

AFTER ADDERALL

Overprescribed, Unraveled, and Rebuilt from Scratch



JEREMY SCHOEMAKER

A MEMOIR

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Scratch*

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This book reflects the author's present recollections of experiences over time. Some names and identifying details have been changed. Dialogue has been reconstructed from memory and is not intended to represent word-for-word transcripts.

During revision, the author rechecked the key medication dates and dosages described in the book against available CVS and Walgreens pharmacy records. Descriptions of conversations with clinicians remain recollections unless otherwise indicated.

This book is not medical advice. Do not start, stop, taper, increase, decrease, or otherwise change a prescribed medication based on this memoir. Consult a licensed medical professional about your own care.

The word "overprescribed" in this memoir is the author's retrospective characterization of what he believes was far too much medication for him, specifically the prescribed 20 mg Adderall XR three-times-daily regimen. It is not a claim that the same dose has the same effect or appropriateness for every patient.

I dedicate this book to my family, old, always, and new.

To my wife, Brandi Nicole Schoemaker. On our second date I told you I loved you, and I've loved you more every day. Here is to our wonderful life together, to which we already have an amazing start.

To my girls, Juliet and Joslyn: I am so sorry that I was unable to be the father you needed in that window when I was taking Adderall. Just know that I love you very much and always will.

To my ex-wife, Dr. J. Elizabeth Schoemaker: you are the best ex-wife any man could ever ask for. Thank you for being a great partner in co-parenting our children and filling in where I was lacking.

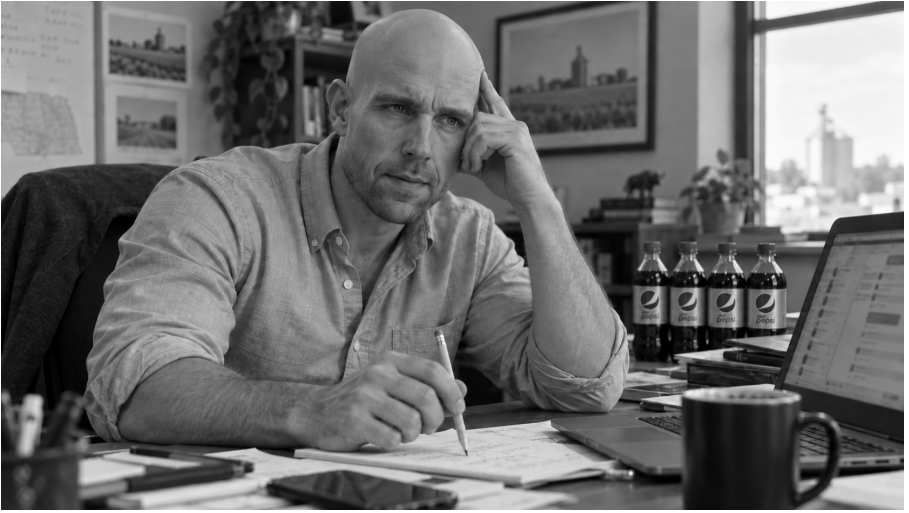
To my in-laws, Alex and Julie Hernandez, Charles and Hazel Findley, and Caleb Weaver: from the first time I met each of you, you have always been so accepting, loving, and gracious.

To my mom, Joyce Schoemaker: I love you very much. Thank you for always being there for me and supporting me in my darkest moments and being my biggest cheerleader at my highest.

To my sister, Andrea Schoemaker: thank you for your unrelenting love and support over the years and for keeping me in check every once in a while, whether I need it or not.

CONTENTS

Chapter One	Nineteen Times Since September	9
Chapter Two	I Watched a Bradley Cooper Movie and Called My Psychiatrist	15
Chapter Three	Forty Milligrams and a PHP Framework	19
Chapter Four	There but Not Really There	25
Chapter Five	Counting My Ribs in the Mirror	35
Chapter Six	Move My House Into Your Garage, I'll Wire You Ten Grand	43
Chapter Seven	Is Getting Out of Bed Worth It.	49
Chapter Eight	Flowers for Algernon	57
Chapter Nine	echo "hello world"	65
Chapter Ten	The Laptop Lived on the Kitchen Island	75
Chapter Eleven	Quiet Is Not the Same as Gone	83
Notes on Sources		91



CHAPTER ONE

Nineteen Times Since September

The pencil was yellow, a Ticonderoga, and the eraser was already chewed flat because I chewed erasers. I was in fourth grade. The room smelled like floor wax and the inside of a lunchbox, that plastic smell that gets into a thermos and never leaves. My teacher was at the board doing long division, and I had already figured out that I was not going to be able to sit in that chair for the next thirty-one minutes without something coming out of me.

