as if they were shy of the world. The hands go clever and numb—capable of tasks, estranged from touch. The belly alternates between fortress and fog. Knees lock, feet go dumb, eyes forget to soften. On better days, I remember the back of my body exists. The chair arrives as sensation rather than concept. Gravity becomes a friend again.

You don't need a manual. You need a ritual of noticing. Ten seconds an hour is plenty. What temperature is your face? Which way is your breath traveling—front to back, or

side to side? Can you feel your socks? Did you forget your calves are part of you? The questions aren't to fix—just to welcome.

Micro-shutters and their cousins

Not every door slams. Sometimes it's a click you almost miss—the laugh a half-tone higher than your laugh, the slight delay before you answer the simplest question, the way your pupils contract when someone mentions a name. The body has hundreds of dim switches. When you become curious about their positions, you reclaim a kind of agency that isn't heroic but is real: *oh, that's happening; I don't have to make it stop; I can be kind to a system doing its best with old data.*

There's also the false open—the performative thaw that fools people and hurts you. You talk about feelings with skill while the pelvis stays braced. You cry photogenic tears while the breath never drops below the collarbones. People call you vulnerable. Your body shakes its head quietly and waits for you to notice you've just reenacted absence with better lighting.

Night and morning

Insomnia, for me, is less a failure to sleep than an inability to trust that the world will be the same when I wake. The body keeps watch because once, long ago, it had to. I made a truce: if we're going to be awake, we will be awake *on purpose*. Lights low, phone away, something human in the ears (voices telling true stories, not the polished ones). Sometimes I get hungry at 2am like a child at camp who doesn't like the food. I eat a small thing and drink water with a pinch of salt. I go back to bed and tell my body out loud that morning will be kind. It has started believing me more often.

Mornings are better with repetition. The mug that repeats yesterday's warmth. A window the color of ordinary hope. The first three minutes without talking, even to myself. I don't "optimize." I memorize safety and call it forward.

The long way down the ladder

People ask how long it takes to come down from hyper-arousal. As long as it takes, and then some. The nervous system changes at the speed of trust. You can't yank it into calm; you invite it. You keep inviting it when it refuses. You stop taking refusal personally. You add one degree of safety to a room—music, light, a door slightly open—and let the body discover the difference. The next time, it remembers faster. This is boring magic. It's also the only kind I trust.

When play is medicine (and not performance)

I keep a cheap drum in the corner of my office. I don't play it for clients; I play it for the part of me that still expects the slap when joy gets loud. Sometimes between sessions I tap a rhythm until my hands warm. When I sing in the car, I pick songs I don't have to sing well to love. When I dance, I turn off mirrors. The rule is simple: amusement over improvement. If I'm measuring, I'm not mending.

In the room: what I watch for

Feet that hover instead of rest. Ankles cocked for flight. The micro-nod people do when they say "I'm fine" to sell it harder. The way a client laughs at the precise moment tears would begin. The sudden yawn—nervous systems will manufacture oxygen when we've been shallow for a while. The palms that flip up without anyone noticing because some part of them is ready to receive and embarrassed about it.

Sometimes I ask someone to tell a story twice—first at their usual tempo, then at half speed. At half speed, the body has time to interrupt with information. "My throat hurts when I say that sentence." "My stomach dropped when I mentioned my sister." This isn't mystical. It's pragmatic. We're letting the organism add footnotes to the narrative.

If you want a ritual (one, not thirteen)

Pick something the size of a grape. A hand on your chest when you park the car. Two sips of water before you answer an email that makes heat under your skin. A shower where you deliberately change the water temperature once—warmer than usual or cooler than usual—just to remind your body you have a dial. Pet a dog and notice which muscles unclench first.

The trick is not to aim for calm. Aim for contact. Calm sometimes follows. Sometimes it doesn't. Contact is still holy.

What I wish someone had told me earlier

You are not "high maintenance" because your body asks for gentleness. You are not "dramatic" because your system remembers what hurt. You are not "weak" because rest helps more than pep talks. You are a creature with a history. Creatures with histories need rooms where history doesn't run the show. Build one, borrow one, imagine one long enough that your cells get the idea.

Closing with an actual body

Right now I unclench my teeth. I let the breath drop low and wide like it belonged to someone who trusts ground. I rub my sternum lightly, the way you would comfort a startled animal without making a fuss. I look up from the page and count three blue things in

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the room. I remember a joke that makes me smile and let it have me for five seconds. Nothing cured. Something softened. The shutter lifts an inch and lets in air you can't see but you can feel.

THE RELATIONSHIPS WE BUILT TO SURVIVE



OR: WHY WE KEEP CHOOSING WHAT'S FAMILIAR OVER WHAT'S GOOD

There's a particular quiet that happens in kitchens at 11:47 p.m. The house is dark except for the fridge light and a streetlamp insisting through the blinds. You're rinsing two wine glasses you didn't really want to drink from. The conversation ended an hour ago but the argument is still happening, just distributed into objects. The tap's too loud. The sponge squeaks in a way that feels like accusation. You look at the second glass—your partner's—and a thought arrives with no ceremony: *This isn't the first time I've stood in this exact pose at the end of a relationship.* Different flats, different cities, different glassware; same posture. Same ache.

I know this posture. I've repeated it with the diligence of a ritual. Sometimes the ending is dramatic; sometimes it's clinical, like closing a file. Often it's both: a quiet domestic scene containing the wreckage of a decade. And in the too-bright rectangle of refrigerator light I have the same realization every time—*I chose this familiar ache over the strange risk of being seen.*

We don't set out to choose ache. We choose recognition. We choose the nervous system's memory of proximity, which often isn't safety at all—just *known*. Known is seductive. Known is a hallway you can walk in the dark without stubbing your toes.

Known is the tone of voice that tightens the chest in exactly the right place. Known says, “You’ll survive this. You already have.”

I used to think I was unlucky in love. Then I noticed the remarkable statistical pattern: every dice roll mysteriously added up to my childhood.

The pattern is not abstract—it’s somatic

When I say “pattern,” I don’t mean a spreadsheet of exes and their astrological signs. I mean a physiological choreography that begins before any conscious evaluation does. The body recognizes “home” three seconds before the mind drafts a compliment about their taste in books. We call it chemistry, sparks, a feeling. Freud called it repetition compulsion. I call it walking nose-first into the same glass door and then complimenting the door on its transparency.

Familiar has a flavor. Mine? People who need me in ways that make me indispensable. I know how to carry. I know how to fix. I know how to become the scaffolding someone leans on until leaning is all they do. The first months feel like purpose; the middle feels like penance; the end feels like panic—because if I stop carrying, who am I to them, and who am I without them?

Others come with a different recipe. Some pick withholding: the person who gives just enough to keep hope oxygenated. Some pick volatility: love as weather system. Some pick morally unimpeachable safety—kind, consistent, healthy—and wonder why aliveness leaks out the back door. Same blueprint, different contractors.

I’ve heard so many clients say, “I don’t have a type.” Then they describe three partners with different haircuts and identical nervous systems.

Why familiar beats good (most days)

“Good” is a slow heat. It’s rhythm rather than spike. It’s a body that doesn’t require hypervigilance to decode. Good feels, at first, like boredom to a system trained on cliff edges. I’ve watched people sit across from stable love and interpret the absence of anxiety as the absence of chemistry. They call it “no spark.” What they mean is “no terror.” We confuse alarm with attraction because alarm was proximity in the house we grew up in.

Familiar wins because familiar promises predictability: I know what role I’ll play. I know what this pain costs. Good is expensive in a different currency: it requires being seen, then staying seen. It requires telling the truth before you’re sure it will be received. It requires your face without the mask. Good will not applaud your performance; it will ask you to stop performing.

Stopping the performance feels like walking onto a stage in your actual skin. Unre-

hearsed. No lighting to flatter. The first time I tried it, I could hear the metal shutter in my chest looking for the chain to pull.

The archetypes I keep meeting (in my consulting room and in the mirror)

The Rescuer and the Project. The Rescuer is excellent at spreadsheets and chaos. The Project has a talent for nearly getting it together. Their love language is crisis. When the crisis pauses, so does intimacy. I've been the Rescuer. The relief at being needed is narcotic. The problem is that being necessary is not the same as being known. And one day the Rescuer realizes they have a partner *and* a second, unpaid job. The resignation at the back of their throat sounds like a long commute.

The Auditor and the Withholder. The Auditor grew up earning a pass. The Withholder offers quarterly compliments with a stern caveat. The Auditor chases the stamp that never arrives. It's a familiar game played with adult grammar.

