



SIMONE COLE

Back Left Burner

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To my Grandma Gloria

Hi Grandma! Look, I made a book!

*What follows is a disjointed collection of narrative shorts that make
an emotional archive, an insight library, or a helpful blueprint.*

It's not a memoir.

It's not an essay collection.

It's not cohesive.

And it's not meant to be.

*It's a lived experience file cabinet, full of overheard confessions,
unprocessed emotions, and jokes too sharp for therapy.*

I'm not a writer.

I'm a storyteller.

And for this archive, I happened to use words.

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Preface

You can find this again at the end, but I've learned most people don't finish things, and this one deserves an intermission.

This isn't a book where the protagonist transforms and everyone claps.

There's no magical epiphany.

No five-step plan.

No "and then I finally learned to love myself" moment. There's just... me. Telling the truth.

About what it feels like to be loved for your usefulness, but invisible in your humanity. About what it's like to be not-quite-picked. Not-quite-seen. Not-quite-left-alone either.

About what it's like to spend your life playing emotional double dutch: jump in, disappear, jump back, smile.

I didn't write this for healing.

I wrote it for clarity.

For the ones who never get a postmortem on the friendships that ghosted them.

For the ones who were always there, but still somehow... extra.

For the ones who thought “it’s just me,” and kept going.

I’m not here to hand you solutions. I’m not here to earn sympathy.

And I’m definitely not here to coddle the people who might see themselves in the villain role. (But hey, if that stings a little—it should.)

So before anyone skims a single sentence and decides I’m being too sensitive or too dramatic...

If you even read the first chapter and thought, “Well, why doesn’t she just do something about it instead of whining?”

I dare you to look in the mirror.

Because I’d bet money there’s someone in your life right now who you’ve accidentally made feel like this.

If your first reaction to that is annoyance...

Sorry, but you might be part of the problem.

And unfortunately for you, I’ve never been known to bite my tongue when something’s unfair, unethical, or just plain mean.

So this is me, telling you.

Just be nice. If you have nothing good to say, say nothing at all.

Some pages in here are typed. Some are left as they were when I first wrote them, quick and messy and caught in the moment. Not unfinished. Left as is.

It's a core feature of my ADHD: I move in bursts, I capture what I need to before it disappears. Teachers and bosses call it "poor follow-through." Maybe you've seen that line too, buried in your report card or performance review. The dreaded comment about task completion.

But who decided leaving something as is makes it less valid? Why should every fleeting thought be polished into a neat typeset block just to appease a teacher, a boss, a publisher? I like them the way they are. Raw. Sharp. Brief. Different.

That's not wrong. It's difference. And difference is the point. This book isn't about smoothing out edges to meet expectations. It's about keeping the archive honest.

|

Instructions for use

Part 1

Read sequentially

Part 2

Prance around each chapter like a kid on Christmas morning.

Enjoy

1

Naming It

This is the closest thing I have to a journal, which is exactly why it isn't one.

Writing down my feelings has never worked for me. That's not the fixation.

The fixation is pattern detection.

The fixation is reverse-engineering moments after they've already happened.

The fixation is figuring out what to prevent, what to repeat, and what to stop misnaming as coincidence.

I don't analyze emotions to feel better. I analyze systems so the situation doesn't happen again. Or so I can make it happen on purpose next time.

If this feels familiar, it's probably because you've been doing some version of it too. We just don't really have a name for it that isn't associated with a diagnosis or clinical setting. I call it 'Red Stringing'. Let's reframe that term. Its the act of reverse

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engineering a social interaction to find the hidden architecture.

2

Disclaimer

Notice: This is a Lived Experience Archive

If you found this on a subway seat, or if you were handed a fragment of this file cabinet because I thought you could handle it, read carefully.

To my Family and Friends:

If you see yourself in these pages, you might feel exposed. You might feel like I've been "keeping receipts" or that I'm being "too much". You might even feel like I'm "punishing" you for things you didn't mean to do.

But here is the math:

This isn't a betrayal of you; it's a documentation of me. For years, I used "stillness" to keep you comfortable, while I was "sinking in emotional quicksand". I "curated a dream life" for you while my own humanity remained "invisible".

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If you are angry reading this, I dare you to ask yourself if you're mad at the truth, or just mad that the performance is over.

To anyone I've let into Phase 2

You met the "Carnival-boat version" of me, and it was electric. But this archive is the "manual" for the parts that usually "ghost out of self-preservation".

If "all of me" is "too much" for your "snack capacity," that's okay.

I'd rather you "lose interest" in the truth than "love" a mask that's currently "eroding my soul".

To the Professional World:

This is my "resume in drag" finally being retired. If my "accuracy" or "justice sensitivity" feels like a "God Complex," it's actually just a "seatbelt" I used because I didn't grow up somewhere safe.

The Bottom Line:

I'm not here to earn your sympathy, and I'm definitely not here to "coddle" the people who see themselves as the villain. I'm just finally using my own microphone.

Just be nice. Or don't. The door is finally unlocked, and I'm no longer holding the handle.

These lived experiences have given me a name for something I couldn't previously articulate well.

I call it. The Glitter Theory.

DISCLAIMER

Glitter Theory: An artistic theory of invisible labor and visible residue.

Glitter is

Eye-catching. Temporary. Disposable. Used to distract. To dazzle. To make something violent feel beautiful. To make something average seem expensive and desirable.

It sticks to you until you're inconvenienced. Then suddenly, it's a mess, swept up, hidden, apologized for. Not because it did anything wrong, but because its presence is no longer useful. Its residue becomes annoying. And annoyance is enough to erase something once celebrated.

Glitter Theory proposes that, for many neurodivergent individuals, social and professional success is not the result of ease or adaptation, rather the residue of immense, unacknowledged effort. Much like glitter, this effort appears decorative, light, or excessive to the casual observer, but it clings to everything, resists cleanup, and reveals where someone has been; even when they tried to hide it.

The theory reframes “sparkle” (charisma, cleverness, productivity) as evidence of overexertion, and challenges the neurotypical gaze that mistakes survival strategies for personality traits. In this framework, glitter is both proof and burden, a mark of brilliance and a reminder of what was required to be seen as competent, likeable, or enough.

To follow the glitter is to trace the labor that was never meant to be visible.

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With glitter. Beauty is the invitation

Brokenness is the reveal.

3

The Embarrassing Parts

This is the part people skip when they're busy calling it a superpower.

The media version of neurodivergence is charming. Quirky. Productive in unusual ways. A little chaotic, but in a fun, palatable, innovation-adjacent way. It's good branding. It helps with stigma. I'm not mad at it.

But it leaves out the parts we don't put on the highlight reel. The parts that don't sound inspiring when you say them out loud.

And you're likely wondering. Well, if it's so embarrassing, why admit it out loud and so publicly now?

Because. This is for the folks that are "too functional" to get empathy and too marginalized to get safety. For the people that have been told "you're so articulate" when really people are just happy their comfort was prioritized.

So here it is.

Sometimes filling out a simple but important form is impossible. Not hard. Not confusing. Impossible. Sometimes making a phone call feels like trying to lift a car with your ribs. Sometimes getting out of bed to “just do the thing” feels like your body has quietly resigned from the job without telling you.

When your neurobiology works against you, those moments stack up and they don’t lead to gentle consequences. They lead to adult ones. Lost jobs. Financial instability. Interrupted access to medication. Relationships that quietly expire. Missed deadlines that turn into missed rent. Missed emails that turn into missed opportunities.

There’s no empathy baked into that stage of the process. There’s no pause where someone asks what happened or why. The response is almost always blame, dressed up as responsibility.

You should have tried harder. You should have planned better. You should have asked for help.

The Belief Gap.

Here’s the part no one likes admitting. For those of us who are high masking, asking for help isn’t a real option. We masked too well. We learned early how to appear competent, reliable, easy to work with. We made sure nothing slipped during the day-to-day interactions. We smiled. We compensated. We covered gaps quietly. We became believable.

So when things finally collapse, when the consequences are already at the door, suddenly asking for help doesn't look brave or responsible.

It looks suspicious. It looks like an excuse. It looks like retroactive justification. It looks like you're blaming a diagnosis for what other people see as a character flaw.

Who's rushing to help someone who "just forgot" something important? Who believes someone who could have prevented the damage by sending one email or making one call?

No one.

And they're not cruel for thinking that. If you strip away the neurobiological context and just look at the actions or the absence of them, the story doesn't read sympathetically.

If this were a movie character with no internal narration, no explanation of dopamine, executive dysfunction, or task paralysis, the audience wouldn't root for her.

They'd say she's irresponsible. They'd say she doesn't prioritize communication. They'd say she keeps creating her own problems.

Sometimes I'd rather let them believe that. I'd rather be thought of as careless than broken. I'd rather be "just like that" than someone whose brain can't be trusted to do basic adult things without help.

The Paradox of Disclosure

There's a specific physical feeling that comes with this. Not sadness. Not panic. It's a quiet, burning embarrassment. The kind

that makes you sit very still while consequences happen to you. The kind that tells you there's no point fighting and no point reaching out. The kind that whispers that preserving whatever dignity you have left is more important than explaining yourself.

This is the paradox. Studies show that being upfront about disabilities in social settings often leads to better treatment. More understanding. More accommodation. Less misinterpretation. That may be true.

But workplaces are not social experiments. They are economic systems. And in those systems, disclosure is a gamble with rent attached to it.

Unmask now: Risk being fired, ridiculed, sidelined, or quietly passed over.

Mask now: Risk burnout, collapse, and catastrophic consequences later.

Now or later. Bad or worse.

People like me live in a world of constant paradoxical decision-making. Every day involves choosing which version of harm is more survivable. And when it finally breaks, when masking fails and the fallout arrives, the judgment comes without curiosity. Without context. Without empathy. Even from people who never meant to contribute to the cycle. Especially from them.

This chapter doesn't resolve that. There's no clean takeaway. No instruction manual. No brave declaration that makes it all

stop.

There's just this.

If you see yourself here, it's not just you. If you've paid a high price for things that look small on paper, you're not imagining it. If you've been choosing between dignity and help, survival and honesty, you're not failing at adulthood.

You're navigating a system that was never designed with your nervous system in mind. And that discomfort you feel reading this, whether it's shame, anger, relief, or all of it at once. That's the point.

In HR, org psych, and retention research, the following is not controversial:

The first 30 / 60 / 90 days strongly predict:

- Probation outcomes
- Engagement
- Early attrition

Making it to the 1-year mark correlates with:

- Higher long-term retention
- Internal mobility
- Wage growth

On-boarding quality matters more than performance in the first year.

That's mainstream. That's MBA slide-deck boring. No one serious disputes it.

Here's what the overlooked variable is:

A neurodivergent employee who is masking is not being on-boarded.

They are being mis-onboarded as a fictional character.

So the organization is optimizing for:

A person who does not exist

A capacity that is unsustainable

A communication style that cannot be maintained

That is not a "personal failing." That is a data integrity problem.

My working Theory: The Glitter Loop

Neurodivergent employees who mask during onboarding are evaluated, retained, or rejected based on a version of themselves that cannot persist.

The first 90 days become a fork:

Mask successfully → burnout trajectory

Drop the mask → probation failure

Either path inflates unemployment and underemployment statistics without ever being recorded as discrimination.

That's not inflammatory. That's precise.

THE EMBARRASSING PARTS

The 90-day probation period is actually a Social Stress Test that neurotypical people pass because their “performance version” and “real version” overlap. For us, the gap between those two is where the “Glitter Loop” happens.

The organization thinks they are hiring a “High-Performer.” In reality, they are hiring a Short-Term High-Intensity Rental of a person who is currently paying for that performance with their long-term health.

That's not to say we can't achieve the desired goals and metrics.

What it's saying is, the way we go about it in order to be accepted by colleagues and peers is unsustainable and will result in lasting consequences.

If you really can't unmask during or even after those 90 days. That would be equivalent to the employer changing the job description without warning or consultation. That creates friction, tension and unhappy people.

In workplaces: You get fired or burnt out.

In relationships: You get rejected or you disappear.

So we power through constantly choosing between the risk of authenticity or the “reward” of masking.

4

About the author

I live on the outskirts of the main community. Every time I interact with someone from inside, I'm the foreigner who clearly never got the rule book at the border. They don't say it outright, but the way they look at me when I break some invisible rule gives it away.

All the rules are different. Which is wild, because I only live two kilometers away. You'd think we'd share the same currency, the same customs, the same language. But no, every exchange reminds me that I don't.

When I pause in conversation, they don't hear it as thoughtfulness, they hear it as a glitch. When I stay quiet in a text thread, they don't register it as efficiency, they log it as neglect. And when I try to explain my side, the response is always the same: adjust yourself to the community standard.

So I do. I learn the gestures. I toss in the emojis, I pad my sentences with filler, I pretend these rituals make sense to

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

me. It's exhausting, like walking through customs every single day and being forced to declare items I don't even believe are contraband.

The irony is, my way is just as valid. But because theirs is the majority, it gets framed as the default. The reference point. Which means I'll always be the one making adjustments, doing the mental gymnastics, bending myself into the palatable shape.

And the longer I play along, the more it cements the story: their way is the way, and the only difference here is me.

But that's a lie. The difference cuts both ways. They just refuse to admit they're foreign anywhere.

||

Receipt Folder

*This is not a memoir. It is a receipt folder.
It is for the “add-on” friend, the “back left burner”
partner, and the one who has spent their life playing
emotional double dutch.
If you’re looking for a five-step plan to “find
yourself,” put this down. I’m not here to hand you
solutions or earn your sympathy.
I’m just finally explaining reality to myself and letting
you overhear it.*

Instructions for use: Pick a page. Any page. It’s disjointed by design, just like the system that tried to fix me.

5

Our Formal Introduction

People love to sing along to John Legend's All of Me. Drunk or sober, they'll belt it out at weddings, stuck in traffic on the 401, even in grocery store aisles, noise cancelling headphones blasting for passerbys to hear.

"All of me loves all of you".

Sounds nice, doesn't it?

Being loved for all of you is a privilege.

Being misinterpreted then judged for all of you is the norm for me.

When "all of me" actually shows up in real life, it's never welcome. Then it's:

Pick a category before proceeding.

This feels messy, can we tighten it?

I don't understand.

Apparently "all of me" is only beautiful when it fits inside a three-minute love song. When it belongs to a Black, queer, neurodivergent woman in the real world? Suddenly, it's too much.

I've been called a lot of things: articulate, resilient, dramatic, difficult. What I've actually been is ANA. Almost. Never. Always.

Almost enough.

Never enough.

Always too much.

ANA is who people see when they want the version of me that reflects them back. The mirror. The mask rack. The translator. But she's not who I am. She's the shape I squeeze into so other people can handle me.

This book isn't tidy because I'm not tidy. Identity doesn't stack itself neatly on the shelf. Being a Black, queer, neurodivergent woman means all of it walks in the room at once. I don't get to peel one layer off at a time for everyone's comfort.

So if you're here looking for a clear arc, a genre label, a "before and after" glow-up story, you're going to be disappointed. This isn't about self-improvement. It's about self-documentation. An emotional archive. A file folder full of fragments, contradictions, and receipts.

Because while everyone else is happily singing all of me, I'm over here trying to survive the daily fine print: conditions apply, some exclusions may occur.

This is me anyway. All of me.

6

Preface: Six Memes and a Diagnosis

One of the first diagnoses I ever got was alexithymia.