So the pencil went tap. Tap tap. Tap.

I genuinely did not know I was doing it. It was the same way you do not know your heart is beating. The pencil was going because something in me was going, and the pencil happened to be the part of me that was holding an object. She stopped mid-problem. She did not yell. That was worse. She just turned around and looked at me with

the specific tired face of a woman who has had this exact conversation with this exact kid nineteen times since September, and said, “Jeremy. The pencil.” She was patient. She was also tired. I said sorry. I put the pencil down. I held still for maybe eleven seconds, which at the time felt like an accomplishment worth a plaque, and then my leg started going instead, knee knocking the underside of the desk. Then I raised my hand and asked if I could go to the bathroom. I did not need to go to the bathroom. I want that on the record because for about thirty years I did not admit it to anybody, including myself. The bathroom was not a bathroom. The bathroom was a hallway. The hallway was ninety feet of cold tile that I could walk down alone, at my own speed, with nobody talking at me about remainders. I would go in, run the water, look at myself in that scratched metal mirror they put in elementary schools so kids cannot break them, count to something, and walk back the long way past the gym. That was the whole trick. At nine years old I had invented a way to leave a boring room without getting in trouble for leaving a boring room. I used it for the next nine years of public school and I was proud of it.

* * *

Here is the part where I tell you what I would not understand for another three decades. The diagnostic language for ADHD describes patterns that now look embarrassingly familiar to me: fidgeting, leaving a seat when staying put is expected, losing track of ordinary things, getting pulled away from tasks before they are finished.

The pencil was one of those patterns. The bathroom was another. I had thought I invented a clever hallway scam; years later I learned that the impulse to get up and escape a low-stimulation room was not nearly as original as I believed.

Every report card I got after that was a paraphrase of the rest of that list, written by someone who had never seen the list: bright, capable, does not apply himself, does not finish.

* * *

Nobody diagnosed any of this. I want to be fair to everybody involved. In the Midwest in the 1980s, a kid like me was not a diagnosis, a kid like me was a personality. I was “a handful.” I was “all boy.” I was “smart but.” There was always a but. The but was the whole sentence.

So I did what an undiagnosed kid does, which is I built my own equipment out of whatever was lying around, and I built it badly, and it mostly worked, and that turned out to be the problem.

* * *

Jump forward. Now I have a company. PAR Program, 2012 to 2015. Twelve people, six in the office with me and six scattered wherever remote people are. We sold to GoSocial in November of 2015 for twelve million dollars, which is a sentence I like typing, and which matters here only as a way of saying this: everything I am about to describe about my own brain was happening the entire time, and none of it stopped when the money got good. Picture my desk. On the back right corner there were four bottles of Diet Pepsi. Unopened. Caps still sealed. Sometimes five, sometimes six, standing there like little soldiers who had been assigned to a post and then forgotten by command. The way they got there was simple and stupid. I would think, I need a Diet Pepsi, and get up and get one. On the way back somebody would catch me with a question about a landing page, and I would answer it standing up, set the bottle down while I was answering, then sit and go do the landing page thing. Forty minutes later I would think, I need a Diet Pepsi. There were

four of them within arm's reach. I did not see them. They had become furniture. That is “loses things necessary for tasks” and “forgetful in daily activities” (Merck Manuals, 2025) running as one continuous loop on a grown man with a payroll. I would go to the bathroom in that office too. Same guy, same move, thirty years later, better tile. And then there was IM. AIM windows and Skype chirps stacked six deep, later Slack doing the same job with better fonts. Every one of those little bloop was a door opening, and I was not strong enough to not walk through a door. I would be nineteen minutes into something with money attached, and a window would flash from one of my remote guys asking about an invoice, and I would go handle the invoice, and while I was in the billing system I would notice something about a charge, and go chase the charge, and somewhere in there a phone call would come in, and at 4:45 I would look up and realize the thing with the money attached had not been touched since 11:20 that morning.

That is not a moral failing. It felt exactly like a moral failing, every single day, and I would drive home prosecuting myself in my own car.