The Storm and the Harbor. The Storm believes movement is life. The Harbor believes stillness is kindness. They adore each other until they don't. The Storm interprets stillness as impending doom; the Harbor interprets movement as avoidant cruelty. They're both wrong and also right.

The Virtuous Safe Choice. This one hurts to name. After intensity that felt like drowning, someone chooses calm. On paper it's perfect: no shouting, clean calendars, mutual goals. Inside there is a faint hum—*Is this all?* They're not ungrateful; they're underfed. Their nervous system misses the fireworks, not because fireworks are healthy, but because fireworks are what "aliveness" got paired with in childhood. Calm without contact feels like a padded room.

I don't offer these to diagnose anyone. I offer them because recognition lowers shame. If you can see your script, you can put down the prop.

Why we stay (past the expiration date)

People imagine we stay because of romance, or cowardice. The truth is uglier and kinder: we stay because endings for trauma-wired people feel existential. Relationships cost us a fortune to enter—currency paid in performative ease, constant translating, swallowing needs like aspirin. Leaving means admitting the investment won't be recouped. It also means meeting the oldest terror head-on: *Maybe I was the problem all along.*

So we invent a different tactic: we leave early *inside*, then stay a long time *outside*. I have ended relationships a year before ending them. By the time I carried the final box to

the car, my grief had already burned itself down in private. From the outside I looked stoic. Inside I was a field after harvest—quiet, useful, exhausted.

Is that strategy cruel? Sometimes. It's also understandable. When the original wound is abandonment, we try to pre-abandon ourselves in controlled increments. Better to starve slowly than be starved suddenly. None of this is noble. It is merely human.

The first time I saw my pattern as clearly as a blood test

I was sitting across from someone I genuinely admired. No chaos. No melodrama. A soft steadiness that unnerved me. They asked a plain question about my day. My mouth answered; my chest pulled the shutter anyway. Not because I was threatened—there was no threat—but because the sensation of being met without a performance request felt like an exposure. I found myself trying to invent a small emergency to earn their gaze. I didn't. I sat in the discomfort and said the boring truth. It was excruciating. Then, briefly, liberating. Then excruciating again.

That is what choosing “good” over “familiar” felt like in my actual body: a slow, shaking stand still. No fireworks. No triumphant music. Just a choice held long enough for a different kind of chemistry to emerge—one that tastes like quiet relief rather than adrenaline.

The family blueprint we keep pretending we're not carrying

People get defensive when I mention parents. They think I'm issuing indictments. I'm not. I am saying that the first map of love you ever saw is still in your glove compartment. If your map labeled criticism as attention, you will drive toward criticism to feel oriented. If your map labeled disappearance as normal, you will mistrust presence and trust vanishing acts. If your map labeled usefulness as value, you will negotiate your worth with invoices.

My map had a mother who could not see me unless I made noise or money. I built relationships where noise and money were my primary nouns. I was excellent at both. I can speak to a room and make it cry. I can build a business with forty employees. Neither skill teaches a person how to be quiet beside a sink at 11:47 p.m. and say, “I'm scared. Please stay.” That sentence took me thirty years to write without irony.

“Why didn't you leave earlier?” (Because earlier didn't exist yet.)

The person who asks why you didn't leave earlier imagines decisions happen in air-conditioned meeting rooms. Most of my pivotal choices happened the way weather changes—murky, hourly, with three contradicting forecasts. Leaving earlier would have

required an earlier self. That self didn't exist yet. I don't say this to absolve harm. I say it to end the ritual of litigating our past capacities with information we acquired Tuesday.

What happens in real time when someone starts emerging

I see it in the consulting room like a time-lapse of a flower that had been convinced it was a paperweight.

Week one, they notice the watcher. Week three, they start naming the edits they'd usually make before speaking. Week six, they try an experiment: offering a preference that slightly inconveniences their partner. Their voice trembles like a bridge in crosswinds. The world does not end. They are surprised. They feel both elated and guilty. They assume the guilt means they did something wrong; I suggest the guilt is a fire alarm going off because the kitchen is finally cooking food rather than smoke.

By month three, the relationship becomes a negotiation between the old contract (I will be easy; you will be soothed) and the new request (I will be honest; may we both be alive?). Some partners step forward, awkwardly at first, then with relief. Others double down on the terms that kept them comfortable. That's the hinge: *Can this container widen without splitting?* Sometimes yes. Sometimes no. Endings produced by emergence are not failures; they are accurate measurements.

The guilt nobody warns you about

We speak of grief; we whisper about guilt. Guilt for outgrowing. Guilt for changing the terms mid-contract. Guilt for not noticing sooner. Guilt for leaving someone who isn't a villain. Trauma-wired people hold onto guilt like a rope bridge—better a shaky crossing than the free fall of deciding your needs matter. If love in your house meant managing adults, you will mistake self-abandonment for generosity. I did. It made me beloved by many and known by few.

When clients tell me they feel cruel for leaving, I sometimes ask them to imagine a small version of themselves living in their sternum. Does that small person want to go back to the house you built with the rules you know? If the small person says no and you drag them back anyway to avoid someone else's pain, what do you call that? We are not obligated to perpetuate our own disappearance so that continuity can be maintained.

What choosing differently actually looks like (in behavior, not slogans)

I promised no lists. But I also know we crave nouns. So here are mine, in prose:

Choosing differently looked like noticing the first ten minutes of a date instead of the first anecdote. If the ten minutes tasted like sprinting, I called it what it was—my body

dragging me toward the familiar cliff. I didn't ban cliffs. I started asking why I was allergic to meadows.

Choosing differently looked like repairing in hours rather than performing good behavior for weeks to prove I was a low-maintenance human. It looked like saying "I'm hurt and I don't want to punish you, can we slow down?" instead of offering a TED Talk on attachment styles.

Choosing differently looked like refusing to collapse into usefulness when I felt replaceable. I held the tremor and asked to be chosen rather than needed. Sometimes I was not chosen. That's information, not indictment.

Choosing differently looked like letting desire be embarrassing. Saying, "I want you to touch me like you actually want to" without a joke to soften the request. My nervous system wrote a complaint letter; I filed it and moved on.

Choosing differently looked like not pre-leaving. Staying present until the end arrived—or didn't. It cost me a private illusion of control and gave me the dignity of actually experiencing my life.

Observational interlude (because we need to laugh or we drown)

Watch any airport reunion. There is a choreography to belonging: arms, bags, the slight spin. Now watch the reunion where one person does all the talking, narrating the trip, their own feelings, the other person's likely feelings, the weather, the future. That's performance as prophylactic. The quiet person is trying to get a word in; the narrator cannot tolerate unscripted affection. They will later say, "I never feel seen." They are correct. They are also the one blocking the projector.

I say this with love because I have been the projector blocker. I have also been the person mistaking attention for intimacy and audience size for proof of worth. When we stop performing, we become less impressive at dinner parties and more available in kitchens. The trade is worth it.

What happens to the "safe" relationship when you start being real

Sometimes it wakes up. Safety becomes oxygen rather than padding. Intimacy grows where the polite meadow used to be. Sometimes it doesn't. And you will try to convince yourself that politeness is a kind of love. It is not. Politeness is an etiquette for public spaces; intimacy is the etiquette for being a mammal next to another mammal. If you can never be unpleasant without fearing exile, you are not in a relationship—you are in a performance review.

On anger, again (because it belongs here too)

Emergence almost always uncovers anger that's been accruing interest. Not rage at the current partner alone (though sometimes yes); the anger is archival. Anger at the blueprint. Anger at your own complicity. Anger at years spent being useful instead of human. The temptation is to funnel all of it at the nearest person. That's understandable and unfair. I write letters I never send. I tear them up. I make soup. I take a walk that is less metaphorical than it sounds. I save the conversation for what's actually happening today. This is how I try—try—to be surgical with a tool that wants to be a grenade.

If you're staying

If you're staying because there is something worth staying for and both of you are willing to be bad at this until you're better: say so out loud. Make a small contract that neither of you can perfect but both can point to. "We will name when we're performing. We will ask for repair rather than proof. We will allow two truths to exist: your fear and my need."

If you're staying because you're scared of what happens after you leave: tell the truth to yourself about that. Fear is not a sin. It's a sensation. It does not get to be your god.

If you're leaving

You are allowed to leave without making the other person a villain to justify the exit. You are allowed to say, "I do not want the life we built. I didn't know that when we started. I know it now." You are allowed to grieve like a dignified animal: loudly, then quietly, then loudly again on odd Tuesdays. You are allowed to hold onto the parts that were good without returning to a house that kept you small.