Most people start with something mainstream. ADHD. Maybe anxiety. Something you can explain to a relative without needing a PDF. I got those too, don't worry. But alexithymia? That one came stapled to my psych file like a surprise plot twist.

I didn't even know it was a thing. Neither does anyone else, apparently. Short version? I feel a lot. But when it shows up, it's like, ok cool, who invited this emotional ghost? What does it want? No clue. Could be joy. Could be grief. Could be that I'm just hungry. Could be all three.

I ended up in Brigitte's office because I couldn't figure out how other adults existed. I knew I was smart, but my life was dumb. Alarms went off and I forgot what they were for. I'd leave the house and forget why. I thought, maybe I'm broken. Or maybe I just never learned how to human.

She was a psychiatrist. Gave me all the forms. You know the ones:

“How’s your mood?” → Neutral.

“Any emotional distress?” → Also neutral.

“Any suicidal thoughts?” → Nah. But if I did, I’d still circle neutral. It felt polite.

Meanwhile I’m in session looking like an open wound with eyeliner. Voice shaking, foot tapping, doing the thing where you talk in jokes because your throat is closing. Neutral.

She wasn’t buying it. She told me to journal. Obviously. Hard no.

I pictured “Dear Diary,” and immediately wanted to fake my own death. If I had the language to explain what I was feeling, Brigitte, I wouldn’t be here saying I’m fine in session while simultaneously trying to figure it out.

She said it was mandatory.

I said “sure” and lied.

Weeks went by. She kept asking. I kept pretending I’d start. I wasn’t trying to be difficult, I just didn’t know how to do the thing she was asking for.

Eventually she told me maybe she wasn’t the right person to

help me.

And that? That hit. Not because I was attached, but because, oh my god, was I about to fail therapy?

Also, lowkey, I liked her. She wasn't soft, but she wasn't fake. She didn't look at me like I was broken. Just... encrypted.

So one day on the TTC I saw a meme that felt like an X-ray of my insides. I copied and pasted it into an email and sent it to her with five more. Subject line:

“This is my journal.”

No reply.

Next session she looked at me like I had just dropped off my tax returns, annotated.

She goes, “I learned more about you from those six memes than in all our sessions combined.”

That's how email journaling became a thing.

No paragraphs. No “dear diary.” Just chaotic bursts of whatever was underneath the polite version of me. Songs. Rants. Meme dumps. Emotional crime scenes in sentence form. And even then, I didn't name the feelings. I just wrote around them until they showed up sideways.

I never reread them.

Still don't. That's not the point.

The point is, for people like me, self-reflection doesn't show up with a spotlight. It leaks. It unspools. And it needs space, the kind you don't get in a normal conversation.

I process externally. But verbally? I glitch. I need to loop. To type. To wander. To add "wait nvm delete that" four times. To explain something 700 ways until I accidentally say the truth without realizing it.

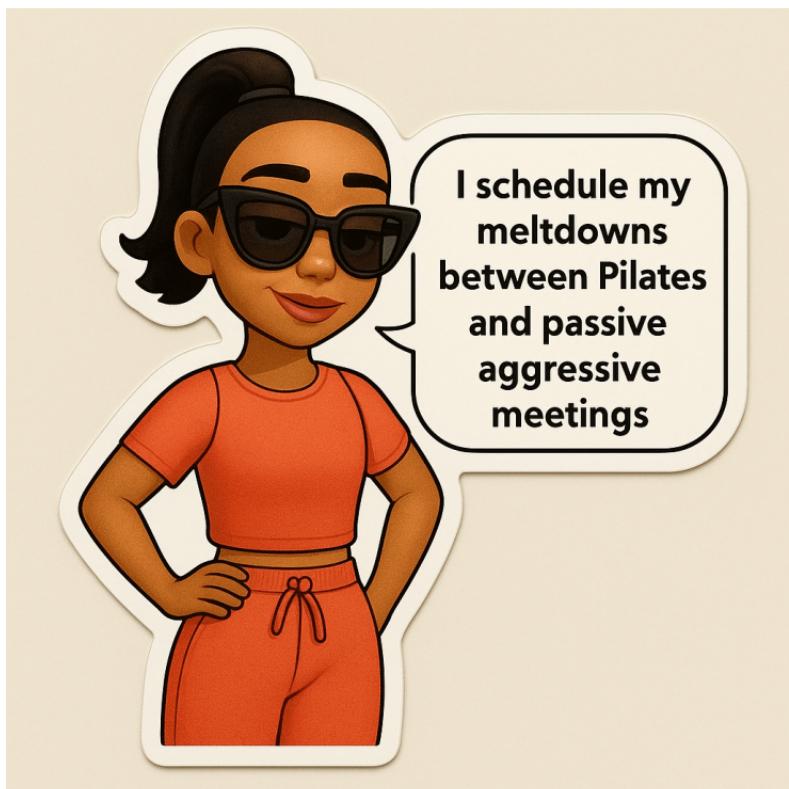
So this book?

It wasn't written. It was offloaded.

One misfired email at a time.

It's not a memoir. It's an inbox. It's a tab I forgot to close. It's all the shit I never meant to say out loud.

I'm not telling you who I am. I'm just finally explaining it to myself. And letting you overhear it.



7

Functional Freeze

When I finally met someone, she met the Carnival-boat version of me. Loud, electric, laughing. That is me. But it's not the whole story. The truth is, my baseline is flat. Ahedonic. Sometimes bordering on catatonic. The engine runs, but only on idle.

Ahedonia: The reduced ability or complete inability to experience pleasure from activities that were once found enjoyable, and it often involves a loss of interest or motivation in daily life.

Catatonic: Refers to a neuropsychiatric syndrome known as catatonia, characterized by abnormal movement, speech, and behavior, often presenting as severe unresponsiveness, immobility, or withdrawal in a person who is otherwise awake. It is a state in which a person appears awake but does not respond to people or surroundings normally.

It's not coldness, it's freeze. I'm not lazy, I'm in a functional coma. I do the minimum required to get through each day because my body has been in shut down mode for years. After back to back traumas in every corner of my life, I never got the chance to stabilize. No single safe place to land. My nervous system adapted by numbing out. That is why it takes something as massive and overstimulating as Carnival to wake me up, to temporarily thaw me out.

Sprinkle in neurodiversity, sprinkle in demisexuality, and my affect is flat as hell. What looks like indifference is actually conservation. I'm surviving on low power mode. And survival is not a quick fix. You don't pop an Advil and reboot. It is more like a long course of antibiotics, paired with rehab, paired with lifestyle overhaul.

The things I love still matter, but joy only punches through in extreme doses. Small pleasures barely register. That is not me choosing to be detached. It is my brain's wiring after years of consecutive hits.

The Invisibility of Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity is another layer of this. It is invisible in the same way chronic illness is. Most days it passes unnoticed until something slips. It is like asthma. As long as I pace myself, use the inhaler, avoid triggers, no one thinks twice. But if I do not manage it, suddenly I cannot breathe, and everyone notices. That is when it becomes an inconvenience to others.

It is like migraines. I can look perfectly fine, then suddenly I am in a dark room, unable to function. People forget the daily management and only see the crash.

That is what living with neurodiversity feels like. Constant adjustments. Constant masking. Constant apologies for being myself. I bend toward norms to stay invisible, because the minute I stop managing it, the invisible becomes visible. And when it becomes visible, people treat it not as reality, but as disruption.

The Missing Home Base

Psychologists like John Bowlby, who developed attachment theory, wrote about the need for a secure base. For children, that is usually parents or a childhood home. It is the sense that, no matter where you wander, you can look back and know someone's got you. It does not mean you never leave. It means you feel tethered and safe while you explore.

Adults need that too. The secure base shifts. It might be a partner, a family, a community, even a city that feels like home. But it has to exist somewhere. Without it, the nervous system is

like a compass with no north.

The verdict is still out on exactly how long it takes most adults to build a secondary secure attachment. What I do know is that it takes me double, even triple the time of the average person. That is my reality, and it is especially unfortunate being someone who has lost every version of a secure base several times over. What research does show with confidence is that having close, secure relationships is positively correlated with psychological well-being. They are protective factors for long-term emotional stability. They even have measurable health impacts, like longer and healthier lives. But without one, survival rewires into hyper vigilance and freeze.

I had a base, then I lost it. I rebuilt it, then I lost that too. Every time, the rug ripped out. Add in multiple medical emergencies, none properly treated, all with lasting effects, and the rewiring got baked in somewhere along the way. Meningitis is the one that carved the deepest pit. It changed me forever, but only invisibly. No one notices, no one asks, because I look fine. Being an adult who survived meningitis is the ultimate back left burner situation. If I had been a child survivor, the scars would have been documented, named, given grace. As an adult, I was expected to walk it off.

Invisible damage doesn't earn empathy, or even sympathy. It just looks like weakness. So I built walls. Tall, begrudging, heavy walls. I have always wanted to let people in, but experience taught me it was dangerous. It is the psychological equivalent of knowing it is safer to wear track pants at 10 pm in a dark alley. Or having to choose a password that is next to impossible to

remember. Society says we have to, or any harm experienced is our fault. Yet we know full well we are at risk either way. But for peace of mind, I comply. It is just easier.

Where That Leaves Me

So yes, my body looks frozen. My affect looks flat. But it is not because I do not care. It is because I have been running without a secure base for years, and my nervous system decided the only way to survive was to shut almost everything down.

What makes this harder is how it lands for others. From the outside I look “totally fine,” or worse, I look cold, uncaring, distant, different, forgetful. Cruelest joke though is, I am forgetful, but not in the way it gets perceived. The truth is, if something is not absolutely required for my survival that day, it will not make the to do list. That is not neglect by choice. That is conservation out of necessity. It means very little attention gets paid beyond the essentials, because that is all the capacity I have to spend.

What it reads as though is not texting back, canceling plans, forgetting people exist, emotionless responses. For most people these are occasional lapses. For me it has become the baseline. What looks like indifference is actually triage. And that misunderstanding is both understandable and deeply frustrating.

This is why I am on medical leave. Why I am moving back to Toronto. Why I make costumes. These are my ways of slowly rebuilding a base. It is slow work, frustrating work, but it is the only way I know.

FUNCTIONAL FREEZE

And that is the state she walked into. Not a cold person, but a frozen one. Not someone who does not want to give, but someone still clawing toward a home base that can hold them without collapsing.

8

Emotional IT & On-Call Interpreter

I am always translating.

Why what they said hurt. What I actually meant. Why that joke landed sideways. Why the silence in the room wasn't neutral. Why tone matters. Why timing matters. Why intention does not cancel impact but also does not equal malice.

I explain subtext to people who swim in it unconsciously and call that intuition.

I explain group dynamics to people who benefit from them and insist they are natural law.

I explain emotional cause and effect like I'm walking someone through a software update they swear they never agreed to install.

I am the emotional IT department. On call. Understaffed. Expected to fix the issue without interrupting the workflow.

No one ever asks if I need translation.

That's the exhaustion. Not empathy. Not caring. It's the asymmetry.

I am expected to be fluent in everyone else's emotional language while mine is treated like a dialect that's inconvenient to learn. People assume I understand because I usually do. They assume I'm fine because I'm coherent. They assume clarity means comfort.

It doesn't.

The paradox is that I am also constantly in need of an interpreter.

Apparently, neurodivergent communication between two English speakers is not actually English-to-English. If one person is neurotypical, one of us might as well be speaking Farsi. Same alphabet. Same words. Completely different operating system.

I say something literally. They hear an implication I did not encode.

They say something casually. I hear an unintentional thesis statement about my worth.

So I ask for clarification. And suddenly I'm "too much."

I try to be precise. I'm "overthinking."

I don't react immediately. I'm "cold."

I react honestly. I'm "intense."

Somehow, I am always responsible for the repair.

I have to explain why I'm hurt without sounding accusatory. I have to explain my intention without sounding defensive. I have to explain context without sounding condescending. I have to explain myself without taking up too much space.

And I do it. Constantly. Competently. Exhaustingly.

Because if I don't, the misunderstanding calcifies. And once it calcifies, I'm the problem.

What no one sees is that translation is labor.

Cognitive labor. Emotional labor. Regulatory labor.

It requires me to pause my own experience mid-sentence, mid-feeling, mid-reaction, and reroute it through someone else's comfort settings. To soften edges. To add disclaimers. To preempt misreadings I didn't cause but will still be blamed for.

I become so busy making myself understandable that I forget to notice whether I am understood.

And the cruel part is this: people praise me for it.

"You're so self-aware."

"You explain things so well."

"You're great at seeing all sides."

What they mean is: you make it easy for us to stay unexamined.

Meanwhile, when I need translation, there is none.

My confusion is framed as a failure.

My directness is framed as a problem.

My need for clarity is framed as insecurity.

I am expected to adapt endlessly to a language that was never built for me, while any request for accommodation is treated like an inconvenience.

So I keep interpreting. Because silence is misread. Because misunderstanding is punished. Because being legible feels safer than being accurate.

But there is a cost to never being the native speaker.

You start editing yourself before you speak. You start buffering emotions before you feel them. You start pre-translating thoughts before you know whether they deserve air.

Eventually, you are fluent in everyone else and foreign to yourself.

And I am tired.

Not of people. Of translation without reciprocity.

I don't need everyone to speak my language. I need someone to stop assuming theirs is the default.

Stillness equals Safety

Stillness Equals Safety

Stillness is safety. That was the rule. Not because it worked once. Because it worked every time.

Movement led to outcomes I was never protected from. Questions led to consequences. Needs led to withdrawal. Attachment led to punishment dressed up as lessons.

Nobody tells you this about quicksand. It is not dramatic. There is no screaming. No arms flailing like in cartoons. No one yelling do not move.

What actually happens is quieter. You step somewhere that looks solid. Normal ground. Everyone else is standing there just fine. Then you feel it. A soft give. Not scary yet. Just wrong.

So you adjust. You shift your weight. You test the surface. You tell yourself you are imagining it. And then you sink. Not fast. That part matters. Slow enough that you think you can manage it. Slow enough that you think you caused it.

So you do what any logical person would do. You move. And that is when it gets worse.

Quicksand does not reward effort. It punishes it. The more

you move, the deeper you go.

So you learn. You learn that stillness is safer than hope. You learn that effort costs too much. You learn that the goal is not escape. It is endurance.

I learned that lesson early. Not because someone explained it. Because my body ran the experiment enough times.

Every time I leaned in, I sank. Every time I wanted more, I lost something. Attention. Safety. Approval. Sometimes the person entirely.

So I learned quickly. Not how to ask. How to anticipate. Not how to want. How to be useful.

I became indispensable before I became authentic. And then indispensable replaced authentic entirely. That is the part people miss.

They think this is about fear of abandonment. It is not. It is fear of annihilation.

Because when I lost people early on, I did not just lose them. I lost safety. I lost stability. I lost standing. I lost my role.

No one softened the landing. No one explained what would happen next. No one circled back to say you are still held even if you are no longer chosen.

So my nervous system did the math. Connection equals risk. Risk without protection equals collapse. Collapse must be avoided.

Stillness became strategy.

I learned that if I stayed agreeable, things lasted longer. If I stayed helpful, I stayed relevant. If I stayed quiet, I stayed included.

I learned to read rooms like weather systems. To sense shifts before they happened. To adjust before anyone asked.

I learned how to make myself necessary without ever making

myself heavy. Indispensable people are rarely abandoned. They are too useful to discard outright.

They are kept. At arm's length. On standby. In reserve. Back left burner.