* * *

So I built two pieces of equipment, and I want to describe them honestly, because they are the reason it took me until adulthood to figure out what was wrong with me. They worked well enough to hide the problem.

Piece one: do it right now or it is gone forever.

That was the rule. Not a productivity system, not a book I read, just a rule I arrived at the way you arrive at not touching a stove. If I had a thought, an idea, a task, a thing I owed somebody, and I did not act on it in the moment it appeared, it did not go into a queue. There was no queue. It evaporated. Completely. Like it had never been in my head at all. I could feel the shape of where it had been, the way you can feel a word you cannot retrieve, but the thing itself was gone.

So I stopped trying to hold anything. If I thought of it, I did it, instantly, at whatever cost to whatever I was already doing. Email at 1 a.m. Call somebody at an hour no reasonable person calls. Buy the domain right then. Push the change right then. People thought this was decisiveness. People wrote nice things about how fast I moved. What it actually was, was a man with a bucket that had a hole in it, learning to drink straight from the hose.

Piece two: caffeine.

Mountain Dew as a teenager, which is such a cliché I am embarrassed to write it, then Diet Pepsi as an adult because I decided somewhere along the way that sugar was the enemy and caffeine was a nutrient. Black coffee all day on top of that. I never counted milligrams, and anybody who tells you they counted is lying. And here is the tell I did not understand for twenty years: a double K-cup before bed. Not a cup. A double. I would run two pods through into one mug, around ten or eleven at night, and drink it, and go to sleep. Not toss and turn. Sleep. My wife at the time thought I was doing a bit. I was not doing a bit. That was how I got the inside of my head to stop moving long enough to shut down. Every other person I ever watched drink what I drank got worse. Jittery, chatty, legs going, that thin wired feeling. I got the opposite. Two cups of coffee and the noise in my head would drop about forty percent and one thing would come into focus and stay there, and I would get four hours of work done in a sitting, which for me was not normal. I never once in my life got the shakes from coffee. Not once. That is my experience. I am not presenting it as a finding.

Years later, after I finally had the diagnosis, I went looking for a neat scientific explanation for why caffeine had seemed to calm me down. I did not find one. The evidence for caffeine as an ADHD treatment is mixed and weak. My experience was my experience; it was not a clinical finding.

For years I had been using caffeine as a crude workaround. It helped enough that I kept doing it, but I do not pretend the science says everyone with ADHD should have the same response.

* * *

The other thing I built, and I did not know I was building it, was speed.

I have one gear. I have never had a second gear. Whatever I am doing, I am doing all of it, right now, at maximum, with no throttle and no reverse. When I decided to get into ringtones, I was in ringtones by Thursday. When I decided to quit my job at Wells Fargo, the quitting happened faster than the thinking about quitting. When I built PAR, I built it the same way, twelve people trying to keep up with a guy who did not understand why anyone would want to do a thing over two weeks that could be done badly in two days and fixed on Friday. For twenty years people called that drive. Hustle. Grit. Somebody once introduced me on a stage as “relentless” and I felt great about it for a month. I think it was partly that. I am not going to sit here and tell you there was no engine in there, because there was, and it built things that are still standing. But I know now that some real percentage of that speed was not ambition. It was me outrunning my own head. If I moved fast enough, I got to the finish line before the distraction caught up. If I did it right now, I did not have to find out that “later” did not exist for me. Some of what I was praised for was a coping mechanism wearing a suit. And I did not know that. That is the whole thing I am trying to get at. I was forty-some years old, I had sold two companies, I had stood on stages and told rooms full of people how to run their businesses, and I could not reliably put a bottle of Diet Pepsi and my own hand in the same place at the same time. I didn’t know I had ADHD. I just knew that if I drank enough caffeine, I could focus.



CHAPTER TWO

I Watched a Bradley Cooper Movie and Called My Psychiatrist

I want to be honest about the date because I got it wrong in an earlier draft of this book. I do not remember the night I rewatched *Limitless* well enough to pin it to a calendar. What I can pin down now, because I went back through my CVS and Walgreens records, is the part that matters: by June 2019 I had taken the ADHD assessment and received my first Adderall prescription.

I remember the couch. I remember the blue light of the TV late at night. I remember watching *Limitless* again and recognizing myself in Eddie Morra before the fictional miracle pill ever appeared. He is a guy who knows what he is capable of and cannot get his own brain to cooperate long enough to prove it. The fantasy that grabbed me was

not Wall Street or genius. It was smaller: what if I could just focus? What if the dishes did not feel like a mountain and an unread email did not have the emotional gravity of a small planet?