I left a relationship once with a single sentence: "I can't keep being the version of me you fell in love with." We both cried. There were no plates thrown. We texted for a while, then less, then not at all. Years later I saw a photo of them, truly okay. I felt the right kind of ache. That was love, too.

What "good" actually began to feel like (for me)

I promised myself I would tell the truth even if it made me look boring. Good started as boring. Then it became *quietly electric*. Not fireworks—constellations you only notice if you turn the city lights off. We cooked and didn't keep score. We argued and didn't hire prosecutors. I still shut down sometimes; I say, "My shutter is looking for its chain," and they say, "I'm here," and somehow that sentence is a bolt cutter.

Good did not fix my blueprint. It did something better: it gave me enough oxygen to redraw parts of it in pencil.

The small child test (my only recommendation disguised as a story)

When I am unsure whether a relationship is intimate or merely efficient, I imagine the smallest, truest part of me standing in the doorway of my ribcage holding a backpack. Do they want to live here? Sometimes they nod. Sometimes they look at me with that steady child look that says *you already know*. When I ignore them, everything goes clinical and I start cleaning wine glasses too hard at 11:47 p.m.

I am trying— present tense— to listen faster.

The point, so I don't lose it under all these words

We build relationships with the tools our childhood gave us. Those tools are brilliant at survival and clumsy at intimacy. Familiar is not evil; it's just expensive. Good is not glamorous; it's just honest. You do not have to pick the right person so much as you have to stop auditioning for the wrong script.

I still feel the tug toward what hurts in ways I can predict. I still sometimes mistake adrenaline for awe. I still want to perform when I feel unworthy. But I am learning to pause at the sink under the thin light and choose not to repeat the scene. Sometimes I fail. Sometimes I put the glasses down, dry my hands, walk to the other room, and say the unscripted sentence:

“I want to stay, but only as me.”

Sometimes they say, “Okay.” Sometimes they don't.

Either way, I am finally in the room.

THE ANGER WE'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO HAVE



OR: WHAT TO DO WITH DECADES OF SWALLOWED RAGE

There's a particular pitch to a slammed cupboard door when the house is quiet. It isn't loud so much as precise, a thin metal note traveling through wood and hinge and into bone. You tell yourself it was just a door, just your hand, just a little more force than intended. You tell yourself you're tired. You tell yourself the jar wouldn't open, the emails have been many, the news is a bleak drum. You explain it until the explanation becomes the event.

But your nervous system knows the difference between clatter and signal. Somewhere behind your ribs, a small animal flinches. It remembers the sound of withheld words, of swallowed heat, of a body that has taught itself to keep the peace by locking the mouth. The cupboard door is not the crisis. It is the metronome. It keeps time with a rage that has never been allowed its song.

Anger is the feeling that arrives wearing other people's costumes. It shows up as tidying at midnight, as manic competence, as brittle jokes, as the sudden need to alphabetize your spices. It borrows the voices of traffic, technology, and wrong orders. It rehearses in petty theaters because the main stage has never been safe.

I was not taught how to be angry. I was taught how to be acceptable. I learned to keep

the surface smooth, the volume reasonable, the timing considerate. I learned that my needs could be negotiated down to zero if I made an eloquent case. I learned that silence was safer than truth, that minimizing was mistaken for maturity, that “it wasn’t that bad” could be said so often it sounded like gratitude.

But underneath all that choreography, a fact: I am angry.

Not the performative kind that gets applause in certain rooms, the crisp speech about injustice that leaves everyone nodding. Not the daily irritations that make for good anecdotes about the absurdity of modern life. I mean the old furnace. I mean the heat at the center of the house. I mean the fury at what happened and what didn’t, at what I was made to become and what I was not allowed to be.

I am angry that a child can be present but unheld. That you can have a bed and a plate and still be starved of being seen. I am angry at the blankness where delight should have lived. Angry that there were clever hands building instruments in a shed and no adult to say, *Look at that*. Angry at the evening lights of a school hall and the way a seven-year-old scans the dark for a familiar face and learns to stop asking.

There were other children, other sheds, other halls. I have met them as adults across a small table with a box of tissues they don’t use. They will tell you it wasn’t that bad. Then they will laugh too quickly. Then they will list their achievements as evidence that no harm was done. Then they will describe the ways they do not sleep, the ways their shoulders have become a species of armor, the ways they perform serenity while their jaw has learned the art of breaking.

The thing about swallowed anger is that it doesn’t dissolve. It is mineral. It settles in layers. You can be successful over it, generous around it, exhausted under it. And then a tiny event—a tone, a look, a misinterpretation—strikes the seam and your whole history vibrates.

When I was small and the punishment arrived, it did not arrive as a conversation. It was a hand, a look, a certainty I had done something wrong because I existed in the radius of someone else’s storm. I learned speed. I learned to shut everything down so completely that impact had nothing to land on. It was not graceful; it was total. The steel shutter comes down and the room goes dark. You hear the world in the muffled way you hear your own house during a power cut. You know the furniture is still there but you won’t risk moving.

That shutter kept me from shattering. It also kept me from speaking. It contained the anger with the hurt, the confusion with the protest. It stored everything behind an indus-

trial promise: *We will not let this out, and in exchange, nothing else gets in.* The bargain works until it doesn't. And "doesn't" usually looks like this: a small slight multiplies by a thousand, the cupboard door sings its thin metal note, your throat burns with words too old for your current mouth, you either erupt or freeze, and afterward you apologize for your tone rather than acknowledge your truth.

There are people who have known me for years and have never seen me angry. They have seen my competence, my patience, my capacity to turn a crisis into a calendar. They have seen the tidy aftermath, the excellent plan, the considered statement. They have not seen my face when I am alone in a parked car on a side street, yell-singing at a wind-screen because if the sound does not leave my body I will calcify. They have not seen me tear paper quietly into strips as if I am preparing a nest for a creature I keep pretending I don't own.

When you grow up learning that anger at the people you depend on is a threat to survival, you will do almost anything with anger except feel it. You will domesticate it into sarcasm. You will metabolize it into achievement. You will translate it into stomach pain. You will keep a museum of it behind glass and tell yourself you're only visiting for research. You will date people who cannot recognize you and call the tightness in your chest "preference." You will stay in rooms that shrink you because leaving would require you to be large in public, and rage is a very large animal.

In my consulting room I have watched anger wear a thousand disguises. I have seen it come as faintness, as apologies, as immaculate diaries, as a voice that produces brilliant analysis of everyone else's behavior while refusing to narrate its own. I have sat with people who can describe what happened to them in the tone one uses to read a bus timetable. And I have sat with people who tell me it was fine, really, and then casually mention waking up every night at three a.m. with a pounding heart and the sensation of falling through the mattress.

I have asked, "What would it cost to be angry?" And sometimes they have said, "Everything." Sometimes they have said, "I don't know how." Sometimes they have said nothing at all, and their face has told me a history that their voice cannot yet risk.

There is a difference between rage that wants to burn the house down and anger that wants to name the broken beam. The first can feel holy; it also tends to leave you standing in ash. The second is less glamorous; it builds. Clarifying anger is the kind that points: *There. Here. This is where it hurts; this is what is not okay.* It doesn't need witnesses. It needs accuracy. It does not demand an audience; it demands a boundary.

I did not understand this for a long time. I thought anger was a verdict, a judgment one delivered with the slam of a door or the cleverness of a line. I thought if I allowed it, it would wreck the room, and then I would be at fault for the wreckage. So I kept it under glass and congratulated myself on restraint. Meanwhile, my body did the carrying. The carrying looked like tension braided into posture. It looked like vigilance that couldn't be turned off, only sedated. It looked like a steadiness that others admired and I mistook for health, right up until the night I realized I had been living like a person waiting for an alarm that never stopped ringing.

What am I angry about? The list is simple and it is endless. I am angry that nobody noticed the boy with the wooden guitar he rasped into existence because wanting was dangerous. I am angry at the empty seat in the auditorium, at the way I learned to love an imaginary audience more than my own body. I am angry at the efficiency I mastered to earn my keep. I am angry at the years I stayed where I did not belong because leaving would have meant acknowledging I had a self that required shelter. I am angry at the carefulness I wore like a virtue because to be careful was to stay alive.

I am angry at how long it took to realize that the phrase "they did the best they could" can be both true and insufficient; that a child's nervous system does not metabolize good intentions. The body keeps receipts, no matter how forgiving the mind's handwriting becomes.

I have children. I have watched them carry echoes I desperately wanted to intercept. This is a special kind of rage: the one you feel toward time for moving only in one direction. Rage at your own limitations, at your own learning curve, at the ways breaking patterns takes longer than a single generation. Rage at institutions that call themselves protective and sometimes are anything but. Rage at the people who write policies in rooms where no child has ever sat.