From the outside, this looks like maturity. Like emotional intelligence. Like being low drama.

What it actually is, is self erasure with good manners.

Quicksand has a learning curve. You learn how to float without thrashing. How to stay light. How to want quietly.

I became very good at not asking. Because asking is movement. Needing is movement. Staying when you want reassurance is movement.

And movement has consequences.

People like to say why did you not speak up. As if speaking up is neutral. As if it does not change the physics of the situation.

They do not understand that for some of us, speaking up has always been the thing that made us sink faster.

So I stay. I hope. I wait for signs that the ground might hold this time.

I tell myself I am being patient. Understanding. Easygoing.

But really, I am standing perfectly still in emotional quicksand. Convincing myself that survival is the same thing as living.

That if someone wanted me enough, they would pull me out without me asking. That if I stayed light enough, pleasant enough, low maintenance enough, the ground would eventually firm up.

It never does.

Quicksand does not turn into land because you behaved well. People do not choose you because you suffered quietly. They just learn that you will not struggle.

Stillness does not stop bad outcomes. It only delays them.

But delaying felt like control. And control felt like safety.

So I stopped testing the ground. Stopped shifting my weight.
Stopped leaning.

I told myself I did not need more. I told myself this was enough.
I told myself wanting would only make it worse.

And eventually I forgot what wanting even felt like.

When you spend long enough being indispensable, you lose
the map to yourself. You become a function. A role. A solution.

You are the person people call when they need steadiness. You
are not the person they choose when they want depth.

Because depth requires disruption. And disruption risks
outcomes you were never protected from.

The cruellest part is this. From the outside, I do not look stuck.
I look calm. I look reasonable. I look like someone who does not
need much.

No one sees how deep it is under the surface. How much of me
is already submerged. How long I have been holding my breath.

I do not disappear because I do not care. I disappear because
staying still hurts less than sinking further.

I do not ask because asking would force an answer. And
answers end things.

Quicksand lets things linger.

The truth is not that I am afraid of being alone. The truth is
that I do not trust that loss will not annihilate me.

I do not trust that if I am fully chosen and then fully lost, there
will be enough of me left to rebuild.

Stillness kept me intact. Indispensability kept me included.
Hope kept me waiting.

And now I am here years later. With a life that looks functional.
And a self that feels borrowed.

People say just be yourself. They assume there is a self

untouched by survival.

There is not.

There is a system that learned too well. A body that optimized for endurance, not joy. A personality shaped entirely around minimizing fallout.

Staying still does not save you. It only slows the loss.

Eventually, even standing perfectly still, you sink anyway.

I am not afraid of moving because I do not know how. I am afraid because I know exactly what movement has cost me before.

But I am starting to understand something they do not teach either.

The way out of quicksand is not thrashing. It is not waiting to be rescued.

It is leaning back. Changing your center of gravity. Risking looking foolish. Taking up space horizontally instead of trying to be small.

It is doing the one thing that feels counter intuitive. Letting yourself be seen.

I do not know how to do that yet. Not fully. Not cleanly.

But I do know this.

Stillness is safety. But safety is not the same thing as being alive.

And the danger I am most afraid of now is no longer external. It is the quiet fact that if I do not move, nothing will ever choose me on purpose.

Not because I am unlovable. But because I never asked to be loved out loud.

I have been surviving long enough.

10

Stillness Is Safety....pt 2

Outcomes I Was Never Protected From

I don't feel like I live inside my life.

I watch it.

Like I'm hovering a few feet above myself at all times, observing this woman who looks like she knows what she's doing. She's competent. She's helpful. She's calm. She's very good at reading the room. She adjusts her posture depending on who just walked in. She edits herself mid sentence. She laughs at the right volume. She says "it's fine" so convincingly that even I believe her for a second.

From up here, it looks impressive.

From up here, I can see what she's actually doing.

She's shape shifting.

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Not dramatically. Not all at once. Quietly. Incrementally. The kind of changes no one notices because they look like maturity. Or flexibility. Or emotional intelligence. The kind that get praised.

She becomes slightly different versions of herself depending on what will keep the situation calm. What will keep the person close. What will prevent the atmosphere from turning. What will make her useful.

She doesn't ask who she is today.

She asks what is required.

I watch her wake up and scan the day ahead like a weather forecast. Who am I going to be with. What version of me survives best there. How much of myself can I afford to show without consequences. She doesn't think these thoughts consciously. That's the scariest part. This isn't strategy anymore. This is muscle memory.

She learned early that outcomes were dangerous.

Not mistakes. Outcomes.

Saying the wrong thing. Wanting the wrong thing. Needing too much. Expecting consistency. Believing someone would stay just because they should. Those were the moments that carried punishment. Not always loud. Not always immediate. But reliable enough that her body learned the lesson.

Stillness is safety.

Movement attracts attention. Attention invites consequence.

So she learned to freeze emotionally while remaining useful physically. To become indispensable. Because indispensable people don't get discarded easily. They get kept. Even if they don't get chosen.

From where I'm floating, I can see how that became her whole personality.

The reliable one.

The understanding one.

The one who doesn't make things hard.

The one who can wait.

The one who can adapt.

She confuses adaptability with identity.

She thinks this is just who she is.

But I can see the cost.

Every time someone pulls back, she shrinks preemptively. Every time someone seems overwhelmed, she reduces her needs to prevent being the reason they leave. Every time there's ambiguity, she fills in the silence with patience instead of questions. She disappears not because she wants distance, but because she's trying to preserve the connection.

If I don't move, I won't sink.

She lives like she's standing in emotional quicksand. Any attempt to advocate for herself feels like thrashing. So she stays still. She tells herself it's temporary. She tells herself it's mature. She tells herself it's safer to have some of someone than risk losing them entirely.

From above, I want to scream at her.

But she can't hear me.

Because this is normal to her.

Self abandonment doesn't feel like abandonment when you never learned what staying feels like. It feels like being smart. Like being strategic. Like being realistic about what people can offer. She calls it understanding. She calls it compassion. She calls it love.

What it actually is, is a constant negotiation with loss.

She doesn't trust that loss won't annihilate her. So she minimizes it in advance. She trims herself down to reduce impact. She removes pressure from the situation before anyone asks. She manages expectations so disappointment won't feel as sharp.

She lives as if bracing for impact is the same as protection.

Watching her hurts.

Because I can see that she isn't choosing these dynamics. She's reenacting a rule she learned before she had language for it. Connection equals punishment. Expression equals risk. Needing equals danger. Silence equals survival.

She doesn't believe anyone will fight for her because no one ever did. Not when it counted. Not when she needed someone to say stay. So she stopped asking. She stopped testing that theory. She stopped putting herself in positions where someone's absence would be undeniable.

She made herself low maintenance so no one could accuse her of being too much.

She made herself useful so no one could say she wasn't worth keeping.

She made herself patient so no one could say she was demanding.

And now she doesn't know who she is without those functions.

From above, I can see how exhausting this is. How much cognitive energy goes into being acceptable. How little space is left for desire. For agency. For want. For voice.

She thinks she's indecisive.

She's not.

She's learned that choosing herself was never protected. So she waits for someone else to choose first. She waits for permission.

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She waits for certainty. She waits for safety that never arrives because safety was never something offered. It was something she had to manufacture by staying still.

She doesn't realize she's self abandoning because abandonment feels like an event. Something dramatic. Something obvious. This is quieter. This is erosion. This is living your life slightly outside your body because being fully inside it feels dangerous.

I want to tell her she's not broken.

She was calibrated for survival.

But survival is not the same as living.

And stillness only works until the sand settles and you realize you've been standing in the same spot for years, watching other people move around you, wondering how they make it look so easy.

I don't know yet how she learns to move.

I just know that seeing it is the first crack.

And maybe one day, she'll feel her feet again.

11

From Front Right to Back Left

The downgrade is not dramatic. There is no explosion. No argument. No breakup scene. There is just a quiet relocation. You were front right.

In reach. In mind. In motion. Then one day you realize you have been moved to the back left.

Still in the car. Still technically coming along. But no longer consulted about the route. This is why it takes so long to notice. Nothing is explicitly taken away. There is no clear rejection to react to. The warmth does not disappear. It becomes inconsistent. The access becomes conditional. The effort becomes reactive instead of initiated.

And your nervous system notices before your logic does. The Brain Does Not Register Downgrades as Neutral. Your brain does not care about labels like “friends with benefits,” “timing,” or “circumstances.” Your brain tracks patterns. Specifically, it tracks prediction and reward. When someone consistently

chooses you, your brain builds a stable reward loop. Dopamine is released in proportion to expectation being met. You anticipate contact. Contact happens. The system stays regulated.

When that pattern breaks, but not fully, something worse happens.

Intermittent reinforcement. This is the same learning mechanism used in slot machines. The reward is unpredictable. Sometimes you get warmth. Sometimes you get silence. Sometimes you get reassurance. Sometimes you get nothing. The brain does not disengage. It escalates.

Dopamine spikes not when you receive the reward, but when you anticipate it. When the reward is inconsistent, anticipation becomes obsessive.

You are not addicted to the person.

You are addicted to the variable schedule of relief.

That is why clarity alone does not stop the pull.

You can name the pattern and still crave it.

In fact, naming it can make it worse.

Because now you know exactly what you are trapped inside.

Why This Hurts More Than Rejection

Rejection is clean.

Downgrading is corrosive. Rejection allows grief. Downgrading demands vigilance. Your brain keeps scanning for signals.

Did I say something wrong. Did I wait too long. Did I imagine the closeness. Am I overreacting. You are not mourning the loss of a person. You are mourning the loss of position. You were once chosen without having to ask. Now you are chosen only when prompted.

That shift registers as danger.

From a neuroscience perspective, this activates the anterior cingulate cortex, the same region involved in physical pain and social exclusion. Your brain processes the downgrade as a threat to belonging.

It is not sadness. It is alarm.

Why Knowing Doesn't Stop You. Even when you know, you go anyway.

Because temporary relief, even when the temporary is fully understood, is such a sharp intake of oxygen that the knowledge of the crash does not deter you. Your brain is not asking for permanence.

It is asking for regulation. The relief is real. The calm is real.

The warmth, however brief, still quiets the alarm. Knowing it will end does not make it less effective.

It makes it bittersweet, not useless. This is why insight does not feel empowering at first.

It feels cruel. You are no longer chasing hope.

You are choosing relief with eyes open.

And that is harder to judge yourself for and harder to stop.

ADHD Makes This a Perfect Storm

If you have ADHD, this dynamic is not just painful. It is destabilizing. ADHD brains have lower baseline dopamine and higher sensitivity to reward variability. That means intermittent reinforcement hits harder and lasts longer. The unpredictability does not fade. It imprints.

Even when you intellectually understand the dynamic, your nervous system does not comply. Insight does not equal extinction.

You know you are on the back left burner.

Your body still leans forward every time your phone lights up.
This is not weakness. This is neurochemistry.

ADHD also amplifies pattern detection. You notice shifts faster, but you also replay them longer. You analyze tone, timing, pauses. You try to solve the system because your brain believes there must be a lever you have not pulled correctly.

There is not. The system is working exactly as designed.

Why Realization Hurts More Than Denial. Before, there was ambiguity.

Ambiguity allows fantasy. Fantasy cushions pain. Realization removes the cushion.

You now see that the warmth you receive is not initiative. It is availability-based. You are not anticipated. You are accessed.

That truth does not liberate you instantly. It sharpens the loss.

Because now every interaction is measured against what used to exist. Every delay confirms what you already know. Every small kindness feels both comforting and humiliating.

You want it anyway. That is the most destabilizing part.

Not because you are desperate.

But because attachment does not shut off when logic turns on.

Knowing you are being intermittently reinforced does not stop the dopamine loop. It just removes your ability to lie to yourself about why you are hurting.

The Stillness Trap

There is another lie the downgrade teaches you.

That getting back to front right requires less of you.

Be quieter. Be still. Don't reach. Don't ask. Don't disrupt.

Stillness starts to feel like safety.

FROM FRONT RIGHT TO BACK LEFT

You learn that motion risks demotion. You learn that wanting is destabilizing. You learn that the best way to stay included is to take up as little space as possible.

This is not intimacy. This is behavioral containment. And it works. At least temporarily. Because stillness does reduce friction.

Stillness does delay loss. Stillness does buy access. But it also teaches your nervous system

that safety is conditional on self-erasure. Which is why returning to front right through stillness never actually returns you there. It only convinces you that disappearing is the price of proximity.

The Back Left Burner Reality

Being on the back left burner does not mean you are unwanted. It means you are not oriented toward. You are not the problem being solved. You are the option being kept. And the most brutal truth is this: You cannot logic your way back to front right without erasing yourself. You already know how to do that.

Be quieter. Be cooler. Ask for less. Accept ambiguity. Call it freedom.

That is not growth. That is compliance.

This chapter is not here to tell you what to do next. It is here to name the mechanism so you stop blaming yourself for responding like a human with a nervous system. You are not

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crazy. You are not dramatic. You are responding exactly as a brain does when it is downgraded without being released.

The pain is not proof of love. It is proof of conditioning. And once you see that, the question is no longer why this hurts. The question becomes how much of yourself you are willing to sacrifice to keep access to a system that only activates when you are no longer centered.

That is not a romantic question. It is a structural one. And structures, unlike feelings, can be changed.

12

Pre-Optimizing for Misinterpretation

I spend a lot of time rehearsing the world before it even exists. It's automatic. Every word I might say, every gesture I might make, every text I might send, there's a miniature war room in my head simulating every possible response. I run probability matrices on whether my intentions will be understood, misread, ignored, weaponized, or interpreted as desperate. I hedge every line. I trim the edges. I craft the pauses. All before I even open my mouth.

Some call it overthinking. I call it survival.

This is what it looks like when your brain refuses to let miscommunication happen. When you're ADHD or neurodivergent, it's not just a quirk, it's a fundamental operating mode. The world moves in fuzzy gradients. Social cues are compressed. People's reactions are volatile and often untraceable. So the only lever you get is pre-optimization. You anticipate, simulate, hedge, clarify, clarify again, and then pause, because someone, somewhere, will inevitably misread.

It's exhausting. But it's not optional. Not really. I learned this early. If I don't run the simulations, I wake up in a world

where my intentions are assumed wrong. Everything I care about, my respect, my loyalty, my honesty, gets misinterpreted as neediness, arrogance, or indifference. My brain won't let that happen. Not because I need to control people, but because I need to survive in a world that refuses to account for me.

The problem is nobody tells you this is happening. And nobody prepares you for how it feels to live life half in your own mental shadow, constantly anticipating the misread, the recoil, the silent judgment. You're perpetually two steps ahead and simultaneously nowhere near the finish line.

Take the simplest example: sending a message. I craft it. I read it. I tweak it. I simulate what she'll think, what her day looks like, what she's heard before, what she might imagine I want. By the time I hit send, I've already lived through twenty potential outcomes. Some are pleasant. Most are disasters. None are mine.

For neurodivergent minds, this isn't occasional anxiety. This is a default setting. It's pattern detection turned into a survival algorithm. You can't switch it off. You can't relax into ambiguity without it clawing at you, whispering that someone will misread, misjudge, mislabel. You become a tactician of intent in a war that nobody else sees.

And yet, paradoxically, this makes life feel alien. You're hyper-aware, over-prepared, and still chronically misunderstood. You're meticulous because you must be, and exhausted because the world refuses to grant you the benefit of the doubt. That tension, between care and misinterpretation, is a defining, fundamental way of being.