I had spent my entire adult life being told, by employees, by my own kids, by myself in the mirror at one in the morning, that I was “so smart” and “such a hard worker” and “if you could just focus.” I’d built companies. I’d sold companies. I ran a hundred-plus tabs of ideas in my head at any given moment and somehow, most days, only two or three of them ever made it out into the world as something real. Everyone assumed that was a feature. From the inside it felt like standing next to a fire hose with a teaspoon.

So there’s Eddie Morra on my TV, and there’s me on my couch, and the question that showed up in my head wasn’t “what would I do with unlimited brainpower.” It was smaller and dumber and a lot more honest than that: what if I could just focus? Not superhuman. Not Wall Street. Just... normal. Just able to sit down and do the next thing without forty other things trying to kick the door in at the same time.

That question followed me into my next appointment. I already had a psychiatrist, mostly for routine medication management. I liked her. Our relationship was administrative and uneventful, which is why what happened next felt so ordinary while it was happening.

She didn’t say much. She reached into a drawer and handed me a form.

I have filled out a lot of forms in my life. Loan applications, term sheets, divorce paperwork, W-9s for guys I hired off Craigslist. This form did something none of those had ever done, which is that it read like it had been written by someone who had been quietly watching me my whole life and had finally decided to say something.

The form was the Adult ADHD Self-Report Scale, the ASRS. I am not going to reproduce the questionnaire here. What mattered was the recognition: questions about unfinished projects, organization, forgotten obligations, delayed starts, distraction, and interruption

read less like a screening tool and more like someone had been quietly watching my browser history and calendar for years.

I checked a lot of ‘Often.’ A few ‘Very Often.’ I did not feel diagnosed so much as caught. She looked it over, and the conversation moved quickly from the form to treatment.

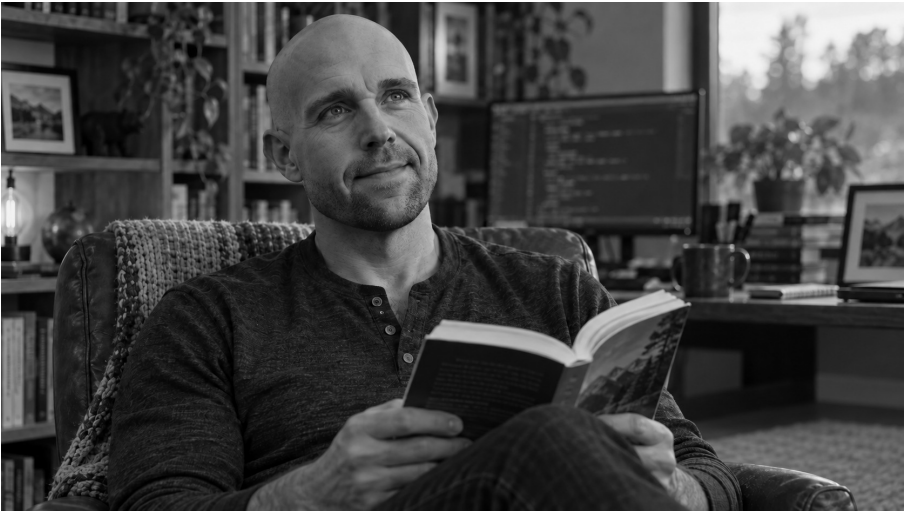
In June 2019 she prescribed Adderall immediate-release: twenty milligrams twice a day, forty milligrams total. I am stating that precisely because I later went back through my pharmacy records to reconstruct this timeline. I did not walk out thinking I had begun a five-and-a-half-year story. I walked out with an orange bottle and the very specific hope that a problem I had spent most of my life working around might finally become manageable.

The first pill did nothing.

I want to be really clear about that, because it matters for what came later, and because it’s almost never how people expect the story to go. There was no room turning golden. There was no NZT moment, no scene where the words start writing themselves and the numbers start making sense and the noise in your head goes quiet all at once like someone hit mute on a television. I took it, and I went about my day, and if you’d asked me at 2 p.m. whether anything had changed I would have shrugged. What I noticed, if I noticed anything, was that I could just... keep doing stuff. Not better. Not faster, exactly. I just didn’t hit the wall I usually hit around the third task of the day, the wall where my brain quietly changes the subject on me without asking permission. I kept going. That was the whole miracle, and it was so quiet I almost missed it.