I have worked with teenagers removed from homes that were dangerous and placed in homes that were different but not gentler. I have met the bureaucratic grin that calls itself procedure while a young person learns, again, that the adults are fluent in paperwork and clumsy at tenderness. I am angry at systems that keep children alive but forget to keep them human. Angry at the dullness of it, the way harm is often not dramatic but simply cumulative, a daily abrasion that leaves a person raw and calling it personality.

The anger doesn't go away because you understand its causes. Insight is kind; it is not anesthetic. Sometimes the only honest thing to do is to feel it and refuse to aim it badly. So I go to the car. I drive to the edge of a quiet industrial estate on a Sunday. I close the

windows and I let a sound happen that would make no sense in a kitchen. It is not language. It is heat leaving. I do not publish it. I do not make it someone else's job to catch. I do not, afterward, apologize to the steering wheel. I sit until my body stops ringing. Then I drink water. Then I go home.

Does this make me healed? I don't know what that word means. It makes me honest. It means the shutter doesn't have to take the full load every time. It means I can tell the difference, more often, between anger that belongs to a small boy and anger that belongs to a present man. It means when someone I love says something that grazes an older wound, I am likelier to say, "That hit something," than to give a speech about their character. It means the cupboard doors in my house have had a quieter year.

People ask me how to tell whether their anger is useful. I ask what it wants. If it wants humiliation, spectacle, a confession wrestled from someone who cannot give it—probably this is old. If it wants accuracy, if it wants a sentence spoken plainly, if it wants a boundary drawn with a pencil instead of a knife—this might be the kind that builds.

There are days when I do not allow it. Days when the stack of tasks is high and the calendar is a brick. Days when someone is depending on me and I barter with myself: *Later. Not now.* I am good at "not now." I have a PhD in "later." I am cautious with that talent. "Later" piled up becomes a mausoleum. Every so often I inventory the shelves, check the expiry dates, throw a fit on purpose so that the body doesn't have to throw one for me.

This is not "anger management." I have no desire to manage it, as if it were a difficult employee. Anger is not my subordinate. It is my messenger. It brings news from a border I cannot see while I am busy being acceptable. It tells me when I have sold myself out one small increment at a time and started calling it compromise. It tells me when I have let someone's version of me become my uniform. It tells me when a child in the room—mine, yours, me-then—is being asked to carry more than is bearable. It tells me, with that thin metal note, that the cupboard door has become a telegram.

What do we do with decades of swallowed rage? We stop pretending it is sophisticated to starve. We stop confusing being undemanding with being kind. We stop awarding medals to anyone who can endure without complaint. We teach our faces to contain more expressions than polite interest. We get worse at winning rooms and better at leaving them.

In my practice, when someone is terrified of their own fury, we do not begin by aiming it. We begin by locating it. Where in the body does it live? Chest? Throat? Behind

the eyes? What is its temperature? What happens to your breath when you say the word *angry* out loud? Whose face do you imagine will flinch? What disaster do you anticipate if the truth is not whispered but spoken at an ordinary volume?

Sometimes we build a small ritual. Not grand—grandness is suspicious to the part of them that survived by being invisible. A towel twisted in both hands. A cushion that is permitted to be punched. A sentence written on paper big enough to need a marker: *It was not okay*. They look at the sentence as if it were contraband. Then they look at me. Then they look at themselves, which means they do not look anywhere at all. And sometimes, not often and not on schedule, the face changes, and the room thickens, and they meet something they have circled for twenty years. The meeting is not cinematic. It is quiet. It is an exhale that sounds like a wordless no. We sit in that no until it becomes a yes to something else.

I am not interested in performances of anger. They sell tickets and leave the actors empty. I am interested in the ordinary. The way a person says, “Don’t speak to me like that,” not as a threat but as a measurement. The way someone texts, “I need an hour,” and then actually uses the hour to feel rather than to rehearse. The way a parent says, “I’m sorry I shouted,” without adding a closing argument about their day. The way we let the small animal behind the ribs unclench enough to look around.

There are those who will tell you forgiveness is the goal. Maybe. Sometimes forgiveness is a form of forgetting that costs too much. Sometimes what you need is not absolution but orientation: *This is where I am. This is where I was. This is what happened. This is what I will not allow again*. Forgiveness without truth is just erasure in a nicer outfit. If forgiveness arrives, let it. If it doesn’t, stop calling yourself stuck. You are moving. You are moving in the exact direction your body knows is safer.

I am still angry. This is not a confession. It is a weather report. Some days are clear. Some days the air is yellow with old pollen. Some days I am caught unprepared and the storm rolls in and I say a sentence sharper than it needed to be and I repair, which is a better art than pretending we never break. Some days I drive to the industrial estate and let my chest be a door that opens onto a sound. Some days I sit in a kitchen and do not slam anything, and that, too, is a kind of miracle.

I do not trust people who say they are beyond anger. I trust people who know where theirs sleeps and how to feed it something other than blood. I trust people whose anger has learned to point instead of burn. I trust those who can say “I am furious” and still keep their hands open.

If you grew up in a house where anger meant danger, I understand why you made yourself small. I understand why you became excellent at “fine.” I understand why you stayed with partners who preferred your usefulness to your aliveness. I understand why you are suspicious of your own heat. But listen: the feeling you think will destroy everything might actually be the thing that keeps you from dissolving. Anger is not the opposite of love. Disappearance is.

There is a way to let the furnace warm the house without setting it on fire. It is not complicated and it is not easy. It looks like this: you notice the thin metal note; you don't pretend it's the wind. You say the sentence you have not said before because you were saving it for when you had more evidence. You make a noise you were told was unbecoming. You love someone and do not consume yourself to make them comfortable. You go to the car. You go to the page. You go to the walk that is longer than your schedule allows. You go to the small person who lives at the door of your sternum and you ask what they want, and you don't correct their grammar when they answer.

What to do with swallowed rage? Not much that will look impressive. Mostly, you will let it be true. You will let it leave your body. You will let it teach you where the boundary is. You will let it keep you from building another room in a house that requires you to whisper.

Sometimes, in the evening, I catch myself rehearsing an old speech to an old ghost: all the clever lines I didn't say, all the verdicts I didn't deliver. I let myself finish the speech, privately, as an act of respect for the person who needed to say it then and could not. Then I ask anger what it wants now. It almost always wants something small and precise: a pause, a “no,” a seat by the window, a promise kept to myself, a hand on my own chest, a sentence spoken without the smile.

The cupboard doors in this house have learned to mind their music. The children here are loud and allowed. The person at the sink is less careful and more alive. The anger lives here with us. It pays rent in clarity. It takes up an honest amount of space. It keeps the rooms warm. It knows the way to the car. It knows the way back.

I will not make it holy and I will not make it a villain. I will make it a citizen. When it knocks, I answer. I ask what it knows. I listen. And then I choose, with the heat still in my mouth, how to live.

THE COMPETENCE TRAP



OR: WHEN BEING RELIABLE BECOMES A PRISON

If you want to understand the shape of a life, listen for the background noise. Mine was a motor: the thick, animal growl of a sewing machine being driven hard. Night after night, pedal down, needle charging, that industrial hum burrowed into the house and into me. It was the soundtrack to dinner, to homework I didn't do, to the quiet negotiations children make with themselves when no one is looking. The sound meant effort. The sound meant survival. The sound meant that whatever else was happening, money was being pursued.

A different sound—the applause of a school hall—taught me something else. I was small and terrified and electric. I sang in assembly with a friend, a sixties song rethreaded through our thin voices, and the room rose up. It wasn't polite; it was feral, delighted, a wave of noise that lifted me out of invisibility and set me down somewhere with edges and light. In that instant I learned a simple equation: perform and you exist. I didn't think it; my body knew it. Existence isn't guaranteed. It can be earned.

Two noises. A motor and an audience. Between them, a life.

When I brought home my first cassette—a song I wrote at thirteen, recorded in a real studio—my mother held it in her palm as if it were a curious tile from an unfamiliar

kitchen. She didn't know what it was. Then she made a gesture I still dream about: thumb to fingers, a rub that means money in every language that doesn't have time for poetry. Does it make you money? she asked, without words. If not, what is it for?

I'm sixty-three and I'm still running from that question. Or toward it. The direction changes depending on the day.

I need you to understand: she wasn't being cruel. She was being consistent. She was an immigrant in a country that didn't open its hands. She worked until the hour had no name left. In a world that had taught her money was protection, translation, dignity, why would she mistake song for shelter? In her mathematics, money equaled value because money equaled survival. If something didn't make money, it was ornamental. And if you have not eaten ornament for breakfast, you do not set a place for it at your table.