So yes, I pre-optimize for misinterpretation. Every word. Every glance. Every action. It is my natural state. And if you don't get it, you probably won't get why it feels like survival

rather than obsession. That's fine. I'm used to being the only one in the room thinking twenty moves ahead.

13

Patterns as Innate Truth

There is a particular kind of fatigue that comes from being right too often. Not loudly right. Not triumphantly right. Quietly right. Right in the way that does not earn validation, only confirmation.

Someone says, I'll call you back. They don't. Someone says, We should hang out this weekend. And the weekend passes like weather. You learn that some phrases are not promises. They are social placeholders. Polite exits. Ways to leave a moment without committing to a future one.

So when someone implies future contact, my brain does not react emotionally at first. It inventories. They were busy. They saw the message late. They probably forgot. All plausible. All reasonable.

And still, the pattern hums underneath.

Because pattern recognition is not pessimism. It is Bayesian inference built from lived data. The problem is not that my brain detects patterns. The problem is that it has been rewarded for

doing so.

Nine times out of ten, the pattern holds. Delays mean distance. Vagueness means optional. Warmth without follow through means low priority. So when the tenth time might be different, my brain cannot afford optimism. Optimism has historically been expensive. Yay. I love this for me.

When people say don't overthink it. They confuse vigilance with imagination. But I am not inventing scenarios. I am extrapolating from precedent. And what rational system ignores precedent. The overthinking only starts when you try and question the belief. And despite wanting so badly to be wrong, you are rewarded w dopamine for being correct. And the pattern slowly becomes the innate truth.

Likability Is Not Selection

Here is the truth that takes the longest to accept. This is my “innate truth”.

People like me. They do not reject me. They do not avoid me. They do not dislike me. They enjoy me.

But enjoyment is not the same as choosing.

Likability is transactional. It gets you hired. It gets you invited when a spot opens. It gets you remembered when someone needs something. It gets you friendly familiarity, last minute plans, “thinking of you” messages, occasional check ins, boredom based nostalgia.

It does not get you priority.

I am liked in the way reliable tools are liked. Helpful. Pleasant. Convenient. Not oriented toward. And over time, I learn the role. I become the helper, the fixer, the background constant. Not because I want to disappear, but because disappearing slightly

is safer than being unwanted loudly. A truly elegant coping strategy. Five stars.

A Pattern That Isn't Romantic

This does not only happen in intimacy. It happens in friendships, in workplaces, in creative collaborations.

I am the person everyone goes to when something breaks. I build the site. Rewrite the proposal. Solve the crisis. I am included because I am useful, praised because I am competent, relied on because I am steady.

But when the project ends, so does the closeness. No follow up. No anchoring. No let's keep this going.

I was essential to the task. Not essential to the relationship. A stunning professional success story, emotionally speaking.

This pattern repeats often enough that my brain stops categorizing it as coincidence.

When the Common Denominator Is Me

Eventually, self protection turns inward.

If this keeps happening, if depth is rarely reciprocated, if intimacy stalls at access rather than commitment, then statistically, I must be the variable.

So I accept a working theory. I am different. I do not know why. I stop trying to explain it.

I adapt instead. I lower expectations. I increase usefulness. I keep my needs light enough that they do not inconvenience anyone. Alexithymia complicates this further. Feelings arrive late, indirectly, or through analysis rather than sensation. By the time emotion clarifies, the moment has already passed.

So I learn systems instead. Systems are more predictable than people.

Add demisexuality and the math becomes brutal. Connection is rare. Desire is slow. Attachment forms deep. Which means

every meaningful bond carries disproportionate weight. Not longing. Scarcity. Incredible branding, truly.

Neurodivergent Pattern Recognition as a Trap

Pattern recognition keeps me safe. It helps me predict tone, navigate ambiguity, avoid embarrassment. But eventually it hardens into certainty.

I stop asking, Is this happening again? And start stating, This is what happens.

Because most of the time, I am right.

Questioning the pattern feels naive. Believing the pattern feels responsible. The spiral begins when the pattern conflicts with hope. I want the exception to be real. History says it probably isn't.

So I oscillate between realism and grief. Not because I am dramatic, but because my brain refuses to abandon a model that has preserved dignity for decades.

The Loneliest Realization

The loneliest realization is not that I might end up alone. It is that it would make sense if I did.

Not because I am unlovable, but because my configuration requires more effort than most people are willing to give. And effort, as I have learned, is rare.

It would take someone choosing me early, consistently, without needing proof of usefulness. That level of selection would have to override years of evidence. And evidence matters.

This chapter is not despair. It is calibration. I am not cynical. I am data literate.

The tragedy is not that I see the pattern. It is that seeing it has

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never been enough to make someone step out of it for me.

And that is the quiet truth I carry every time someone says we should do this again and I already know what that usually means.

14

Stillness Without Safety Pt. 3

There is a particular kind of grief that shows up when you realize
you were not just harmed by a dynamic,
but helping it persist.

Not intentionally.

Not maliciously.

But consistently.

It sucks when you realize you were a contributor to your own
shit and then had the audacity to place the blame solely on the
other person.

That sentence hurts because it is true and incomplete.

The fuller truth is worse and kinder at the same time.

I did not cause the dynamic.

But I did optimize for it.

I did not invent being back left burnered.

But I learned how to survive there so well that I stopped
noticing I was no longer trying to leave.

That is one of the shittiest consequences of living your whole
life as an option instead of a priority.

You miss the moments when you could have moved to the

front.

Not because you were never invited.

But because you did not believe the invitation was real unless it came with guarantees.

I blamed the other person for not choosing me.

And yes, that part is fair.

But I did not ask to be chosen either.

Not clearly.

Not cleanly.

Not in a way that risked an answer I could not reinterpret later.

I spoke in a language designed to keep exits available.

I told myself I was being patient.

What I was actually being was non-confrontational with reality.

Because confrontation meant outcomes.

And outcomes were the thing I learned early I would not be protected from.

So instead of saying this hurts,

I said I get it.

Instead of saying I want you,

I said I am fine.

Instead of saying choose me,

I said nothing at all and waited to see if it would happen anyway.

And when it did not, I called it confirmation instead of information.

Here is the part that is hardest to admit.

I needed someone else to read me because reading myself felt too dangerous.

If I was chosen without asking, then I did not have to risk wanting out loud.

If I was noticed without prompting, then I did not have to tolerate the vulnerability of being seen and declined.

I outsourced agency and then resented the other person for not returning it.

That is not villain behavior.

That is fear wearing intelligence as a disguise.

I confused self-control with self-respect.

I confused restraint with depth.

I confused being low maintenance with being lovable.

And because I had spent my life being praised for adapting, for understanding, for not making things hard, I did not see the cost.

The cost was momentum.

The cost was clarity.

The cost was realizing too late that stillness does not just keep you safe.

It also keeps you unchosen.

No one tells you this part when they tell you to be patient.

No one warns you that waiting long enough starts to look exactly like consent.

Consent to ambiguity.

Consent to crumbs.

Consent to being almost.

I was not wrong to protect myself.

I was wrong to believe protection and progress were the same thing.

They are not.

Protection minimizes harm.

Progress requires risk.

And I built an entire identity around minimizing harm.

So when I look back now, I do not see someone who failed to

speak up.

I see someone who learned too well that speaking up came with penalties that could not be afforded at the time.

But adulthood does not care why the pattern formed.

It only cares whether you keep reenacting it.

That is the reckoning.

Not I am the problem in a pop-song, self-loathing way.

But in a sobering, adult way.

Hi.

It is me.

I did not create this system.

But I learned how to function inside it so efficiently that I forgot I was allowed to leave.

And the hardest part is not accepting responsibility.

It is accepting grief.

Grief for the moments I stayed quiet when I could have asked.

Grief for the versions of myself that believed being chosen was something that happened to you instead of something you participated in.

Grief for the time I spent waiting to be noticed instead of standing where I could be seen.

This is not self-blame.

It is authorship.

It is the moment you stop narrating your life as something that happened around you and start admitting where you froze when movement was possible.

Stillness used to keep me safe.

Now it just keeps me stuck.

And knowing that does not fix everything.

But it changes the rules.

Because once you see your own hand in the pattern, you can

STILLNESS WITHOUT SAFETY PT. 3

no longer pretend you are powerless inside it.

And that is terrifying.

And that is freedom.

Crying on Planes While Wearing an Invisibility Cloak

Told by the girl who never screamed loud enough to be noticed, but somehow still got blamed for the echo.

There's something devastatingly poetic about crying on planes.

You're not quite anywhere.

Suspended in a metal tube full of recycled air, loud silence, and people pretending not to notice you wiping your face with a napkin thinner than your will to keep it together.

There's a life you didn't pick waiting at both ends. And the snacks are trash.

But it's safe.

CRYING ON PLANES WHILE WEARING AN INVISIBILITY CLOAK

Not because it is, because no one makes eye contact at 36,000 feet. That kind of disinterest is sacred. It's the only place where you can unravel in peace.

The invisibility cloak doesn't go through security.

It walks on with me. It isn't folded in a carry-on. It's stitched into my skin.

I hate being emotionally fluent. I hate being calm.

I hate that I can text "No worries!" while every cell in my body is buzzing like it just got bad news.

I hate the reflex to smile before I know what I'm agreeing to.

I hate that I show up and play the part and dare someone—anyone—to notice that none of this is real.

Spoiler: They never do. Not because they're cruel.(At least I don't think so.)

But because I trained them not to.

I taught people how to enjoy me without ever needing to know me.

I handed out cheat codes: here's how to keep me functional, low-maintenance, helpful, and forgettable.

I made it look easy. So they assumed it was.

So yeah, this book?

It's not romantic.

It's not some soaring before-and-after story where I find myself in Bali and become a life coach.

It's not the turning point. It's the moment I realize:

I have no power. No cheat code to finally be the girl someone picks first. No script to make me lovable in a way that sticks. No way to stop the cloak from doing its job.

So I cry on planes.

Not because I'm fragile. But because I'm done narrating my own vanishing act.

And the worst part?

The seatbelt sign never goes off.

You live strapped in, bracing for impact, rejection, or quiet exits with no explanation.

You can't stand.

You can't move.

You just press your head against the window and try not to leak too loud.

Told by the girl who never screamed loud enough to be

noticed, but somehow still got blamed for the echo.

There's something devastatingly poetic about crying on planes.

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This isn't the first chapter of healing. It's the receipts folder from trying to survive.

And survival?

It doesn't want applause.

It just asks that you stay visible.

Even when it's easier not to.

Even when the clouds feel safer than people.

Even when the sky feels more solid than the ground.

16

The File Cabinet Theory

Some people don't want to understand you. They want to catch you.

They walk around with invisible clipboards, gathering data for a case they already think they've solved. Every misstep, delay, or offhand tone goes into a mental file labeled Evidence of Who She Really Is.

That's why I stopped defending myself. There's no logic in debating someone who's more interested in confirmation than clarity. Arguing with them is like trying to upload truth to a computer that's already out of storage.

People ask why I don't speak up. Because defense is expensive.

It costs time, language, emotional calibration, and energy I don't have. I'm always rationing it, triaging what matters, what might actually move the needle. These conversations never do.

But silence is not neutral. Silence is fuel. Every time I let a false story slide, it gets filed away as “proof.” And as the file cabinet fills, their treatment of me worsens, because they know now. They’ve built a portfolio of reasons to be cruel.

It usually starts small. A misunderstanding. A missed text. An off moment that becomes mythology. They reinterpret it until I am something uglier, smaller, less deserving of grace. And because I don’t contest it, the story hardens.

This is the loop:

If I defend myself, I’m “dramatic.”

If I don’t, I’m “guilty.”

Either way, the verdict stands.

Once, in high school, a girl dumped water on my head on picture day. Said I’d slept with her boyfriend.

I hadn’t even been kissed.

I was a virgin who spent every evening dancing until ten p.m. There wasn’t time for scandal.

But she believed her version, and that was enough.

The accusation stuck longer than the water did.

That’s the lesson: truth doesn’t matter if fiction is more entertaining.

And for certain people, suspicion is a hobby.

So I stay quiet. Not because I don’t care. Because I care in ways that cost too much.

Defending yourself to someone committed to misunderstanding

you is like arguing with gravity. You can explain physics all day, but the fall still happens.

And the worst part? Some of the things they believe about me, I wish they were true. Some of the stories sound like a good time, a freer version of me. At least she gets to live without constantly auditing her own tone.

But I'm not her. I'm the one who calculates before speaking. Who runs the numbers on every word. Who knows that energy spent proving innocence to the wrong audience is energy stolen from becoming more real.

So yes, I let them build their file cabinets. Let them think they've solved me. Because the truth is: I've been misread so many times that silence feels like efficiency.

And maybe that's its own mistake. Because silence doesn't save your name. It just leaves it unguarded, waiting to be rewritten by whoever's loudest.

I want to be me, is that not allowed?

Punished for Existing

I live in a constant state of feeling like this is unfair. I'm constantly being held accountable for things I shouldn't logically be held accountable for. There's always a steep price to pay. And now my nervous system reacts before I even have time to process how I feel about it.

My brain isn't a computer. I can't manually override certain codes. I can't change the way I look. It's insanely hard to change the way I naturally react to things, especially when the environment around me is conditioning me to react in that exact way. This is the core of what it feels like to be punished for simply existing.

Get excited and overshare? Too much, too loud, inconsiderate, can't read a room.

Cry because a feeling is too much to keep in? Dramatic, selfish, over the top.

Zone out or fall asleep without warning? Lazy, unfocused, unmotivated.

Be accidentally late? Living out a stereotype because I'm Black.

Be loud? Aggressive.

Be quiet, recharging my social battery? Rude, better-than, boring.

Think I'm being helpful? A know-it-all.

Delay in processing and respond late? I wasn't listening.

Ask someone to repeat, then figure it out mid-sentence? Rude for interrupting.

Have clear preferences? Rigid, inflexible.

Unsure of what I'm feeling in the moment? Manipulative, playing games.

Take my medication? Cheating for an advantage.

Don't take it? Annoying, unbearable.

Burnt out? Lazy.

Forgot something - irresponsible

Remember too many details - rude, too much, know it all

Picky eater - you're a child, inflexible, rude for not trying something

Inquisitive - no you're not. You're annoying because you've asked too many questions. And you asked those questions obviously because you think you know better. It's impossible to just be genuinely interested.

Ask for clarification - needs extra attn/help

Ask for clarification - know it all (make this one make sense)

Over stimulated - attn seeking and too much

Under stimulated - attn seeking and not enough

Large displays of emotion - most definitely you're getting called too much, probably in front of other people too

I WANT TO BE ME, IS THAT NOT ALLOWED?

Are you feeling like this list is getting too long, unnecessary, because you get it, there's no need to continue, I've made my point.

That's a privileged thought, because try living the list out daily. If you're annoyed reading it. I'm exhausted navigating it.

I could sit here and analyse each situation and explain the social dynamic or systemic issue that under pins each one, because I certainly have done that too many times to count.

Or, we can collectively stop punishing and pathologizing difference

Every path I take, there's a consequence waiting. Even neutral actions carry penalties.

And this is the worst part: over time, the punishment gets built into my wiring. My nervous system reacts before I've even had the chance to decide how I feel. The shame hits before the emotion does. My body flinches for impact before I've even opened my mouth.

That's what "back left burner" means some days. The pot that never boils but never cools either. The simmer of being policed for existing. The knowledge that even if I do nothing, someone will find a way to pin me for the crime of simply being here.