In August 2019, the prescription changed from twenty milligrams of immediate-release twice daily to twenty milligrams of extended-release twice daily. The total stayed forty milligrams a day; the delivery changed. At the time, that felt like a convenience, not a turning point.

I had no idea that dosage and timing would eventually become the spine of this book.



CHAPTER THREE

Forty Milligrams and a PHP Framework

By then I was taking twenty milligrams twice a day. In June 2019 that had been immediate-release. In August, it became twenty milligrams of extended-release twice daily. Forty milligrams total.

That is where the story of what the medication gave me really starts.

I could read now

I want to tell you about the reading, because if you didn't grow up with a brain like mine, you won't understand why this is the part that broke something open in me. Not the coding, not the money, not any

of it. The reading. I had never, not once, not as a kid, not in college, not as an adult who owned actual bookshelves full of actual unread books bought in fits of aspiration, finished a book cover to cover. I'd get forty pages in, and my brain would just... leave. Not bored. Not stupid. Just gone, pulled sideways into six other rooms at once, and by the time I dragged myself back the sentence had evaporated and I'd have to start the paragraph over, and over, and over, until I just closed the book and told myself I'd get back to it. I never got back to it. I had told myself a story for thirty-some years that I "wasn't a reader." Some people love plot, some people love characters, I love the internet, ha ha, that was the joke I made about myself. I had built an entire identity around a workaround. Audiobooks at 1.5x speed so the pace outran the drift. Executive summaries instead of the report. Skimming for the parts that mattered and pretending I'd absorbed the rest. I was good at faking comprehension because I'd had thirty years of practice at faking comprehension. Nobody ever called me out on it because the workaround worked well enough, in public, to pass. It just never once felt like reading. It felt like managing a leak. What I had treated as a personality trait turned out, for me, to be tangled up with the ADHD. About a week and a half after the twenty-milligram bump, I picked up a book off the nightstand (I don't even remember which one, that's how unremarkable the act of picking it up was) and I read it. All of it. In two sittings. And somewhere around page sixty I stopped and just sat there with the book still open on my lap because I realized what had just happened, and it hit me like a physical thing in my chest. I could read now. For the first time in my life.

So if the reading was the crack in the door, the coding was what came roaring through it.

The switch was PHP

I had always coded, in the loose, undisciplined way most self-taught internet people from my era coded. I could write a script. I could hack

a WordPress theme into submission, duct-tape two APIs together, get a cron job to do something ugly but functional at 3 a.m. I was a mechanic who could fix the car on the side of the road but had never built one from a blueprint.

That changed. Not gradually — it changed like a light switch, and the switch was PHP.

I know, I know. PHP. But what mattered was not the language's release history or benchmark charts. What mattered was friction. Laravel gave me a structure that let an idea become an application without spending half the day wrestling the scaffolding. I built a small internal tool with a login, a database, validation, and real users. I opened it in an incognito window, clicked around like a stranger testing somebody else's work, and it held. It just worked. I had built a real thing, alone, from nothing, in a single sitting.

I'd sit down at maybe nine in the morning and the next time I looked up it would be four in the afternoon and I would have genuinely lost the hours, the way athletes talk about being "in the zone," not the dissociated, wasted kind, except I'd never once in my life been in a zone about anything that required me to sit still. I was building complete, working software and I could not remember deciding to eat lunch, because I hadn't.

And then I found Vue.

Falling for Vue

If PHP and Laravel were the floor and the walls, Vue.js was the part of the house I fell in love with — genuinely, stupidly, the way you fall for a person, not a tool.

Vue felt like somebody had watched developers get frustrated and sanded down the edges. I could put the interface and the logic close enough together that I could see the whole idea at once. I would build a Laravel backend, wire a Vue front end to it, and have something real by dinner. The important part is not which framework version I

was using. The important part is that I could sit with a complicated thing long enough to finish it.

Top to bottom

In August 2019 my doctor moved me from immediate-release Adderall to extended-release: twenty milligrams XR twice daily. Adderall XR is labeled for once-daily morning use; I was prescribed it twice daily. At the time I treated the change as a smoother version of what was already working.