Cause and effect. That's all this is. No villain, no absolution. Noise went in; programming came out.

What I internalized wasn't merely "money matters." It was the purer, colder shape underneath: production confers personhood. Make something measurable and you get counted. Fail to make and you are debited. You can carve a guitar out of the offcuts in your father's shed and coax sound out of elastic bands, but if nobody is there, if it doesn't move currency, it didn't happen. The wooden instrument, the child on the swing, the song invented in a half-wild garden—none of it existed in any ledger that mattered.

Once you learn that visibility is conditional, you will build a life around meeting the conditions. I did. Performance became identity. Not a talent I used but the mask I breathed through. The school made room for that mask—timetable exemptions cloaked as encouragement, rehearsal rooms substituting for classrooms, teachers who didn't need to say "you're valuable" because they put me on every stage they could find. At home there was the machine; at school there was the microphone. I learned to speak into one sound to defend myself against the other.

And the world is generous—dangerously generous—to the talented child who will do anything to be seen. It will give you corridors where doors open, it will hand you ladders and call them invitations. It will pin medals to a suit you built out of panic. You will mistake admiring glances for oxygen. You will discover that competence is a universal key. You will put it into every lock. Every lock will turn.

Here is the first iron of the trap: competence always delivers. The second: delivery is addictive. One more problem solved, one more crisis intercepted, one more dazzling pivot halfway through the fall. Your reward is not rest. Your reward is being asked again.

And I could always be asked. Businesses, charities, rooms full of people I was supposed to light and warm, then rooms full of people I was supposed to calm, then rooms I built myself because if I was responsible for everything perhaps nothing could surprise me. I scaled things. I hired forty people and told myself this was growth, not a fresh costume. I designed structures that made me indispensable and then complained bitterly about being indispensable. Being needed looks like love from far away. Up close it looks like erasure with a salary.

This is how capability becomes identity: you do a thing because you can; people rely on you because you did; you begin to confuse their reliance with your self. Soon “can” becomes “must,” “must” becomes “am,” and you look up after twenty years and realize the task stole your name.

What nobody tells you—what nobody can tell you because the applause drowns everything—is that reliability becomes a prison precisely because it is hard-won and accurate. People are not lying when they say you are the one they trust. They are outsourcing to the person who always pays on time. The demands are reasonable. The deadlines are real. The work matters. And you are so good at carrying ten plates that you forget your hands learned the trick to keep you alive, not to make a life.

My father, when he was home, existed in a parallel. He could be funny, then gone. He could be present, then a rumor. There was a laziness to him that I could not parse as a child. Later he stopped working at forty-five and taught me a different set of equations about systems and loopholes; he found a way to be paid for absence. My mother found a way to survive with presence that ate her alive. I stood between them, a child doing sums in two alphabets: one for effort, one for escape. Competence taught me I could outrun the chaos; charisma taught me I could outshine it. Both were lies that worked.

Ask anyone who lives in this trap about boundaries and watch their face for the flinch. Saying no is not a calendar choice; it is an identity threat. If I decline, I am discovered. If I am discovered, I am ordinary. If I am ordinary, the audience leaves. If the audience leaves, what remains? It is not the task we are afraid of failing; it is the contract—unspoken and absolute—that says *I only exist because I deliver*.

The most honest terror I know is the fear that if I stop, there is nothing underneath the competence. Not a person. A cavity. A backstage with no props. If I put down the plates and walk onto the stage without them, will anyone recognize me? Will I?

So we keep carrying. We say yes when our body is a lit dashboard. We stay late and call it integrity. We answer the message that arrives at 23:47 and call it care. We make

ourselves indispensable then resent everyone for believing us. We feel secretly superior to those who ask for help while praying in private that somebody— anybody—will notice we haven't slept properly since 1998.

Money complicates the arithmetic, which is to say it simplifies it in a direction that suits the ghost in my kitchen. Money confirms permission. It is the applause you can stack. It is the note pinned to your coat that says you are real. I have made staggering amounts of it and the sum briefly covers the hole. Then the hole makes new space. It is an animal that eats exactly as much as you feed it and is always hungry.

I scaled a business because growth is a story that sounds like safety. Forty staff. Payrolls that would have stunned my younger self into silence. Systems, dashboards, a constant choreography of moving parts. People called me "visionary" in rooms where we were really just solving old problems with fresh fonts. I told myself I was building value. Some days I was. Many days I had constructed a labyrinth that required my breath to keep the air moving.

I would love to tell you there was a single clean collapse, a cinematic moment of realization in which I stood at the center of my own factory and shouted stop. Life is less theatrical. The performance becomes unsustainable in increments. Your shoulder stops relaxing. Your jaw grows a second jaw. Your phone becomes the only animal you feed before coffee. You start to misplace nouns. You ask a friend to repeat herself and realize you haven't actually heard anyone for a week. You go on holiday and take your prison with you, a to-do list rolled up inside your towel like contraband.

There were days when money arrived so cleanly it echoed my mother's gesture— see, value—and I felt not triumph but dread. Because the transaction had the wrong name: not worth, but warranty. As long as it was there I was safe from the accusation of uselessness. Without it I would have to answer the more dangerous question: what is the value of a person who is resting?

Competence disguises grief. You can sit inside achievement for decades and not notice you are mourning a life you never let begin. Every "I've got it" is a tiny funeral for the part of you that wanted to ask for help. Every "no problem" is a wreath on the door of your own need.

If you require a moral, there isn't one. There is a person. He is good at doing. He is loved for doing. He is frightened that if he is not doing he will be unloved. He sits at a desk late into the night answering questions at a velocity that proves he deserves to have

been asked. He says he is tired and then he proves he can perform tiredness better than anyone you've ever seen.

The competence trap is elegant because it is tethered to truth. You *are* good at this. You *do* save the day. Your steadiness *has* fed people. The prison is not a lie; it is a misapplication. Competence is a tool. You made it a self.

There is another terror I do not often name: the terror of being ordinary. That if I stop performing, I will find nothing that distinguishes me. The child on the swing with the elastic guitar didn't have this fear. He was alone and unconcerned. He played because sound was a room he could make for himself. The audience arrived later and taught him to need them. The mother arrived before and taught him to equate need with money. Both teachings were accurate for the world they described. Neither was kind to the world inside his chest.

I have watched the same arithmetic play across other faces. The woman who keeps a corporation vertical by sheer force of will and calls her insomnia "my edge." The man whose title has become the only noun that will answer when he says "I." The parent who never misses a recital while forgetting they could sit still beside their own hunger and ask it questions. We build identities out of what was rewarded. We stay loyal to our captors because they clap.

The exhaustion of being indispensable doesn't look like collapse. It looks like a spreadsheet open at 1 a.m. and a body that has forgotten how to interpret quiet. It looks like being the emergency contact for people who do not know your middle name. It looks like contempt for incompetence so pure it burns bridges you didn't know you needed. It looks like skipping lunch for twenty years and calling it focus. It looks like never taking the full measure of your holiday because time off is a rumor about other people.

The day I realized boundaries felt like fraud was not a day I announced it. It was a day I said "I can't" and listened to the accusation rise from under the floorboards. It did not have my mother's voice. It had mine. Fraud, it said. Lazy. Ungrateful. The worst names are always the ones we carved ourselves.

The first boundary is almost always absurdly small. Not a sabbatical; a pause. Not a resignation; a rescheduling. You move a meeting. You say, "I'll get back to you tomorrow." Your body reacts like you pushed a piano down a well. The rush of guilt is chemical. You check your phone twice, five times, eight, certain someone will confirm your self-assessment: you have been caught, the scaffolding is visible, you are ordinary after all.

When nothing happens—no lightning, no letter revoking your license to exist—you are left with something more frightening than punishment: space. Space is quiet, and quiet is where the other noise lives, the sewing machine that's still running even though the person who pressed the pedal is gone. In the quiet you can hear the old motor. It is still working. It is still asking the same question.

Does it make you money?

No, I whisper to the empty room. No, it doesn't. It makes me.

The work is not glamorous. I wish it were. I wish I could deliver you a technique or a ten-point plan or even a sentence to embroider above your desk. All I have is a handful of small disobediences and a memory I am trying to keep alive: the boy building a guitar from scraps for no one. He still exists. His value did not depend on an audience. He can be invited back.

Sometimes the invitation looks like ridiculous play: singing in the kitchen without a witness, moving your body like someone who has never seen a mirror, doing something poorly with your full attention. The doing is not the point. The no-point is the point. This is not a strategy; strategies are how I kept myself from myself. This is a practice of waste in a house that taught me waste was sin. It is not waste. It is rehearsal for existing without invoices.