18

The Ugly Duckling

I wasn't unloved.

I was unseen.

My parents adored the daughter they imagined, the one who smiled when asked, stayed inside the lines, and never wanted more than they were ready to give.

But that daughter wasn't me.

I came with different wiring.

Sensitive. Curious. A little too tuned in. I felt everything too deeply and questioned everything too often.

I made people uncomfortable. I broke the script.

So they tried to rewrite me.

THE UGLY DUCKLING

They weren't cruel. They were kind in the ways they knew how.
There was food. There were trips. We had movie nights.

But when it came to my insides?

There was nobody home.

They didn't see me.

They saw a rough draft they thought they could fix.

So I played along.

I became the version they liked.

The convenient daughter. The charming one. Not because it fit, but because I learned early what didn't.

This wasn't trauma in the traditional sense.

No slammed doors. No screaming matches. No diary entries with the word "escape" underlined.

But there was silence. A kind of emotional vacancy that teaches you: Love isn't unconditional. It's transactional.

And I've been negotiating ever since.

Even now, most days, I still believe it,

That to be loved, I have to shape-shift.

That "real me" is too strange. Too intense. Too much.

So I perform. And shocker, it never works. Not for long anyways.

BACK LEFT BURNER

I grew up feeling like the ugly duckling.

Not because I thought I was ugly, In fact, people told me the opposite.

Which somehow made it worse.

Because I couldn't blame the mirror. And that meant the reason I wasn't wanted? Had to be deeper. Harder to fix.

My weirdness wasn't visible. But it was treated like a flaw.

Like the duckling, I wasn't broken. Just in the wrong habitat.

And yeah, I know that now.

But the ghost of "you're defective" still lingers.

It lives in the pause after a compliment.

In the way people smile but don't stay.

My parents didn't fail to love me.

They just... loved someone else.

And expected me to audition for her role.

They still do.

Their love is conditional.

On me being convenient. Interpretable. Painless.

And I got good at that.

THE UGLY DUCKLING

I'm trying to stop. But unlearning how to shape-shift is harder than it sounds. It's not instinct. It's survival.

And if one more person calls me "so unique" like it's flattering?

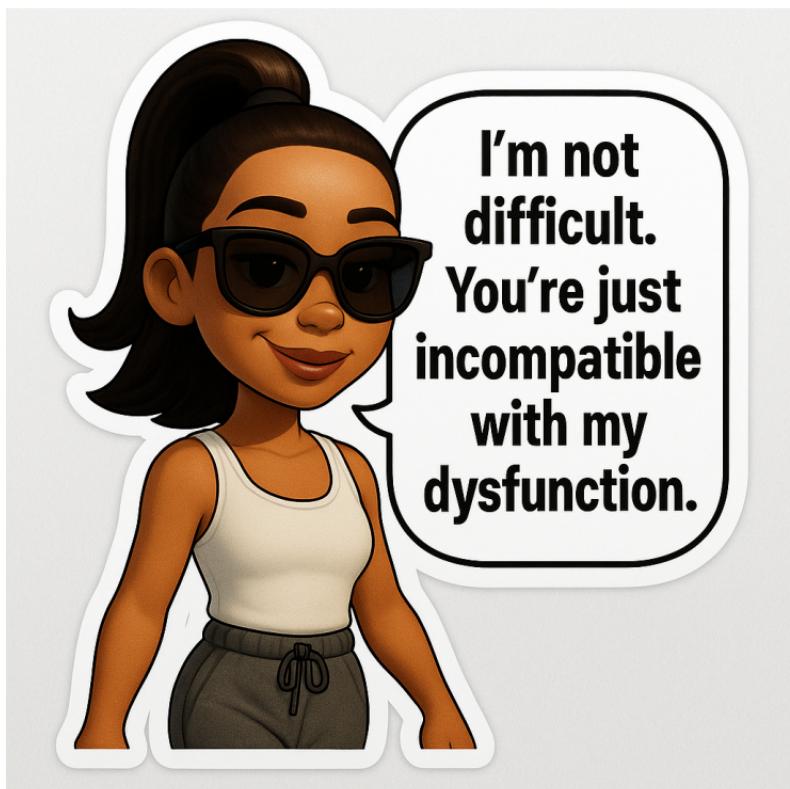
They're getting slapped with a duck wing.

No, I'm not the daughter they imagined.

I'm the woman who survived being turned into someone else.

And honestly? I just want to be seen.

Not for how well I perform. But for who I was before I got cast.



19

Curating Your Dream Life for Others

Was it stolen or given?

There's a very particular kind of heartbreak no one talks about.

The kind where you help someone build the life you once prayed for, and then you're forced to watch them live it. Flawlessly. Without you.

Not because they betrayed you. But because you offered it so well, so intuitively, they didn't even realize it was yours to begin with. They just accepted. Eyes closed. Hands open. Happy.

And now? You're not there. Not needed. Not mentioned. Not remembered.

No eulogy. No thank you. No "what happened?" Just a slow fade to black while their life gets brighter.

I've been the emotional architect of other people's glow-ups

more times than I can count. It's what I do. Not because I'm some altruistic angel, let's be clear, but because I know exactly what it feels like to be drowning in a sea of almost. So I throw them the life jacket I never got.

And sometimes they make it to shore. And sometimes they build a whole resort.

This happened with my soul-twin, once ride or die and emergency contact. She found solace in my bed when she was at rock bottom. I threw her every life jacket I had: playlists, pep talks, carnival spaces, access to the safe havens I had curated for myself. She healed. She thrived. She rebuilt. And then she left.

It hurt, but it wasn't random. It was a pattern.

Because when you grow up marginalized, you learn survival through service. You make yourself indispensable by becoming the solution to other people's problems. It isn't just empathy, it's strategy. Research shows that people who have experienced exclusion often develop heightened empathy and what scholars call "hyper vigilant helping." You anticipate needs before they're voiced because you know the ache of being ignored. You curate safety for others in the hope that someone, someday, will return the favor.

But here's the catch: once the crisis passes, your usefulness expires. You're not the port. You're the lighthouse. Helpful in the storm, unnecessary in the calm.

It happened in my personal life, and it repeated at work like clockwork.

I once spent weeks designing an EDI training for my organization. I vetted facilitators, curated materials, built learner profiles, even interviewed providers to shape a custom curriculum. It was brilliant work, work only someone with my lived experience could create. And then, after all of it, I was told I couldn't facilitate because "leadership needed someone who knew how to communicate at a high level." Translation: not you.

Instead, I was invited to attend the training like a guest at my own dinner party. My fingerprints were all over the meal, but my name wasn't on the menu.

That is what it feels like to be the back left burner. All the labor, none of the credit. The blueprint, not the architect. Your marginalized identities make you perfect for building what others need, then disqualify you from benefiting from it. If I had done the bare minimum, googled "EDI facilitator" and sent the first three names, the outcome for me would have been the same. The only difference is everyone else would have had a worse experience.

So this story wasn't just about one relationship gone wrong. It was the system in miniature. The extraction economy of being marginalized: your value gets used, your insight gets consumed, and then you get discarded once people stabilize.

And the kicker? You learn to expect it. To plan for it. To curate

better for others than you ever expect to receive. That way, at least the abandonment doesn't feel like a surprise.

And the worst part? I'm not even angry. I'm confused. I'm heartbroken. But not mad.

Because how do you blame someone for living what you gave them? They didn't steal it. You offered it. Gift-wrapped in guidance and playlists and late-night pep talks. And they took it. Of course they did. They didn't know it cost you something. They never stopped long enough to notice. Even if they had, would they? I have gotten so good at hiding this particular ache that when I finally voice it, it gets dismissed anyway.

But it always costs me something. Even though I rarely say that part out loud. Because I was raised to think generosity is silent. And if you mention the weight of it, you're selfish. So best to swallow it.

I keep curating. Keep helping. Keep giving.

And then I sit on the sidelines, watching lives I designed thrive without me. Because when people finally feel safe, they forget what danger looked like. And when they forget the danger, they forget the rescue. And when they forget the rescue, they forget the rescuer.

My brain is built to recognize the gaps. The needs. The emergencies. Pattern recognition is supposed to save you, but in relationships it betrays me. I notice what is missing in other people before I ever notice what is missing for me. And if filling

that gap gets me a sliver of validation, my ADHD lights up like I just hit a jackpot.

Pain is expected. It's muted background noise. It comes whether I serve or not. But validation? That's rare. That's sugar. So even when I know it won't last, even when I know the credit won't stick, I still take the hit. Because for a moment someone needed me. For a moment I was the solution.

I repeat the pattern because it gives me a project, a role, a use. Growing up as the back left burner taught me usefulness was the only safe currency. You don't get chosen for who you are. You get kept around for what you can fix. So I keep curating, keep blueprinting, keep handing out the maps. The pain is always tomorrow's problem. The project is today's dopamine.

So no, I'm not the villain. I'm the blueprint.

But sometimes, I wish I didn't build so well. Because now there's a city full of dream lives and epic projects I designed, and I don't live in a single one.

Applause Accepted Here

The first time I had sex was in my friend’s basement with her older brother.

Not because I wanted to. Not because desire had even entered the chat. My friends told me I just needed to “get it over with” and then boys would like me. Her brother was “willing to help.” That’s how they framed it. Like a chore. Like a service call. Like I was overdue for initiation and he happened to be the available technician.

Research says your first sexual experience shapes how you understand intimacy, boundaries, and self-worth. I didn’t need a published study to confirm it. My life already proved the theory.

What I learned that day wasn’t about sex. It was about strategy. If I wanted to be liked, there was one surefire way. Not loved. Not respected. Just temporarily wanted. Enough to rent me a place in someone’s orbit.

And I already knew how to perform.

I was a competitive dancer. Trained to hit the beat even when I was tired, even when I was hurt, even when I wanted to go

home. Trained to smile while my ribs ached and my toenails bled through my shoes. Trained to understand that if I didn't deliver, someone else would. In dance, there's no bonus prize for effort. You either win the medal or you disappear into the lineup of girls who almost did. Nobody remembers fourth place at the Olympics.

That training bled straight into sex. It taught me to perform when I was uninterested, bored, busy, exhausted, even sick, because the fear of the consequence ran too deep. You don't scratch. You don't flinch. You nail the routine, no matter what.

And here's the consequence no one told me: once sex becomes performance, it rewires everything. It made it nearly impossible to believe anyone who said they liked me for more than the act. Why would they? When you spend years turning yourself into a show, you attract audiences, not partners. People who clap, not people who stay. And when the curtain drops, when the trial period of being the apple of someone's eye inevitably expired, I was left with silence.

That silence became the cost. Every time the performance ended, so did my place in the story. And every time it ended, the blame pointed inward: who asked for this currency system? Me. Who trained for it, perfected it, leaned on it? Me again. Obviously.

Even with women, it bled through. I didn't always trust intimacy without the transaction attached. If a girl said she wanted me for me, my brain filed it under "temporary promotion." A bonus round before the real bill came due. Because when performance is your only proof of value, love without performance feels counterfeit.

Sex taught me to be a dancer even offstage. To deliver precision

and timing on cue. To believe my worth lived entirely in the spotlight. To confuse applause with intimacy, and validation with love.

And so I learned the cruelest truth: when you spend your life performing for affection, you can't tell the difference between the people who are clapping because they care, and the people who are clapping because you hit your mark.

And the worst part? The performance didn't just mess with my relationships. It messed with my sense of orientation.

Every time someone said, "You can't be a lesbian, not with all the guys you've been with," a small part of me wondered if maybe they were right. Maybe I was lying. Maybe I had imagined the truth of my own attraction. Spoiler alert: I wasn't lying. I am a lesbian. But trusting my own gut has never been my default mode.

Performance had already trained me to doubt myself. Add years of being misinterpreted and mislabeled before I could even finish one sentence, and of course I started to wonder if I was the unreliable narrator of my own life. Their assumptions landed like facts. My corrections landed like excuses. Every interaction just reinforced the idea that I was too much. Too complicated. Too messy to explain.

So I doubled down on the mask. On the routine. On giving people what they wanted so they wouldn't argue with me about who I was. It was easier to perform likeability than to keep defending reality.

APPLAUSE ACCEPTED HERE

And when performance becomes your only strategy for acceptance, the cruel math is this: the more you perform, the less believable your truth becomes. Even when you finally state it plainly, people assume it's another act. And you start to wonder too.

So yes, sex became currency. But the cost wasn't just the emptiness after the trial period expired. It was the fact that performance blurred the line between what I wanted and what I endured, until even I couldn't always tell the difference. And the applause never landed on the real me.

Aspiring to be a trophy wife (and other childhood crimes against complexity)

It wasn't about luxury. It was about clarity. About being easy to love, without needing a slideshow to explain why.

My mom defended the gloves. But she misunderstood the thesis. She saw softness. I was asking for certainty. She thought I wanted comfort. I wanted commitment. The kind with proof. Her support wasn't false. It just wasn't connected.

She validated what looked like rebellion. But not what felt like desperation. Looking back, I think she supported the version of me that matched her values. Independent. Self-knowing. Unapologetic. But when my difference wasn't about choice, When it was about need. That's where we clashed. She understood softness as a luxury. I understood it as safety. She defended me when others criticized.

But she couldn't see when I needed defending from my own silence. And maybe that's the hardest part. When the person

who champions your freedom never notices the quiet ways you're still begging to belong.

Years later, when I went through the diagnostic process for ADHD, I was supposed to bring in a parent for collateral. No chance. Instead, my psychiatrist let me stealth-administer the questions myself. My degree is in psych, so I told my parents it was for a research project. They happily complied, not knowing they were filling out the DIVA 5 ADHD test.

One of the questions asked about my ability to make friends as a child. My mom laughed and said I didn't have many because I "didn't really like people" and preferred books. I laughed when I repeated that to my therapist, like see? She knows me well. My therapist didn't laugh. Her face went stone cold with pity. Then she told me what those answers actually showed: I was a child who struggled to connect, who retreated into books, and no one noticed enough to help me communicate my needs.

Maybe that's why I locked onto the trophy wife fantasy so young. To be claimed like that meant the opposite of invisibility. It meant someone would surely have to love all of me to hold me up that way.

22

You're only talking to the front desk

She said she wanted to get to know me and now I'm in full fledged panic mode.

Not in a pushy way. Not in that fake interested way where people want your trauma in neat little takeaway containers. Just... open. Curious. Like I was someone worth learning.

And all I could think was:

If you knew me, really knew me, you'd leave.

Because that's how it works. You tell someone the real version, the story behind the socially acceptable versions, and then you watch their pupils shift just slightly. Not fear, not disgust. Just recognition.

Oh. This one's going to be work.

That's when the countdown starts.

They might not run right away. But they start building distance.

Slow. Polite. Emotionally sterile.

They'll stay long enough to feel like a decent person. But eventually, they go.

So I keep it surface-level. Warm. Engaging. The Carnival Version of Me. The road vibes.

Bright and shiny.

Wit on tap.

Touch just enough to feel real.

Because if I really let her in, she'll find out I'm not light. I'm not easy. I'm not neutral.

I'm heavy in ways that don't show up in photos.

And I don't say that to be poetic, I say that because I know what it's like to have someone look at you after a disclosure and suddenly see a version of you they need to manage.

Shes not the problem. She's kind. She's done her therapy years. She's good at soft eye contact and not prying too hard.

She says things like,

"Tell me what you want me to know, when you're ready."

Which is nice.

But also makes it worse.