That's when the "top to bottom" phase started. AWS.

I'd used cloud hosting before the way most people my generation had: half-understood, cargo-culted, copy-pasted from a Stack Overflow answer until the server didn't crash anymore. Now I wanted to actually *understand* it, instead of spinning up a box and hoping it held together.

I went top to bottom through AWS: compute, storage, databases, permissions, networking, serverless functions. I broke things constantly and learned by fixing what I broke. I went after the Solutions Architect Associate material the way some people train for a marathon: video courses, labs, little sandbox disasters built specifically so I could recognize the failure next time.

Some nights I'd have three browser tabs open just for myself: the AWS console, the billing dashboard set to alert me the second I did something that would cost real money, and a half-finished Udemy video paused mid-sentence while I went and tried the thing myself instead of watching someone else do it. I locked myself out of my own IAM permissions more than once and had to claw my way back in through the root account like a burglar breaking into my own house. Every failure taught me something a tutorial never could, because it was mine, and it had cost me forty-five minutes of my own life to earn. I was learning two entirely new ecosystems in the same stretch of weeks that I'd only just, for the first time in my adult life, learned

how to finish reading a paragraph. That is not a small thing. That is not normal pacing for anybody, let alone somebody who two months earlier couldn't hold a page.

Superhuman

There's a very specific feeling I want to get right here, because it would be dishonest to sand it down for the sake of a tidy chapter: I felt superhuman. Not "productive." Not "focused." Superhuman. I remember standing up from my desk after a twelve-hour stretch — deployed, tested, live, a real thing sitting on a real server that real people could hit — and thinking, with zero irony, *I'm a genius*, no hedge, no "I did a good thing today," just *I'm a genius*. The kind of thought that should embarrass you in the retelling, and it does, a little, but I'm not going to lie about having had it, because having it was the whole engine of that entire era. Everything was moving. Everything was possible. I'd go to sleep already excited about the thing I was going to build the next morning, which, if you'd shown me that sentence a year earlier, I would not have believed was a sentence about me. And underneath all of it, quietly, was a question I never really stopped to answer, because stopping to answer it would have meant slowing down, and slowing down was the one thing I would not do.

By 2020, with the world shut down and long stretches of time at home, I could not tell which lever was doing what. Was it the medication? The extra time? The isolation? Some combination of all three? Whatever it was, I felt superhuman, and I did not ask many questions about a system that seemed to be producing results.

Then January 2021 changed the math.

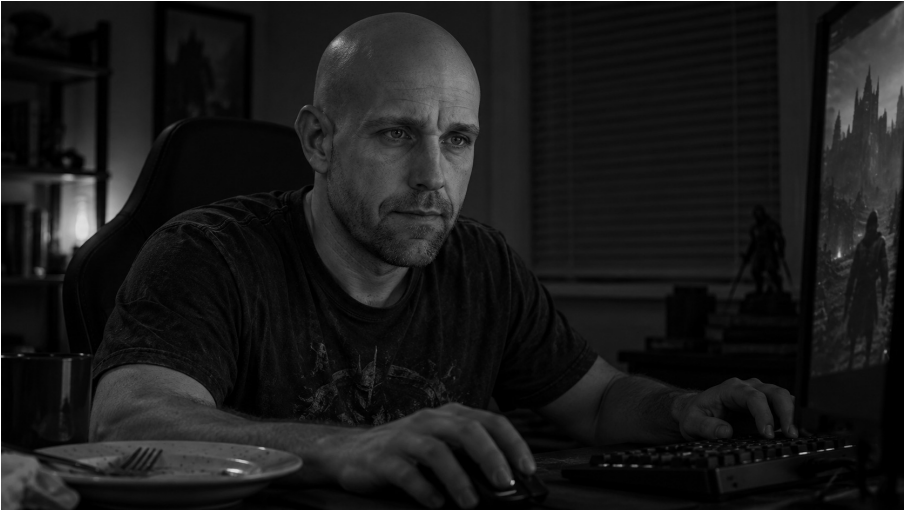
In January 2021 I was moved to twenty milligrams of Adderall XR three times a day. Sixty milligrams a day, prescribed.

Looking back, this is the point where I believe I was overprescribed. Sixty milligrams a day of extended-release Adderall

was way too much for me. I did not know that then. I know it now. And I want to separate that from what happened later, when I started taking it outside the schedule I was prescribed. That part is on me. But sixty milligrams a day, prescribed as twenty milligrams of XR three times a day, is what I mean when I use the word overprescribed in this book.