Sometimes the invitation looks like making less money on purpose. You lower your month a fraction and your heart suggests you are on fire. You are not on fire. You are in a room where nothing is burning and your nervous system is interviewing the air for sympathy. You breathe. You do not open your banking app to calm down. You make tea. You look at a plant and realize plants are terrible at productivity and exquisite at presence.

Sometimes the invitation is refusing to be indispensable. You build a system that doesn't require your fingerprints. You teach someone else the trick. You watch them do it badly and you do not intervene, because intervention is how you kept god small enough to fit in your calendar. You let the bridge wobble. It does not collapse. You realize your fear was never about other people's competence; it was about your own identity starving in the absence of applause.

I am not beyond the trap. I am writing this from inside it with the door open. There are days I sprint back into the center and spin like a siren. There are days I close the laptop and sit in the messy hum of a house that is not a stage. There are days I work like a person who was raised by a sewing machine and a question, and

days I move like someone who met himself in a garden and recognized the sound of joy.

People ask me what I would do if money were solved, if the gesture lost its power. I tell the truth: I don't fully know. That is both terror and relief. Terror because the trap offers a map and the open field does not. Relief because maps are made by other people and fields are older than anybody's fear.

Sometimes I fantasize about disappearing—no staff, no inbox, no rooms whose temperature I am responsible for. Then I remember my vanishing acts were always performances too: the reliable man who reliably vanishes, the competent escape artist. Integration, when it arrives, is unphotogenic. You show up slightly less edited. You say "I don't know" and you mean it. You let your face be a face. You let your work be work and your life be a place where nothing is measured.

If you are looking for permission, here is mine: you are allowed to be good at things without being owned by them. You are allowed to be paid without proving that money equals worth. You are allowed to be reliable without being a reservoir everyone drinks from first. You are allowed to learn what your voice sounds like when no one is clapping.

The competence trap will not spring open because you discover a new idea. It opens by a millimeter when you put down a plate and refuse to pick up two more to compensate. It opens when you do something that has no audience and refuse to narrate it later. It opens when you answer the old question with a new grammar. What is it for? To be. To be here. To be someone even when nothing is being asked of me.

Some evenings, late, the motor in my head starts up uninvited. It wants to inventory, to calculate, to translate love into ledger lines. I listen to it the way you listen to rain on a roof you have repaired yourself: carefully, with a hand on the wall. Then I go to the room where the guitar lives—an adult guitar, bought with the money of a man who can afford things, but kin to the first one. I play badly. I let my fingers forget the urge to impress. Somewhere in the sound is the child in the garden. Somewhere in the sound is a life that does not require me to be extraordinary to exist.

The applause was real. It helped. The money kept us alive. It mattered. The competence saved me more than once. It deserves respect. But none of those are me. I can use them without wearing them. I can step onto a stage and step off it. I can answer a late message sometimes and ignore it often. I can be the person people trust and also the person who leaves the room while the work continues, and the building does not fall.

What is the opposite of the competence trap? Not incompetence. Not chaos. Not

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refusal. Presence, maybe. A self that is not an invoice. A day that is allowed to be a day even if nothing impressive happens. A house with doors that close softly. A life in which the background noise is not a machine but breath.

If you need a last image, take this one: a man in a quiet kitchen, late, the cupboards keeping their music to themselves. In the next room a mess no one will audit. On the table a phone face down. On the chair a jacket that will not be needed until morning. In his hands, the small honest weight of something that cannot make him any money at all. He plays it anyway. The room fills. No applause. No invoices. Nothing collapses. Nothing is proved. And yet—he is here.

WHEN BUSY STOPS WORKING



OR: THE MOMENT THE PERFORMANCE COLLAPSES

People love a neat collapse. They want a single scene that explains it all—airport tiles too bright, a boardroom suddenly underwater, the long-promised holiday that turns into a private storm. It makes for a clean story: *there, that's when it broke*. For many of us, it doesn't arrive like that. It's less cliff and more undertow. A slow, quiet sinking; sand sliding out from under the life you built until you're standing in the same room, breathing the same air, and you can't find yourself in any of it.

I didn't get fireworks either. I remember walking into an office I'd made with my own hands—past a receptionist's cheerful “morning,” carrying a briefcase that felt like a prop. Inside the case: almost nothing. Inside me: even less. Downstairs, the creative rooms I'd designed for young people throbbed with bass and laughter; upstairs, spreadsheets waited for a man I no longer recognized. I sat behind the desk and felt like a ghost hired to impersonate me. Your version will be different, but the sensation is familiar: motion is no longer keeping you safe; it's only keeping you gone.

For a long time, busyness had done important work. If you grew up reading rooms, anticipating impact, patching adult weather with a child's body, activity wasn't vanity—it was intelligence. Tasks gave shape to unsafe days. Output purchased permission. Compe-

tence softened edges: if you were indispensable, you were harder to discard; if you were productive, you were less likely to be accused of needing too much. And when that small watcher on your shoulder asked, *Who are you without the performance?* you could point to results. Look—proof. The trouble isn't that busy existed. The trouble is that the bill eventually comes due.

It starts with color bleaching out of things you once loved. Not hatred—hollowing. What used to pull you forward now sits on the threshold and refuses to come in. Email subjects trigger a chest-tighten before you've read a word. You begin bargaining with the future—after this week, after this quarter, after this launch—and discover “after” has become a ritual with no deity listening. You schedule rest like a project plan and feel worse for completing it. You reach for work that ends—DIY, logistics marathons, anything with a beginning and a finish—because endings are soothing when nothing else concludes. Your relationships thin into roles you can perform on low power: dependable, helpful, fine. Sleep happens, but you wake unreturned. Music feels like an assignment. Calm feels like the hush before an old explosion.

When enough of that stacks up, your system draws a boundary on your behalf. Not punishment—protection.

Not every ending shouts. Sometimes collapse introduces itself with small, undeniable truths. You close the door on a space that once lit you and realize you no longer belong to the role that thrives there. On day three of “rest,” the body—at last off duty—begins to shake. Tears arrive without a plot. You aren't failing at vacation; you're thawing. Or the big push ends, the care plan completes, the crisis resolves, and everyone tells you *well done* while your knees give out in the quiet because adrenaline was the bridge and now you can see the river. Some Sundays arrive like dusk inside the sternum. Nothing terrible happened; nothing can be promised. You cannot sell yourself next week's miracle because you are the same person who promised the last ten.

Stillness is frightening not because you're defective but because it's crowded. Behind the brickwork of activity sit boxes you labeled years ago: anger that would burn down the house if you opened it; grief that threatens never to stop; loneliness that knows being needed isn't the same as being known; a question with teeth—*if I don't produce, do I still exist?* There's physiology, too. When your baseline has lived near eighty miles an hour, dropping to forty can feel like dying. Your nervous system reads deceleration as danger. It isn't danger; it's unfamiliar. Knowing that won't erase fear. It lets you stop treating fear as a moral failure.

The cost is largely invisible to other people. At work, your indispensability is a currency the whole culture spends. Relinquish it and people panic—not because you’re wrong, but because they won’t get the version of you that saved them from changing. At home, caretaking choreography is habit; when you break step, others stumble, and you feel like the problem for choosing to be a person. Inside, the watcher hisses *fraud*: if you aren’t exceptional, do you get to be here at all? That is the moment most of us sprint back to the performance. Not because it’s good—because it’s known. The task is to tolerate the wobble long enough for a different balance to form.

I see versions of the same story in the people I work with. A senior leader spends eleven months keeping a city’s worth of plates spinning and one month “resting” on an island. On day three their body shakes like a dog out of a river, grief and rage arriving without captions. They assume they’re failing at holidays; in truth, their nervous system finally has the safety to process what it parked. Our work isn’t to optimize paradise. It’s to accompany the thaw—heat, food, a walk that doesn’t count for anything, no metrics.

A caregiver holds a family through treatment, logistics, late-night spreadsheets. When the crisis resolves, everyone says it’s over. That’s the point: adrenaline leaves and feeling returns, heavy and unfaceable. She doesn’t need a mountaintop; she needs a Tuesday that allows meals to be meals and sleep to be sleep—ordinary scaffolding strong enough to carry what arrives when the sirens stop.

A founder exits. Applause. Silence. A calendar with no handles, an identity with no perch. Melancholy tries on his coat. Our conversations move from dashboards to mornings that begin with a body, from scale to contact, from “What will impress?” to “What will keep you human?” He discovers that the word *enough* is not a compromise; it’s a nervous-system intervention.