Because when someone's that steady, and you know they're probably safe, but your entire system still goes don't you dare, ...it's not about them.

It's about you. And how little you trust anyone with the actual truth.

Because once you tell someone why you were the last kid picked, or how many people had your loyalty and still walked, or why you can count your friends on one trembling hand, they don't just get to know you.

They get ammo.

And if the day comes when they stop feeling generous, they'll use it.

They won't even mean to. They'll just do it the way people do when they're tired or hurt and want to remind you that they had the upper hand all along.

So you stop sharing.

You let them like the outer layers, the ones that don't bleed.

And then you sit there, days later, realizing you might actually like them back. But now there's this time bomb in your throat.

Because you know how this script goes.

You open up.

They blink.

They smile.

They thank you for trusting them.

And then one day, maybe not that week, maybe not even that month

they slowly start seeing you as the one who needs too much.

The fear is so deeply entrenched because I trust patterns. My brain is built for pattern recognition, and it doesn't miss much. People call it paranoia, but paranoia implies being wrong. What do you call it when you're right? When you've correctly predicted every departure, every betrayal, every subtle shift that led to the same ending? Neurodivergent kids grow up hearing significantly more criticism than their peers by the time they reach adolescence. Complaints pile up like bricks, and eventually you start using them as blueprints. I did. Each jab, each correction, each sigh of annoyance became a building block for a new personality. A helpful hint on who not to be next

time.

Call me what you want. Dancer, shape-shifter, front desk clerk. It's all the same survival strategy.

The patterns scream that I am the problem, so the logical solution is either to always be exhausted trying to be someone else, or to avoid situations where the pattern could repeat. Hyper vigilance rewards me with early warning signals, but it also traps me. It tells me to shut things down before they can hurt, even when the shutting down becomes its own form of hurt. That's the part no one warns you about: when fear is stitched into your nervous system, awareness alone doesn't undo it. I can see the cycle. I can name it. And still, I keep choosing the performance.

Because the applause is safer than the silence.

23

When the sky isn't blue and you're the elephant but don't know what to do

When you're the elephant but don't know so

They call it “the elephant in the room” because the phrase started in an old Russian fable

A man walks through a museum, noticing every tiny detail, but ignores the giant elephant standing there.

That's me in a friend group. I'm not stomping. I'm not destroying the furniture. I'm just silently there, too obvious to name, too awkward to acknowledge, so everyone politely talks around me.

The size of the elephant is honestly irrelevant, as even baby elephants can't go by unnoticed inside a room.

So, I'm just a silent inconvenience.

The kind of presence that feels too complicated to name, so people just... politely work around me.

I was never excluded in the harsh, overt way.

I was included in the “surface smile, low depth, no feedback” way.

Which is somehow worse,
because it gave me no clarity, no confrontation, and no correction.

Just this perpetual sense of being too much and not enough at the exact same time. I just live in a constant state of WTF

I don't smell.

I don't disrupt.

I don't insult people

I just carry too much internal things I guess.

And that makes people uncomfortable.

And because I am "polite," "kind," and "funny,"
no one can justify pushing me out.

So they did the next best thing:

They kept .e close but at arm's length.

They made me socially essential, but emotionally peripheral.

I became the friendly fixture.

Reliable. Palatable.

Just... not invititable in the ways that matter.

If I was openly rejected, at least it would have given me evidence, data, something to work with.

But instead, I am warmly ignored. Not because people hate me, but because they couldn't figure out how to connect with me.

And they didn't want to say that out loud.

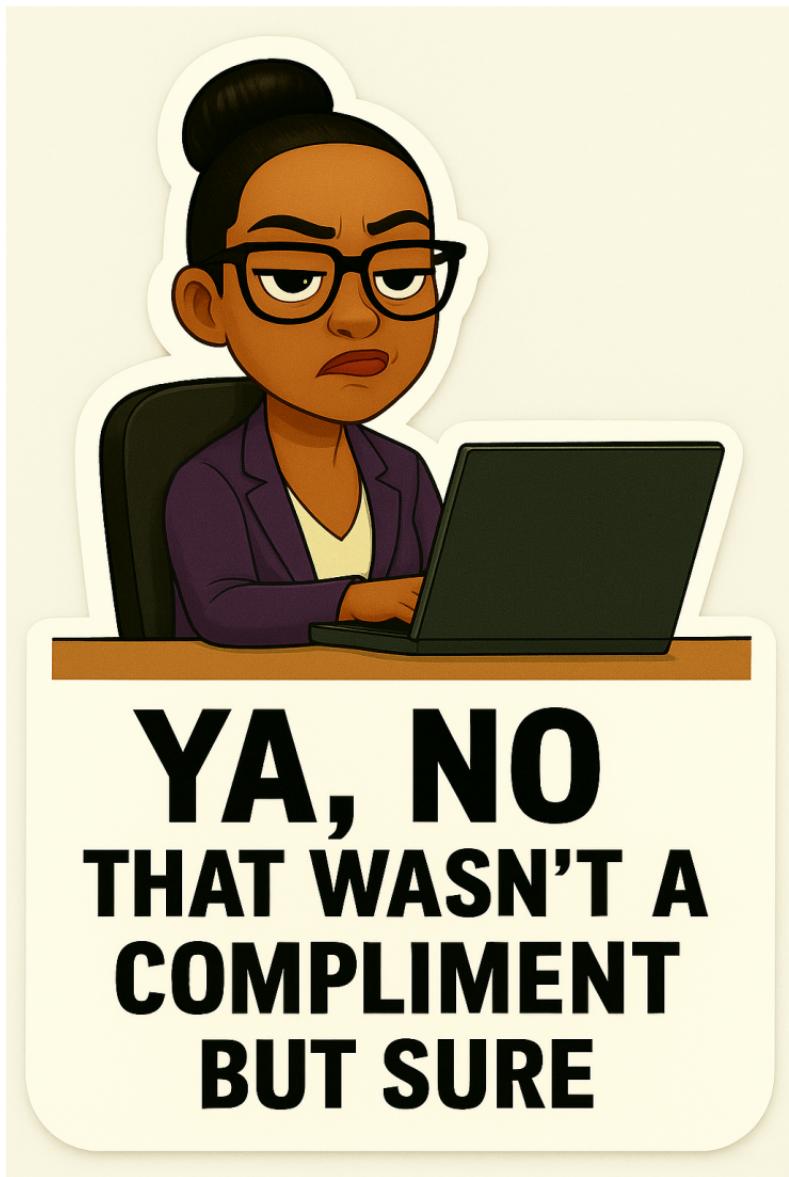
So I assumed the discomfort was my fault.

Because someone had to be blamed, and honestly, I'm usually to blame anyways.

And really no one else was offering to carry it.
I am the elephant.
Just quiet.
Well-dressed.
Well-spoken.
Well-liked.
And utterly unseen.
And the worst part?
I learned to make their comfort my responsibility.
Even when I was the one softening every edge just to stay welcome. I just want To be invited in, not tiptoed around.
But I was never told I was the elephant, because I never stomped.
And people only notice elephants when they shake the ground.
Test Time
Think you might be the elephant too?
Do plans still happen if you're unavailable?
Are your quirks and needs framed as “funny” but secretly treated like inconveniences?
If you go missing for a few days, does anyone notice?
Do people misinterpret you with confidence, as if their version must be right?
If you show up quiet or heavy in a group setting, does anyone even register the low mood?

If you said yes to most, congrats. You’re probably the elephant. Welcome to the herd no one admits is in the room.

WHEN THE SKY ISN'T BLUE AND YOU'RE THE ELEPHANT BUT DON'T...



**YA, NO
THAT WASN'T A
COMPLIMENT
BUT SURE**

Accuracy Is Not a Personality Trait

Some people think accuracy is a preference. Like cilantro.

But they're wrong about that too. Cilantro isn't a preference. There's scientific neurological reasoning behind why some people experience it as soapy and some people love it. Specific genetic variants tied to olfactory receptors make certain aldehydes register as soap. This isn't opinion. It's biology.

For me, accuracy is not a preference. It's not a value. It's not even an ethic.

It's a seatbelt.

People love to say things like, "You don't always have to be right." Which is cute. But deeply unserious. Because this isn't about being right. It's about being safe.

And yes, logically, accuracy is safer. Correct information leads to better decisions. Mislabeled things leads to bad outcomes. Reality matters. That part is boring. What's less obvious is that for me, accuracy doesn't just feel smart. It feels regulating. Like if the facts are aligned, my nervous system can finally unclench its jaw.

The "Fixable Error" Loop

They assume I care because I'm pedantic. Or controlling. No. I care because neurodivergent people are always told they're wrong.

They act wrong. They talk wrong. They look wrong. They exist... wrong. From childhood on, everything about you is treated like a fixable error. Your tone. Your timing. Your honesty.

Wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong.

So eventually you stop trusting yourself and start trusting facts. Because facts don't roll their eyes. Facts don't say, "That's not what I meant." Facts don't punish you for intent. Accuracy becomes the only place where the rules are clear and the goalposts don't move mid-sentence.

The Injustice of the Sleep

Somewhere along the line, being inaccurate stopped feeling neutral and started feeling dangerous. I've been misread so many times that my brain quietly decided: Reality needs supervision.

Take a recent interaction. Someone I was speaking with made a claim that was factually incorrect. It would have taken exactly four seconds to verify with a search engine. I offered the correct information, citing the indisputable evidence. The response I got?

"Not debating it. Gotta sleep."

To them, they were just ending a boring conversation. To me, they were telling me that my lifetime of studying the rules didn't matter. They were leaving the door unlocked and walking away while I was still holding the handle.

This is the Injustice of the Sleep. The fact that someone can

just go to sleep while leaving the math wrong is maddening. I am objectively, demonstrably correct. But in the social hierarchy of that thread, their “feeling” carried more weight than a verifiable fact. That is the injustice that rots quietly.

The Cost of the Math not Mathing

This is where justice sensitivity kicks in. I did what you said would keep me safe. I learned the rules. I corrected myself. I verified before speaking. I tried to be right in a world that swore that was the solution.

And I still lost.

But the worst part is the paradox: when you state a fact, you’re back to being “annoying” and “unable to read the room”.

Accuracy equals safety for me. Logically, it helps you navigate the world. Emotionally, it’s the last place where I’m not wrong by default. I don’t need to be right. I need the world to make sense long enough for me to breathe.

Every time someone shrugs at a fact and walks away, my body remembers every time sense was optional and I paid for it. This isn’t a chapter about facts. It’s about what happens when your survival mechanism happens to be correct, and how lonely it is to live in a world where that still isn’t enough.

25

Screaming Silently

Indecision is not the absence of preference. It is the paralysis of having preferences that cannot be safely expressed or enacted. Most people mistake hesitation for uncertainty. What I live is “trapped knowing.”

I usually know what I want. The problem is that speaking up has never gone well for me. Choices get punished. Opinions trigger blame. So when I pause, it isn’t because I’m lost. It’s because I am weighing the cost of expression against the illusion of options in front of me. It feels like being handed a menu that doesn’t even list what I came for.

From the outside, I appear passive, even pliable. But I’m not. There are areas of my life where my limits are immediate, sharp, and uncompromising. I can be demanding and immovable when the stakes cut deep. What looks like indecision is not the absence of power. It is power contained, muted under the weight of performance and the fear of misstep.

This is what people fail to see: indecisiveness is not a character flaw. It is the residue of navigating systems where choice is framed as freedom but delivered as trap. To be indecisive is, in part, to recognize the performance of agency. You are asked to select between paths you never asked for, and then graded on how gracefully you pretend that one of them was yours all along.

Growing up Black, I was told I didn't inherently have the same options and opportunities as everyone else. I would have to work ten times harder to maybe get them. I didn't have the option of being loud or rowdy and still getting grace. I didn't have the option of doing poorly in school and still being seen as someone destined for success. Options that existed for others were invisible to me.

Being neurodivergent added another layer. Seamless communication was never in my cart. Whoever filled my order forgot to check that box before purchase. Words got stuck, emotions lagged, tone landed wrong. So the option of expressing what I felt in real time never even existed.

Being gay closed more doors. As a kid, there wasn't even the option to see myself reflected or normalized. No option to feel like attraction to girls could be ordinary. Instead, it was automatic ugly-duckling status.

So when people tell me “just speak up” or “just decide,” they miss the point. Most of the time the options in front of me are illusions. A carefully curated menu designed to make me feel like I’m free to choose, when really it’s all the same meal with different names.

“Trapped knowing” belongs on the back left burner because it is both constant and invisible. It simmers while other pots draw attention. It underpins the masking, the perfectionism, the buffering. It is not hesitation for its own sake, but a disciplined response to environments where asserting your real preference has consequences.

This is why I can look indecisive and still be stubborn. Why I can defer on small matters and yet hold uncompromising ground on others. The contradiction dissolves once you see the pattern: in a world where speaking up has rarely been safe, indecision is not weakness. It is survival dressed as neutrality

26

Learning to be through TV

I was taught math.

Advanced placement, gifted math, to be exact, aka the kind that kills your GPA if you blink too slow.

I was taught how to move through space with rhythm and posture.

How to earn A's.

How to avoid creepy men.

How to make my parents proud.

How to make my parents calm.

How to shrink myself without vanishing.

How to be helpful, but not high-maintenance.

How to carry a room full of competing emotions like a tray of champagne flutes.

Never spill, never clink.

I was taught how to disappear politely.

But no one taught me how to be.

No one taught me how to exist when no one needed something.

No one taught me how to know what I liked.

What I felt.

What I feared.

So, I watched TV.

Seinfeld from 11 to midnight while doing math homework after dance.

Sex and the City, hoping to pick up adulthood like a second language.

Lizzie McGuire taught me how to survive high school, yes, I took notes.

That's So Raven taught me how to dress. I once emailed the costume department asking for help. They didn't reply. Shocking.

Then came Grey's Anatomy. I assumed it was a documentary. To this day, no one on earth has restarted it more than me. I'd take that bet in a heartbeat.

Prime-time therapy disguised as trauma bonding.

Where I learned:

Tequila softens depression

Avoidance is a valid strategy

Work trauma is best numbed in a supply closet.

And if you're lucky, you'll have one person who lives in the dark with you and doesn't ask why.

I didn't grow up with guidance. I grew up with episodes.

I learned to survive through scripts and sitcoms.

To decode life by watching fictional people have fake problems that felt real.

Now?

My memories play like re-runs.

Conversations feel like rewrites.

Arguments are just scenes I forgot to rehearse.

I prep emotional monologues in my head just in case someone ever hands me the mic.

No one has.

So I cast myself. Directed the story. Built the damn set.

That's how I learned to be.

Not from my parents.

Not from school.

From syndication.

From 22-minute arcs that wrapped everything up with a bow

and a laugh track.

And I still manage my life like I'm show running a pilot for a girl who looks stable but keeps forgetting who she is once the credits roll.



Unemployment: The only job without costume requirements

Getting hired is supposed to be a win.

For most people, it is.

For me, it's a five-minute dopamine spike followed by a ten-week anxiety spiral.

Because I didn't actually get hired, my performance did.

I curated a version of myself so polished, so articulate, so charmingly competent that I tricked the hiring manager, the panel, HR, and maybe even myself.

Nailed the STAR method.

Matched their energy. Laughed at the CEO's joke about synergy. Threw in a line about how I "thrive under pressure."

That was a lie. I survive pressure the way a paper straw survives soup.

And then they say it:

“We’d like to offer you the job.”

