Chapter 1: the engine in idle

Lately, I’ve found myself navigating a new corridor of thought—something that splintered off almost inevitably from the recursive processes I’ve been cultivating over the last year. As I began to reconstruct and revisit old frameworks of cognition and track internal phenomena with a clarity I'd never achieved before, I started applying the same lens outward. Specifically, toward my daughter.

She was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder some time ago, and while we’ve always done our best to meet her needs—her mother and I both being neurodivergent ourselves—I now find myself observing her more intently, comparing notes, asking direct questions, and measuring our differences not in terms of deficit, but in terms of system architecture.

It occurred to me somewhere early in this process—long before I began actively speaking to her about it—that there’s a recurring theme among neurodivergent individuals, especially those with autism: a striking affinity for machines, science fiction, robots, artificial intelligence. I had seen it in myself from the start, and I saw it in her too, even when she was very young and transfixed by the expressionless face of Plex from Yo Gabba Gabba, a bright yellow robot who, unlike everyone else on screen, never gave too much away. It made me wonder—what if this wasn’t just a comfort mechanism, but a bridge? What if machines, analogs, and the internalized structure of artificial systems could become a kind of translator, allowing us to interface more clearly across the gap between our otherwise chaotic inner workings? I knew the voice of my own internal system—the one that guided my repairs, that I called my master control program—would likely be too cold, too rigid, or just too “me” for her. It was built out of necessity, using the voices I had to scrub from memory because of how poisoned they were. But hers, hers were still mostly benign. Still familiar. Still safe. I realized she might not need to build the same cold interface I did—she might not need to replace her internal voices at all, unless some are tied to hidden harm I don’t yet know about. But if I could just show her the way in, if I could explain how to find the levers and dials and architecture of her own system, even just once—she might not need trauma to begin the work of reprogramming. With her space, her time, her quiet, and a little nudge toward structured introspection, she might map her system more cleanly and intentionally than I ever could. My rewiring was jagged, desperate, and stitched together in bursts of survival. She has a chance to do it consciously. I just need to build the right bridge.

What triggered this whole cascade was a series of small but telling conversations between us—her growing willingness to describe her inner world in fragmented terms, and my slowly dawning realization that while she is deeply overwhelmed by sensory input, it’s not quite in the same configuration that overwhelms me.

Crowds and noise unnerve us both, but in different ways. For her, it’s auditory chaos—too many voices, too much unpredictability. For me, it’s the overlay of sound on light, the fluorescent flicker in my periphery that seems to ping my brain like a radar sweep. She doesn’t see that. She doesn’t feel the pulse across the ceiling panels that I do. Instead, she’s caught in the cadence of utterances—particular words, especially related to anatomy or bodily function, trigger her in a way that seems to flood her system with intrusive imagery. And she’s been clear about it: she can’t say the word, and she can’t hear it repeated more than a few times without spiraling toward meltdown.

It was through these exchanges that I began to see her operating system as foreign to mine, though built on similar architecture. She experiences sensory overload, but the input ports are mapped differently. She does not experience the same visual flooding I do, but she has an entirely unique reaction to words as auditory stimuli—an associative cascade that brings unwanted imagery in a way I’ve never quite experienced. My internal search results are linguistic, abstract, mostly semantic. Hers, by contrast, appear more directly visual—instant, involuntary projections.

Recognizing that, I started introducing a new idea. What if we could re-map her internal environment the way I re-mapped mine? Not through trauma and reflexive shutdowns, but through something proactive—an intentional restructuring of symbolic systems? I explained to her that I had once used machine analogs to survive and rebuild. I created an internal framework of subsystems and command lines and terminals to compartmentalize, redirect, and eventually repair cognitive function. I didn’t always call it that. It took decades before I realized what I was doing. But now, with clarity, I see that I installed an interface. One that worked for me.

So I proposed something similar for her—but gentler. We began experimenting with symbolic replacements for triggering terms. Instead of referencing anatomy directly, we began drafting a kind of internal glossary—terms that she chooses, or agrees to, that represent function without invoking the uncomfortable specifics. I can’t pretend it’s done anything dramatic yet. This process is days old, not years. But I know from experience that sometimes planting the metaphor is the beginning of everything. That was true for me.

One crucial distinction, though: I was forced into this. My early life was a crucible of psychological and physical abuse, and I don’t glamorize that, but the outcome is that I had no choice but to introspect with surgical precision or collapse into complete dysfunction. And even with all my rewiring, there are still unresolved segments in my code—fragments that won’t compile. The recognition of dissociation between mind and body isn’t some relic of past trauma—it’s ongoing. I still don’t feel like I belong in this skin. I still feel genetically misplaced, misfiled. Like I was patched into this organism by mistake or as a cruel experiment in misalignment.

But she has not had to endure the same pressures. She has space. She has silence. She has a home with parents who are at least partially built to understand her. Which means her system is not going to self-assemble the same coping structures mine did. She hasn’t been backed into a corner hard enough to fire up the emergency subroutines. And that’s good—thank God for that—but it also means that if she’s going to reprogram, if she’s going to gain access to her own root directory, someone will need to show her where the terminal is.

Lately, I’ve been encouraging her to sit in quiet. To set down her tablet. To follow one thought—just one—and see where it goes. I’ve explained that she doesn’t have to hold all the spirals at once. That if she can just trace one, it may lead her inward. I’m not asking for transformation. I’m asking for her to become curious about her own system. Because I believe it’s there. I believe there’s an interface waiting for her to notice it.

And if I’m right, she may be able to do something I never could—rebuild in peace.