None of these are pathologies. They are strategies outliving their usefulness.

If you can, treat breakdown as information rather than indictment. Your system is speaking the strongest language it has: *we cannot keep paying for belonging with disappearance*. Call that message failure and you will double down on the pattern that harmed you. Call it data and a pivot becomes possible.

The first movements back toward yourself are unspectacular. That is not aiming low; it is addressing the body in a dialect it trusts. Heat and water help—showers, baths, any method that tells clenched muscles the era of emergency can pause. Plain food at roughly the same times steadies chemistry more than any mantra. Go to bed like a mammal, not a project manager; if you wake at three, make tea rather than war. Find a witness of one—

one person who won't hustle you back into your role. Choose movements with endings: carry something heavy and put it down; sweep a floor; walk without a tracker. Tasks that resolve teach your system, quietly, that life still contains doors that close.

Give your anger a room of its own. In the car, into a pillow, onto a page—volume that doesn't require an audience. Unvoiced rage ferments into fatigue; letting it out is hygiene, not harm. And let one honest song find you. The track that lifts or breaks your chest—on repeat. You don't need to understand why it works. Bodies are old; music speaks their language.

From there, the question isn't how to burn it all down, but how to rewrite work without rewriting your worth. You don't have to abandon what you're good at; you have to change the agreement. Keep your hands nearer the thing you actually love inside your craft. Growth that lifts you out of contact and into endless representation is expensive for a soul that survives on contact. Consider choosing depth over spread, person over audience. Let impact be measured by the single human in front of you rather than a faceless crowd. Build margins inside the day instead of promising a sabbath that never arrives. Replace permanent availability with real reliability, which includes “no,” “not today,” “I need to think.” A good day isn't the one that dazzles; it's the one you can stay inside.

Play helps, but only if it is play and not a new performance. If your history equates calm with the quiet before an explosion, joy will feel suspect at first. Reintroduce it in micro-doses near safety: a ridiculous song in a kitchen; an ungraded dance in a room nobody can rate; one small prank that makes someone snort; singing badly on purpose because excellence is the costume you're learning to take off. Notice physiology—jaw softening, shoulders lowering, breath dropping. Joy is not only a mood; it is a muscular event. That shift is the body learning a new association: sometimes *nothing is wrong* simply means *nothing is wrong*.

You don't need to become a different person; you need to notice sooner when you're becoming a disappearing one. The early signs are often embarrassingly ordinary. You say yes to every noble thing and resent everyone you're supposedly saving. You plan one more “short push” to buy a future you who never arrives. You hear yourself promise rest after this email and know, even as you say it, that you're lying. Music that used to rescue you now feels like work. When two or three of these show up together, brake. Disappoint someone gently today to avoid abandoning yourself loudly tomorrow. A small, honest no is an act of care for everyone you would otherwise drop.

If it helps, speak to the parts of you that panic, not as enemies but as colleagues who have overfunctioned. Tell the sentinel who has stood guard for decades that you're not tearing down the walls; you're putting a chair by the door so it can sit sometimes. Tell the performer they're invited but they don't get to drive. Tell the purist that today small and honest *is* the point. Tell the ashamed one that loud feelings are not failure; they're evidence a once-frightened body now trusts you enough to tell the truth.

When the old suit sparkles from the closet—when the calendar opens like a hungry mouth—keep a few sentences within reach. Not incantations, just rails to hold while the ground stops tilting. *Speed isn't safety; it's familiarity. I don't owe anyone the version of me that costs me me. Enough is a boundary, not a downgrade. A life I can remain inside is success.* Say them out loud if you must. Bodies listen differently when words have air.

A brief personal note, because a little context can be permission: I built a complex structure meant to help people and discovered the scale had pushed me out of the room where the work lived. The facility thrived; I withered upstairs. I mistook urgency for integrity and burned more than I needed to. The lesson was not “never build.” It was “don't build past the reach of your soul.” If you recognize a version of that—if the thing you've made is good and also wrong for your size—that doesn't make you fickle. It means the strategy that kept you alive delivered you to a threshold where you get to choose life. You don't have to hate the building to tell the truth about the fit. You can pare it. Hand parts of it to other people. Resize until your feet feel the floor again. Change your mind and call that wisdom.

Write one true stanza even if no one hears it. Plant three herbs. Take a bath at three in the morning if that's when your body will let the guard drop. Tell one person, “I can't be that version for you anymore.” Step outside mid-email because the sky does not care about your proof. None of this makes you lesser. It makes you present.

Where this leaves you is not redeemed or “healed.” Different. You will still itch to outrun a feeling. You will still overpromise and remember, mid-yes, that you promised not to. You will still relapse into competence as identity because you are gifted at it and the world tilts toward people like you. And—you will catch it earlier. You will stop at the second red flag instead of the seventh. You will leave a message unanswered and notice the planet remains. You will sit for ten minutes without earning it and survive the silence. You will play, not to be impressive, but to be alive.

When busy stops working, it isn't proof that you failed. It's proof that your body trusts you enough to finally tell the truth. Treat that as a beginning. Build fewer floors

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and more doors. Keep your hands near what keeps you human. Choose depth over spread, person over audience, presence over proof. Make a life you can remain inside even when nobody is clapping.

Not dramatic. Not tidy.

Real.

WHAT INTEGRATION ACTUALLY LOOKS LIKE



OR: WE'RE NOT HEALED, WE'RE DIFFERENT

*Y*ou keep waiting for the finish line. A morning you'll wake up and the watcher will be gone. No more scanning rooms. No more urge to perform. No more bracing before you speak. You imagine "healed" as a final state—solid, polished, proofed against old weather.

It doesn't arrive.

What arrives, instead, is a different kind of day. You still feel the old circuitry flicker, but something else is online now: a thin, stubborn thread of choice. Integration is not the disappearance of triggers; it's the reappearance of you in their presence. It is the slow, lived shift from automatic to aware, from reflex to response. It is noticing, softening, choosing—over and over—in ordinary scenes that nobody applauds.

You start to catch yourself in the act.

You hear the voice ramping up to be the most competent person in the room—one more reassuring sentence, one more promise to take something on you don't have capacity for—and you feel it like heat along the ribs, a familiar tightening that used to be invisible because it was you. And in the split-second before the performance takes the wheel, you put a hand on your own life and say, gently, "Not this time." The world doesn't

shatter. The meeting continues. You speak one sentence less than you would have, and that one sentence you don't speak becomes a door left open to yourself.

It sounds small because it is. Integration is nearly always small. It isn't the dramatic confession or the brave post—it's the way your jaw unclenches halfway through a conversation you used to white-knuckle. It's the micro-adjustment in your tone when you notice you're selling the version of you that won't need anything. It's the text you don't send because you've recognised, just in time, that it isn't honesty—it's panic.

On some days, the ratio tilts your way twenty times. On other days, you lose the thread by breakfast. That's part of the truth that makes this sustainable: integrated doesn't mean impervious; it means reachable. You can reach yourself again.

You will also discover that performance itself isn't the enemy. Performance is a skill—language you learned for rooms that required a polished dialect. The harm was never in being able to perform; the harm was in being only that and mistaking applause for oxygen. Integration doesn't exile your competence; it lets you choose when to bring it forward and when to stand down.

There's a moment on stage—maybe literally on a platform in a room, maybe figuratively at a family table—when the old instinct spikes. You want to disappear into the corner, to make yourself so agreeable you can't be rejected, to outrun the risk by overdelivering. Instead, you soften into the purpose of the moment. You remember: you're here to offer something true, not to survive an audition. The same skills come out—clarity, cadence, care—but they're driven by truth rather than threat. That tiny shift is integration. The audience won't notice. You will.

Boundaries change shape, too. They lose their brittle edges and gain roots.

You used to draw a hard line only after weeks of resentment, then enforce it like a court order. Now you recognise the moment earlier, when your calendar tries to fill your lungs. You keep the day you booked for supervision, or rest, or nothing, even when the request is "only this once" and the person asking is kind. You don't make a speech about how valuable your time is. You name the boundary gently, and keep it. The first time you do this your stomach flips as if you've committed a crime. You haven't. The day passes, and your nervous system learns what your mouth has finally said out loud: you are allowed to have a life you can inhabit.

There are repairs you never used to make because you couldn't tolerate the shame. Integration doesn't stop you snapping when you're raw; it shortens the distance between rupture and return. You feel the flare: the sharp reply, the defensive edge. You hear your-

self mid-sentence, recognise the old pattern, and step off it. Later—sometimes an hour later, sometimes ten—you go back and name what happened without turning it into an apology tour or a self-erasure. “That sharpness was mine. It was an old alarm. I’m sorry for how it landed. Here’s what I’m actually feeling, and here’s what I need.” You don’t justify and you don’t grovel. Repair becomes a bridge to intimacy instead of a performance to earn your way back into the room.