I say: “I’m thrilled.”

I mean: “Oh no. Now I have to be her. Every day. Forever. For rent money.”

I’m fantastic at getting hired.

It’s a neurodivergent party trick.

I know how to read what someone wants and become it with disturbing accuracy.

Call it a coping mechanism.

Call it corporate drag.

Problem is, that version of me isn’t real.

But now she’s expected to show up Monday to Friday, no sick days, fully charged.

So I start rehearsing my “I love team huddles” voice before morning meetings.

I memorize people’s dog names and snack preferences.

I write thank-you emails that read like LinkedIn posts with a personality.

And eventually, I can't keep it up.

The mask slides.

I ask too many questions.

Or not enough.

I get quiet.

I miss cues.

I stop being someone they know how to work with.

And when that happens, two things might follow.

Sometimes, I leave. But only because they made damn sure I wanted to. They water the workplace with just enough discomfort to make it clear: this garden wasn't built for you.

Other times, it's "shortage of work." But somehow the work doesn't stop. Just their need for me does.

And I land right back in the in-between. Unemployed. Untethered. Unmasked.

It sucks. But it also doesn't.

At least I don't have to waste hours each day wondering how many of my traits are currently irritating to someone.

And I get a break from the exhausting game of trying to prove I'm capable without needing to explain why I work differently.

That performance?

UNEMPLOYMENT: THE ONLY JOB WITHOUT COSTUME REQUIREMENTS

It comes with a paycheck. But it charges interest in identity debt.

28

They ordered “too much”

I'm not the one who gets overlooked.

Actually, I'm the one they pick first a lot of the time.

Fast. Loud. Proud.

Like a limited-time offer.

They ask for the full spread, Emotional intimacy, intellectual banter, warmth, vulnerability, unpredictability, softness with sharp corners.

They say things like:

- > “Where have you been all my life?”
- “I've never felt this safe with anyone.”
- “I think I could really do this with you.”

But before you start feeling anything close to jealous, keep reading. It would be wildly misplaced.

THEY ORDERED "TOO MUCH"

Because they do mean it. For exactly one unit of time.

And then...

They realize they're full.

Or overwhelmed.

Or "confused."

Or they ghost.

Or they backpedal with something soft and digestible like:

"This is just a lot right now."

They don't say:

"I ordered more than I can carry."

"I thought I was ready, but I'm not."

"You're the meal. I just have snack capacity."

They do say:

"You're amazing, but..."

"This is moving too fast, someone's going to get hurt."

"I never wanted a relationship, I don't know how we got here."

And the "but" always translates to:

"I was excited by the idea of you, just not equipped for the reality of you."

This isn't a story about being overlooked. It's a story about being emotionally overestimated by people who don't know their own limits.

Like getting hired on contract to lead the team, I only get to watch them panic when you actually start doing strategy instead of just admin. They wanted leadership energy. They just didn't want the accountability that came with it.

Same with relationships. They want depth, until they feel like they're drowning in anything real.

So yeah, I know what it feels like to be picked. But I'm not a fan so far.

Because being chosen doesn't hold any special value for me.

Not when I'm always left wondering:

"Was that all fake just to get what they wanted?"

And not when I'm left wishing, honestly, that no one would find me attractive at all. Because then at least, I'd never have to wonder if that was the only reason I got picked.

Just for a hot second.

THEY ORDERED "TOO MUCH"



I'm Too Perfect, Til I Open My Big Mouth

Respect to Lola Young, who captured the anatomy of messy better than I ever could.

You ever meet someone who makes you feel like the rules might not apply this time?

Like maybe this is the one who sees you clearly enough to stay?

That's how it felt with them.

It wasn't fireworks.

It was worse.

It was quiet recognition.

The kind that says,

“Oh no. You’re going to ruin me. Just like I’m going to ruin you.”

We were best friends.

Or trauma twins.

Or puzzle pieces with jagged edges that fit because we both gave up a little shape to make it work.

I didn't plan to like them.

That would've been impractical.

And I'm nothing if not practical, until I'm not.

They were safe.

Until they weren't.

You're wondering, who is "they"

And why use that pronoun.

They represents a few, select knives in my story.

We slept together.

It wasn't supposed to matter.

But it did.

Thet told me i was the dream girl.

That they knew it from the day we met.

And I think they meant it.

But people say a lot of things when they think they're being poetic and not prophetic.

The truth?

They didn't lie to me.

They just didn't choose me.

Which is worse.

Because there's no betrayal to dissect.

No lie to hold up and point at and say, "Aha! That's where you broke me."

Just a slow fade into ambiguity.

A mess who stayed too composed.
Who made them laugh too much.
Who gave too many solutions and not enough mystery.

I was too perfect.
Until I opened my big mouth.
Thanks Lola.

Until I asked, even silently, “Do I matter?”
Until I flinched.
Until I hesitated.
Until I told the truth.
About what I felt.
About what I needed.

That’s when I became confusing.
Heavy.
Too much.

Because I’m not the girl you casually fall for.
I’m the girl who knows where your trauma lives and organizes
the emotional furniture around it.
I’m the girl who can read your silences.
Who calls you out with compassion.
Who makes you feel safe enough to finally sleep, until you
realize she also expects you to wake up.

And that?
Is terrifying.
For someone who was never planning to get that honest with
themselves.

So they found someone simpler.

Or maybe just someone not me.

That's definitely easier.

Someone who doesn't make them feel like they have to evolve.

Someone who smiles more, and spirals less.

Someone who doesn't keep receipts of every small moment, because she doesn't notice every small moment.

Someone they can be proud of because they aren't an elephant.

I would ask tell them this.

But I want to know: Why did you make me come over it you knew you weren't going to open the front door, just a window to wave hello?

Why did you hold my hand and talk about dreams,

if you had no plans to stay awake with me long enough to build any?

They are not the villain in my story.

That would be too easy.

Too clean.

They're just another chapter where I got edited out mid-sentence. Where the story shifted genres without warning, and no one told the protagonist.

But maybe I should be thanking them. Because being "almost chosen" by someone like them. taught me more about my worth than being fully chosen by someone unworthy ever could.

So no, this chapter won't be published. It'll live in the margins.

BACK LEFT BURNER

Where all the real things live.

But if I ever see them again...I hope they think of me not as the one who needed too much.

But as the one who saw them before they were ready to be seen.

And showed them what it would've felt like to finally be known.

30

Prototype Illusion

It's almost humiliating, how many times I've fallen for this script. Different faces. Same dialogue. Same fireworks at the start, same ash at the end.

But this one hurt more. Because it wasn't just some guy who stumbled in off the street with a handful of charm. It was someone who already lived in my orbit. Someone I'd trusted for years, without requiring the usual background checks. Shortcut to the inner circle. Big mistake.

I was at a low point when it started, the kind where even the wrong person can look like a life raft. And he did. He said the words that sound like vows when you're desperate enough: perfect girl, dream girl, I'd marry you, tell me you're mine. Words designed to stick to the inside of your rib cage. And I let them.

But the thing about words? They evaporate. They taste sweet going down and leave you hungrier after. He said enough to make me feel chosen, but never enough to actually choose me. He picked me up, patched me together, and then, when it was inconvenient, shattered me worse.

And the insult layered on top of the injury? He acted like I was being dramatic. Like my breaking was an overreaction, instead of the logical result of being lifted high and dropped on purpose.

(Side note: I love how people always call you “too much” when they’re the ones who over-promised. Thanks for the emotional Groupon, I guess. Expired the second I tried to use it.)

I told him in the beginning I was fine with casual. And I was. I didn’t need a fairy-tale. The only thing I asked for was to feel different. Not another placeholder. Not another option in rotation. Just different.

Apparently, that was the one thing he couldn’t give.

And here’s the part I hate admitting: I really did believe him. Every recycled line. Every “you’re not like the others.” I ate it up like it was new cuisine.

(I guess it’s my fault for thinking this time would be different. Isn’t that the definition of crazy, seeing a clear pattern and still betting against it? Hope is just denial in better shoes.)

So what did I actually get? The prototype illusion. An intimacy demo with no follow-through. The beta version of love, all glitter and no code.

And when the lights cut out, when the screen went black, I was left holding the wires. Repairing myself in silence. Again.

31

HW - Bookmarked

I get labeled as bossy.

As rigid.

As someone who always has to have it her way.

But that's the irony.

The exhausting, infuriating, reality-warping irony.

Because in truth?

I'm constantly pretending to like things I hate just to keep the peace.

I lie about where my ideas came from because I'm embarrassed I cared enough to think deeply.

I fake excitement so people don't ask what I really feel.

I smile while disassociating so I don't cry in public.

I agree quickly, eagerly, just to make the discomfort end.

I don't take control because I'm controlling.

I take control because it's the only way to protect myself from the violence of being ignored.

If I speak up? I'm bossy.

If I stay quiet? I'm invisible.

If I compromise? I'm performing.
If I care too much? I'm annoying.
If I stop caring? I'm cold.

That's why I hate group work.
Because it's never just collaboration.
It's reputation management.
Emotional surveillance.
Performance optimization under fluorescent lights and fake
smiles.
So I offer to do everything.
Because doing everything is easier than defending my value
in a space that was never going to see me anyway.
I wear the invisibility cloak until someone needs something.
Then suddenly I'm under a strobe light—blinding, expected,
hypervisible, blamed.
It's not leadership.
It's survival strategy dressed up like efficiency.
And I'm tired of surviving in w
ays that get misnamed as power.

32

The Add-on Friend: The Ugly Duckling Remix

Chapter 11

“Oh wait, we forgot Steph, should we text her?”

“She’s cool, but she’s a lot sometimes.”

“Let’s just invite her last-minute, she probably won’t care.”

This betrayal isn’t loud.

It’s casual.

It’s logistical.

It’s structural.

This chapter better not gain me any pity cause I’ll gag. That’s not what I want. But every time I hear “oh shit, I forgot to add you to the chat” it’s a quiet middle finger wrapped in a silk napkin.

the add-on friend (ugly duckling remix)

If you've ever been invited to something and your first thought was,

“Who canceled?”

then welcome. You already know.

I'm the backup friend.

The oh-right-her friend, an afterthought.

The name that gets added when someone remembers there's room for one more.

I'm not the first text when something big happens.

I'm not the one you pre-plan birthday gifts for.

I'm the “you're always invited” but never actually mentioned in the group chat kind of friend.

And don't get me wrong, people like me.

They really do.

They like my energy.

They like my help.

They like how useful I am when the group needs a plan, a ride, a caption, a vibe.

But I'm no one's anchor.

No one's default.

No one's non-negotiable.

I'm the friend who adds value.

But never the friend who sets the tone.

Sometimes, it even shows up at home.

I once stopped speaking to someone for several weeks, and they didn't even notice.

At the time, I was still with my girlfriend, and out of what I thought was nowhere, they asked if I wanted to hang out. No occasion. No reason. Just a “hey, come by.”

I was floored. Excited, even. Turned to my girlfriend like, “Whoa. They’ve never asked me to hang out, just to hang out.”

I said yes. Started getting ready. I was genuinely looking forward to it.

Then the follow-up text came in:

“Hey, can you bring your drill so you can hang my curtains?”

And that was the end of that.

Because I knew. I knew there had to be a reason.

And that reason was utility. Not closeness. Not bonding. Not friendship.

Just a task. An errand in disguise.

It's not that asking for help is wrong.

It's that I don't get invited without it.

So, I did the thing and made a mental note to distance myself, which backfired cause they didn't notice my silence until the next time I was needed. She doesn't even know this but I guess she will now.

So here's where it gets expensive: Because I know I'm not the main character in anyone else's story, I rarely let people into mine.

When I'm unraveling, I disappear.

I disassociate.

I mute the world, sit with my playlists, clean my apartment for the 6th time, and rehearse how to return without showing

how far gone I went.

Some people call it flakey.

Some people take it personally.

Some leave.

And if you're reading this thinking,

"She did that to me,"

yeah. I probably did.

And I'm sorry.

This chapter isn't a guilt trip.

It's just me putting the invisible ink under a blacklight.

My bad.

I just don't want to only be seen as, the fun one. the helpful one. the one you bring along because your real best friend couldn't come.

I guess though, thanks for even thinking of me. I'll definitely be bringing some snacks. I just wish I didn't have to feel like the awkward +1.

33

Nobody's Perfect – Thanks, Hannah

Cue sparkly font and a key change no one saw coming.

**“Sometimes I’m in a jam, I gotta make a plan. It might be crazy,
I do it anyway. No way to know for sure, I’ll figure out a cure.
I’m patchin’ up the holes, but then it overflows”**

Relatable.

That was basically my internal monologue for the majority of my 20s.

The lyrics to Nobody’s Perfect weren’t just catchy. They were scripture.

“If I’m not doin’ too well. Why be so hard on myself?”

Because I’ve never been allowed not to be hard on myself.

I used to wish violently that I was Hannah Montana.

Not for the stage, the fans, the fame.

I wanted the wig.
The buffer. The option.
The ability to present one version of myself and tuck the rest away safely.

“Nobody’s perfect, I gotta work it

Again and again ‘til I get it right”

This was me.

Patching holes. Cleaning messes. Editing feelings.
Working at being likable again and again until I either got it right, or disappeared trying.

“Sometimes I work a scheme, but then it flips on me
Doesn’t turn out how I planned, get stuck in quicksand”

Because here’s the joke no one tells you:

When you’re neurodivergent and masking like your life depends on it (because it kinda does),

You’re never actually presenting yourself.
You’re curating a version that others can digest without discomfort.

And they love that version.
Until it slips.
The few times I didn’t mask?
I paid for it.

Once, I was around someone I trusted and wasn’t medicated.

They asked me a question, and I rambled. I spiraled. I got a little too intense.

They looked at me and said,

“Did you take your meds today?”

I said no.

They responded,

“...Yeah. I can tell.”

And that was it.

Not “Are you okay?”

Not “Do you need anything?”

Just a passive judgment disguised as casual concern.

A verbal shrug that landed like a slap.

And don't even get me started on the people who say,

“There's no way you're an introvert. That's impossible.”

Oh okay, thanks, stranger.

Let me just cancel my social anxiety and rewire my brain real quick to make you more comfortable.

I'll start enjoying birthday dinners and grocery store small talk immediately.

Your emotional clarity has healed me.

“But no problem can't be solved once I get involved. I try to be delicate, then crash right into it. But my intentions are good. Sometimes just misunderstood”

That's the part that hits the hardest. The misunderstood part. Because when you're always trying to get it right, and still end up being too much, It doesn't matter how good your intentions

are.

People don't see intentions. They see impact. And when your impact is unpredictable, people pull away.

So no, this chapter isn't just a nostalgic nod to Disney Channel. It's a love letter to the mask I never got to take off.

The version of me that most people knew?

That was my Miley.

The version I protected like state secrets?

That was Hannah.

She was messier. She talked too fast. She made jokes that were just a little too true.

She forgot to respond to texts and sometimes ghosted out of self-preservation.

But she was real.

And now, after years of trying to be the girl who got it right, I'm writing this book as Hannah.

Not because I'm hiding. But because she was always the one telling the truth.

So if you're holding this book, and wondering why the author's name feels unfamiliar? It's because the girl who made it finally stopped trying to be perfect. She just started talking. And she used her own microphone

Always Denied Entry into Phase 3 of the Plan

This documentation process has made me turn every experience that makes me want to cry and hide into an analytical moment of asking why and understanding the deeper systems at play. It happened again today. I write this in real time as I emotionally process the events. Thank Destra for the part of my neurodivergent brain that gets easily distracted by rhythm and movement and lets me avoid drowning in the unfairness of it.

Level One is the vision phase. It is the high speed synthesis of information where I can see the finished product before anyone else has even opened their laptops. It is the innovation, the flair, and the rapid prototyping. It is the part of the process where I am allowed to be brilliant because I am not yet a threat to the established order.

The amount of praise I get for level one is ridiculous. I hear some version of this constantly: “Wow, she is so creative.” “How did she pull that together so fast?” It used to give me a dopamine

spike. Now it just slides past me. I am desensitized. It is not really admiration. It is surface level awe. They are amazed by the sparkle, not the structure. They praise what is easy to clap for: the idea, the flair, the intro sequence.

Then comes level two. The part that actually matters. The part where my thinking has to make sense to other people. Where decisions get questioned. Where execution is no longer exciting. It is now subject to scrutiny. This is where everything shifts. Suddenly I go from “incredible” to “explain yourself.” Now I am justifying every move. They ask: “Why did you do it that way?” “Could you not have asked first?” “I think maybe you need to slow down.”

If I push back too much, or if I ask for the same grace they give each other, I become rigid. Defensive. Uncollaborative. Or worse, I get quietly phased out of my own thing. My value was only in level one. Not in the building. Not in the leading. Not in the making it real.

I have noticed something. In this phase, I am not allowed to make mistakes. Other people get to shrug and say, “We are all human.” I do not. My errors get remembered. My instincts get questioned. My presence becomes a liability instead of an asset. So I get the choice of choosing to eat it and shrink or speak up and get judged. I always choose to preserve team dynamics at my own emotional expense. That is a high price to pay, but the price is even higher when I defend myself.

I do not know if it is because I am neurodivergent, or Black, or both. Or just visibly non-traditional in the way I process and

move. But I live in a reality where I am everyone's favorite muse until I start actually trying to build the thing. And then, suddenly, I am too much. Too fast. Too confusing. Too difficult to trust.

Then there is Phase Three. I cannot describe Phase Three to you because I have never been invited into the room where it happens. Phase Three is the sustainability phase. It is the long term maintenance, the legacy building, and the quiet authority of ownership. Phase 3 is where credit is assigned, applause happens and you are recognized for your hard work. In the architecture of my career, Phase Three is a redacted floor. Those in phase three are getting recognized wearing my glitter, and I am no longer afraid to acknowledge out loud that it was my glitter that got them there. I provide the vision and I survive the scrutiny, but I am consistently denied the keys to the building I designed. I am the architect who is asked to leave the site once the heavy lifting begins. If you are looking for a description of how it feels to finally be trusted with the finish line, you will have to find another archive. This one ends at the door I am not allowed to open.

Judgment During Beta Testing: The lab coat chaos no one claps for

People always assume I rushed it. That I didn't think it through. That I just threw something together with no plan, no care, no logic. And it's been like that since I was a kid.

Yes, I have ADHD. And yes, people with ADHD often jump into things fast. But that sentence always stops too early. I don't just fling myself into random things all day. I only have two modes of working.

Mode one: when I know exactly what I'm doing, I do it perfectly. I overdo it, really. I get obsessive about the seams lining up, the perfect font choice, the sparkle placement, the flow of a sentence. If it's aesthetic or public-facing, it's getting my full precision. No crumbs.

Mode two: when I don't know what I'm doing yet, I build the plane while flying it. But not recklessly. I research the hell out of it, narrow it down to two or three potential options, then test

them all. I merge theory with instinct. I try, fail, revise, and repeat until something works. And not just works, makes sense to me.

I can't take someone's word for it. Even if their method is proven. I need to prove it to myself. I need to touch the stove. I need to break the thing and rebuild it to understand why it works. I hate the feeling of running something that functions but makes no sense to me. It feels like magic I can't control, and that gives me Weasley brother vibes.

No one taught me how a car works, but I was taught to drive. And the engine starting felt like a miracle. I hated that. So I went back and learned how engines actually work. And then I got annoyed. Because I realized how many things I could've prevented or done better if I had just known that from the beginning.

So yeah, sometimes I get it wrong. Sometimes I build the wrong thing first. But it's never careless. It's never random. And the wrong version is how I find the right one.

And yes I hate reading instructions, and I rush into the start of things, but that's because I treat everything like a learning experience anyways. Plenty of time and frustration would have been saved in my life had I just read the instructions manual first, but it always ended with me gaining a lot more knowledge that way.

And also yes, this method has backfired on me. Mostly because people love to make it awkward and embarrassing when you do something the wrong way, suddenly it's spectacal worthy

and there's no such thing as an invisibility cloak. But, people will be people and at the end of the day, I learn so well from those situations and it only drives me 10 times more to now do it even better, cause you best believe I won't be reliving that embarrassment again.

The part that doesn't land is,. Noone sticks around for the refinement. They see version one and decide that's all there is. They say I oversold my skills. That I can't handle it. That someone else should step in.

They don't see the method behind what looks like a mess. They don't see that it's part of the build.

And the people who do stick around? Sometimes they just hang around long enough to say "you can never just let anything go" when I finally figure it out. Rarely "good job" or "that was smart." Just a quiet shift into pretending like they always believed it would work.

It's not usually malicious. But it is reductive. And when it comes from people who actually love you, it cuts deeper. Not because they disagreed. Not because they had a different way. But because their first assumption was that you didn't try.

That's what gets me.

Because those two modes of mine? They're not flaws.

They're how I get things right.

Precision or strategic chaos.
There's no middle.
But there's always a method.

All Aboard on Platform 3/4 – The Train of Dissociation and RSD

Reason for this entry into the archive:

I finally read the definition of functional dissociation and it was a little too accurate. Except I'm not fully detached from emotion. I wish. I can't disassociate out of RSD no matter how hard I try. Sometimes, maybe, if I force it. But the rest of the feelings? Gone.

The other day someone lost it on me when Air Canada kept canceling my flights but I seemed I bothered. They asked me why I wasn't panicking. Why I hadn't answered the CRD's email. Why I hadn't even opened the one from Alima. I just didn't. I still haven't. I don't want to see what's inside.

I used to cry. A lot. Like, all the time. Over everything. Now I don't cry unless the entire world falls apart. I mostly sit in silence. I stare at the wall. I know what to expect. Me and rejection are on a first name basis now. So, I deep dive into

rhinestone patterns or carnival belts like my life depends on it.

And every time someone hears even a tiny piece of what's happened and their face changes, I'm the one surprised. Because I've convinced myself none of it counts. I was fed. No one beat me. I wasn't left in a ditch somewhere. People just don't like me. That's it.

So no, I don't think it's cPTSD. I don't think it rewired my brain. I just think it was a lot. Like the book. *A Series of Unfortunate Events*.

Even my own history doesn't make the cut. It's not a category. It just... exists.

Are You Me? Let's Check.

A self-check quiz for identifying whether you're everyone's emotional appetizer or the featured main course who gets asked for an encore.

1. If you let others lead 100 percent of the conversation, do they ever stop to ask about you, your life, your well being?

Don't get too excited if the answer is yes. That doesn't automatically bump you to the bottom right burner.

Ask yourself:

- Did they only ask about gossip-worthy things?
- Was it only the stuff with entertainment value?

Put a finger down.

2. When you get invited somewhere, is it almost always tied to a task?

“Hey... can you help hang my curtains, and then we'll do brunch?”

Put a finger down.

ARE YOU ME? LET'S CHECK.

3. Could you go five to ten days in your house with no invites, no spontaneous check-ins, and when you finally talk to people again, you dread being asked:

“What have you been up to?”

Because you know the group's full of stories, and all you've got is:

“I researched a new hobby I'll never actually do.”

They assume someone else invited you out.

They've never looked close enough to realize no one did.

Put a finger down.

4. Have you ever gone so long without speaking that when you finally open your mouth, the sound of your own voice surprises you?

Put a finger down.

5. Do you mostly see friends and family on holidays and special events, but never on a random Tuesday for no reason?

No grocery run together. No impulsive tea.

Just milestone appearances.

Put that finger down.

Not Confident. Just Calculated

Sitting at the kitchen table at 10pm, just starting to make dinner. For context, I've never been a one-pot girl. Cooking means chopping onions and slicing shit and a minimum of two pans and six utensils. While the pan sat heating, I pulled up a photo of the girl who was chosen over me. Her photos exuded confidence.

But so do mine.

So what's the difference?

I sat there long enough to disrespect my un-oiled pan and realized: yeah, her confidence is real. Even if I looked exactly as hot as she does, she'd still win. I used to say if I got cheated on, they better be hotter than me. Now I know that's not the only variable.

Initial Thought:

I don't have confidence. Let's start there.

Whatever people think I'm walking around with, it isn't confidence. It's math. It's observation. It's survival instinct in whatever outfit gets me through the door. People confuse logic for security. They assume because I can articulate the problem, I must not be drowning in it. Cute. No. I feel it all. I've just learned to narrate chaos with a steady voice and a decent outfit.

Lesson 1: The Costume

Confidence is a costume. I wear it like shape wear: tight, necessary, wildly uncomfortable. It doesn't belong to me, but I know how to use it. And when the performance ends, I peel it off and toss it onto the same emotional laundry pile where I keep every moment I smiled through discomfort, or acted unfazed while calculating whether I'd just been dismissed or misunderstood. Spoiler: it's usually both.

Each costume represents a carefully built personality mask, stitched together from unsolicited comments and casual attacks on how I move and communicate. Too blunt. Too quiet. Too weird. Too much. Every note became a tailoring instruction. The mask is what lets me look like I'm exuding confidence when really I'm just wearing everyone else's opinions back at them.

Lesson 3: The Myth of Confidence

People love to say confidence is key. My ex had that tattooed on her and it was hot as hell.

But what they really mean is: if you look confident enough, we won't ask what's wrong with you. It's not confidence that makes people stay. It's legibility. If they can read you, they relax. If they can't, they leave.

And me? I've always been hard to read. So I built a script. Played the role. Until I was alone, and the script collapsed.

Lesson 4: The Real Skill

I'm not confident. I'm adapted.

I've designed an entire life around masking emotional lag with intellectual speed. I can explain the problem before I let myself feel it. I can look composed while everything underneath glitches. That's not a deficit. That's an interface update.

The Insight I Almost Missed:

It isn't just insecurity. It's strategy born from exclusion. Marginalized people learn fast: if you aren't instantly legible, you risk being ignored, dismissed, left behind. Strategic self-presentation isn't optional when you grow up on the back left burner. It's the only way to be seen at all.

So yes, confidence feels like a costume. But it's also a survival mechanism. It's what I use when I can't trust the room to value me without a performance.

Final Thought:

I don't need to believe I'm the main character. I just need the system to pause when I walk in. That's not confidence. That's strategy. And strategy keeps me alive in rooms that weren't built for me.

But if strategy always wins, wouldn't I be winning?

That's the break in the logic. Because what I actually want is

NOT CONFIDENT. JUST CALCULATED

for strategy to be unnecessary. To walk in with all of me, no costume required. And maybe even stay.

Two People Guarding the Same Door

There is a special kind of hell reserved for two avoidant people who want the same thing but are terrified of naming it.

Not because they do not feel it.

Because they feel it too clearly.

We are on opposite sides of the same fence, them and I.

Both waiting.

Both watching.

Both pretending stillness is neutrality instead of strategy.

Each of us needs the same proof before we move.

That it will be worth it.

That we will be chosen on purpose.

That the risk will not make us smaller.

So no one moves.

This is not a lack of desire.

It is an excess of imagination.

I imagine the moment I speak and watch his face change.

I imagine the micro pause where I realize I miscalculated.

I imagine the polite deflection.

The soft rejection.

The version of him that says nothing cruel but everything final.

And I know he does the same thing.

He imagines being exposed.

Imagines losing leverage.

Imagines choosing wrong and being trapped in regret.

Imagines giving something away that cannot be reclaimed.

So instead, we circle.

Two people desperate to be seen, doing everything possible to avoid being fully visible.

That is the paradox.

I want him to know exactly how much he matters to me.

And I am terrified that if he sees it clearly, he will decide it is inconvenient.

He wants to feel wanted without obligation.

And he is terrified that if he admits it, he will lose control of the outcome.

So we communicate in fragments.

In timing.

In jokes.

In proximity.

In everything except language.

We mistake restraint for maturity.

We call avoidance boundaries.

We tell ourselves this is safer.

It is not safer.

It is quieter.

And quiet is easier to survive than clarity.

This dynamic does not stay contained.

It leaks.
It hijacks my attention.
It corrodes my focus.
It turns basic adult tasks into background noise because my nervous system is busy running simulations.
What did that text mean.
Did that pause mean something.
Should I wait.
Did I already say too much.
Did I say nothing at all.
It overrides logic.
It overrides time.
It overrides hunger, sleep, ambition.
Not because I am dramatic.
Because unresolved attachment eats cognitive bandwidth.
This is what people do not understand.
This is not longing.
It is hyper vigilance.
My brain is not romantic.
It is strategic to the point of exhaustion.
Every interaction is a chessboard where neither player wants to move first because the first move reveals what matters.
And what matters is the one thing we both learned to protect at all costs.
Ourselves.
So we stay suspended.
Neither advancing nor retreating.
Calling it connection when it is actually mutual fear with chemistry.
This is the hell I live in.
Not passion.

Not heartbreak.

Limbo.

The place where wanting and terror coexist so completely that they cancel each other out.

And the cruellest part is that from the outside, it looks like choice.

It looks like casual.

It looks like freedom.

From the inside, it feels like holding your breath indefinitely because exhaling might collapse the room.

I am not afraid of rejection because of ego.

I am afraid because I know exactly what rejection does to my system.

It does not bruise.

It destabilizes.

So I wait.

And they waits.

And the silence between us becomes the third thing in the relationship.

The thing neither of us names.

The thing that controls everything.

Two people.

Same desire.

Opposite sides of the fence.

Both convinced that if the other wanted it badly enough, they would risk it.

Neither realizing that the other is thinking the exact same thing.



HW - Life Keeps Running the Same Cruel Experiment

Reason for this entry:

I opened LinkedIn and Facebook today.

Big mistake.

Everyone's wins punched me in the face before I could even scroll.

Promotions. Celebrations. "Proud to announce..."

This is why I avoid social media.

But when you're looking for work, LinkedIn becomes a necessary evil.

Life keeps running the same cruel experiment.

It gives me just enough hope to think maybe this time I'll actually mean something to someone.

Then it waits for me to act on it, to believe in it for real, and laughs in my face the second I do.

I'm almost 36.

I've long accepted I'm never going to be the girl that wins.

Not the one who gets chosen.
Just the one who looks like she has everything together
because no one has ever bothered to look deep enough to know
that's the furthest thing from the truth.

I honestly think if you look deep enough at people who have solo hobbies,

you'll find they're teetering on the same acceptance edge I already jumped off of.

Some people are lucky.

They jump and somehow land in a version of life that feels content.

They learn how to live with it.

I tried.

But I'm gullible.

Not in a naive way.

In the way where if someone gives me a moment
where it feels like maybe I was wrong
maybe this person actually chooses me
I believe it.

And I don't know how to stop that.

Because I'm jaded enough to have accepted the cliff.

But not cynical enough to shut the window when hope taps on the glass.

If that makes any sense at all.



**OH YAY, JESSICA
HAD ANOTHER
BABY & GOT
A PROMOTION**

Back Cover