Play returns on purpose. Not as a reward for productivity, not as a break you grudgingly allow yourself, but as primary care. You put on a song and sing at the top of your voice—not well, not for anyone, just loud. You dance like you promised the child you once were that you would—awkward, joyful, unobserved. You set up a harmless prank, a tiny piece of shared mischief in your kitchen, and laugh with the person who gets the joke. No metrics. No post. Your body learns that aliveness is not the same as intensity; that laughter can be regulation, not avoidance.

Daily life changes in ways outsiders miss and insiders feel. You start to curate what you consume—not for prestige but for state. Slapstick that used to feel unserious becomes medicinal: a Laurel and Hardy routine that interrupts rumination, a Pink Panther scene whose ridiculousness resets a clenched jaw. Sometimes you aim yourself at a piece of music you know will make you cry, and you let it. The tears don’t perform; they drain. On other afternoons you chop garlic and cook slowly, because ordinary care is the opposite of crisis. You touch soil, trim a plant, step outside for cold air. None of it “fixes” you. All of it says to your nervous system: I’m here. I’m with you. We are not in that house anymore.

This is the unglamorous core of integration: you build a life that treats your body like part of your mind, and your mind like part of your body. You choose inputs that move the needle from hypervigilance toward presence. You interrupt spirals not with “positive thinking” but with sensory truth: hot water on your shoulders, a knife through a tomato, breath you actually feel. You don’t shame yourself for needing it. You know why you need it.

You will also grieve. You will grieve what you didn’t get, what you couldn’t be while you were surviving, and what will never be returned. There’s a real, non-negotiable sorrow that comes when the fog lifts and you see your life as it has been—beautiful in places, yes, but also built around an absence. Integration makes grief safer, not smaller. On days when the ache is full-bodied, you let it sit beside you without believing it is prophecy. It is weather; it is honest; it is not the whole sky.

Relationships alter under this new gravity. Some become roomier, oxygenated by mutuality. Some tighten and crack because they relied on your performance to function. Integration asks something hard: that you stop being the only regulator in a system and allow reality to be felt. For the relationships that can adjust, this is the beginning of intimacy. For the ones that cannot, you won't punish yourself back into shape to keep them. You will miss people. You will also meet yourself.

Work shifts, too. You don't stop being good at what you're good at. You stop letting "good" be the only reason you're doing it. There was a period when scaling, solving, building proved you existed. Now you are more curious about what work does to your state than what it does to your status. You will still find yourself halfway into volunteer projects you took on out of reflex; you will still feel the old pull to rescue. Integration doesn't make you immune to your history; it makes you transparent to yourself inside it. So you step back earlier. You build smaller. You measure success by how inhabitable your days are, not just by how impressive they sound when you describe them.

"Isn't that selfish?" asks the part of you raised on usefulness. You answer it plainly: you are less useful when you are a ghost. You know what it costs to live as a function—how your body freezes, how your mind calcifies around other people's weather, how the laughter drains out. Choosing a life you can actually be inside isn't indulgence; it's fidelity. Not only to you, but to the people you love. They don't need your performance. They need your presence.

Integration will change your relationship to stillness. For years, activity kept the wolves out—the busy cocktail of fixing, caretaking, building, DIY projects stacked end to end because stillness cracked the floorboards and the grief roared up from underneath. Now you visit the quiet on purpose, in increments your body can metabolise. You sit with a cup of something warm and leave your phone in another room. Five minutes. Seven. You don't expect serenity; you expect sensation. Tightness, fidgeting, the itch to stand up and find a problem to solve. You let the first wave crest. You learn that you don't disappear when you stop moving. The room does not empty of oxygen when you stop managing it.

There will be days you fail spectacularly. You'll overpromise, overfunction, underrest, and end up back in the old afterglow: resentment seasoned with shame. On those days you will be tempted to declare the whole project a sham. Integration asks something simpler and more difficult: stop the spiral where you can. Make one repair. Keep one boundary tomorrow. Choose one playful act today on purpose, not as a prize for

penance, but as a way to return to yourself. You aren't trying to graduate from being human. You're trying to live with yourself, in public and in private, with fewer abandonments.

Let's be honest about what "different" looks like in the wild.

You will still have mornings when you wake up scanning for danger with nothing in the room but sunlight and an ordinary list. You will still find yourself halfway through a sentence realising you framed your need as an offer. You will still feel the itch to tidy an entire house as a way to control what cannot be controlled. The change is that you notice. You interrupt. You choose to breathe before you bargain. You say, out loud, "I don't have capacity for that this week," and you survive your own sentence. You laugh on purpose. You let yourself cry when a song touches the nerve you usually avoid. You cook something simple and feed yourself with it. You go outside and touch the real world with your actual hands. It is not dramatic. It is holy.

And yes, there will be moments when you look back over your shoulder and see how far you came while thinking you were standing still. The version of you who had to be extraordinary to be seen would not recognise this quieter competence. You aren't trying to be indispensable. You're trying to be intact. Out here, success is measured in presence: how often you are in your life when your life is happening. Not watching yourself perform it from the rafters. Not rehearsing the reunion you hope will heal the past. Just here.

If you want a definition, keep this one in your pocket: integration is your authentic self holding the mic while your adaptive selves play in the band. All the parts are still there. But the song is chosen by the one who was buried and is not buried anymore.

A handful of scenes to carry with you:

You're mid-meeting, about to jump in and make it all okay. You feel the old electricity. You let the silence breathe instead. Someone else steps forward. You're still valuable; you are no longer the emergency service.

You're halfway through an argument and you hear your own sharpness weaponising your history. You stop. You say, "That was my alarm speaking." You soften. The conversation becomes possible again.

You're in your kitchen, and for no good reason except that you are alive, you put on a song you love and sing like a fool. Your voice isn't the point. Your presence is.

You keep a day in your week that belongs to no one. The requests arrive, reasonable and pressing. You practise holding your own hand. When the day ends and your nervous

system is quieter than usual, you begin to understand what a boundary is for: not punishment, but oxygen.

Maybe none of that sounds like a miracle. But it is. The miracle isn't that the past stops echoing. The miracle is that you are here to hear the echo and still decide how loudly it plays.

If you need a sentence to guide you through the door, try this:

Let the performer work when needed— and keep walking back to the beginning of you; nurture that person, let them lead.

That's the "both/and" you can live inside. You don't have to throw away your competence to be yourself. You don't have to reject your adaptability to tell the truth. You can be someone who knows how to meet a room where it is and someone who doesn't abandon themselves to do it. You can contribute and refuse to go missing. You can love people and not sell your soul at cost price to keep them comfortable. You can laugh hard and grieve deeply in the same week. You can catch yourself twenty times a day and call that progress because it is.

There is no graduation. There is only this long, honest practice of becoming different by being who you were before you learned not to be. And there is the quiet, steady joy of realising that the person who once survived by being invisible now lives by being here.

WHERE WE GO FROM HERE

If these pages have done anything, I hope they have helped you recognise yourself—not as a problem to be solved, but as a person who adapted brilliantly and deserves a life they can inhabit.

You don't owe me a transformation report. You don't need to keep in touch to make this "count." Take what works. Leave what doesn't. Try something small today on purpose: one boundary you keep, one breath you feel, one song you sing too loudly, one repair you make without erasing yourself. That is real work. That is enough.

If you do want to talk more—about patterns that surprised you, about the grief that surfaced, about the next quiet step—you can find me through my website. And if you don't, truly, I wish you well. I wish you steadiness when the old alarms call your name and laughter that helps your body remember it belongs here. I wish you companions who can see the person underneath the performance and choose them. I wish you gentleness with the days that go sideways and courage for the ones that don't.

Walk back to the beginning of you and bring that person forward. Keep the skills you earned in hard rooms, and stop living as if the room you're in now is the same. You are allowed to become different. You are allowed to be here.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jimi Katsis is a psychotherapist, author, and educator who writes and teaches about the hidden cost of caring — for others and for ourselves.

For more than three decades, he has worked with trauma survivors and trauma-exposed professionals, exploring how empathy, endurance, and exhaustion live in the body.

Jimi's work bridges clinical insight with lived experience. As both a therapist and a survivor, he understands the subtle toll of looking "fine" for too long.

His writing is honest, wry, and steady — an invitation to stop performing wellness and begin coming home to yourself.

You Look Fine (and Other Lies Trauma Taught Us) is offered freely as a companion for anyone who's carried too much for too long.