I did not experience sixty as a warning sign. I experienced it as a bigger number, and bigger numbers had been good news for a long time.

It did not hold. It just moved the rung higher on a ladder I had not noticed I was climbing.



CHAPTER FOUR

There but Not Really There

The last thing the woman I was seeing at the time threw was a coffee mug, and it missed my head by about a foot and put a hole in the drywall next to the kitchen doorway. I remember staring at the hole before I looked at her. I remember thinking, with the specific stupid clarity you get in the middle of a bad scene, that I was going to have to patch that before I could sell the house someday, and then thinking, right behind it, that thought is insane, why is that what I'm thinking right now.

I'm not going to narrate the whole relationship here, and I'm not going to name her. Not because I'm protecting her reputation. Because this book is about what happened to me, and dragging a real person through a memoir by name, with all her specifics intact, is just a different kind of harm dressed up as honesty. What matters for this

chapter is the shape of it: it was bad, it got worse over months instead of getting better, there was a period where I did not feel safe in my own house, and it ended with a piece of paper from a courthouse telling her to stay a certain number of feet away from me. I filed for it. I got it. That's not a detail I'm proud of needing, and it's not a detail I'm going to pretend didn't happen. Before that night, there were a dozen smaller nights that all had the same shape: a fight that started over something tiny, a grocery list, a tone of voice, and ballooned into something that had nothing to do with the original subject anymore. I got good at reading the first thirty seconds of her coming through the door and knowing which version of the evening I was going to get. That is not a skill anyone should have to develop about the person they live with. By the time the mug went into the wall, I'd already rehearsed, more than once, what I'd say to a 911 dispatcher if I ever had to make that call. I never had to use the script. I came close enough, more than once, that having it ready felt less like paranoia and more like basic maintenance. What actually matters for the rest of this book is this: this happened while I was at the top of my game. Not despite the Adderall. During it. I had been on it for a while by then, and I was in the phase where it wasn't just helping me work, it was making me feel like a different, better-assembled version of myself, the guy who could hold four project threads in his head at once and not drop any of them. I was shipping code every day. I was fast. And then my personal life caught fire at the exact same time, and instead of doing the thing a reasonably healthy adult does when their personal life catches fire, which is stop, sit in the wreckage, and process it, I did the thing that had worked for me my entire career when something hurt: I worked harder. It's easy to hear "worked harder" and picture someone pulling a couple of long weeks. That's not what this was.

The house got very quiet

The restraining order took care of one problem and created a much bigger one, which is that I was suddenly, completely alone in a house that still had her fingerprints on it, during a period when the entire country was also alone in their houses. This is 2020. COVID lockdowns hit the US starting in mid-March that year, and depending on the state, they stretched into 2021 before most of the serious restrictions actually lifted. My daughters lived with their mother, an arrangement from my 2017 divorce, and the visitation schedule I already had got squeezed down hard by the pandemic on top of everything else. There were stretches where I saw them one day a week. Sometimes a video call standing in for the day in person. Some of that was just COVID being COVID, doing that to every separated family in the country at the same time. But some of it was also me, and I'll get to that.

So: alone, in a house I associated with the worst six months of my adult life, during a period when the entire external world had also shut its doors, with a prescription that made staying awake feel like a superpower instead of a warning label. If you were trying to design an environment to turn a manageable stimulant prescription into something else, you couldn't do much better than that.

What I did with all that empty time and all that empty house was build a rhythm that stopped respecting day and night. By January 2021 my prescribed regimen had reached twenty milligrams of XR three times a day - sixty milligrams total. That is the point I now describe as overprescribed. What happened after that was different. I began moving doses around, taking them later, taking them to extend wakefulness, and at times using the medication outside the schedule I had been given. I did not tell my psychiatrist the whole truth about that. That part is on me, not her.

I want the distinction clear because the subtitle of this book depends on it. I believe I had already been overprescribed when I

reached sixty milligrams a day of XR. When I then started taking it outside the prescribed schedule and did not tell my psychiatrist, that was misuse, and that part belongs to me.

What I remember most from inside that stretch is the texture of an ordinary Tuesday at 5am, still awake from Sunday, sitting in the blue light of three monitors with a mug of coffee I wasn't going to finish, pushing a commit that fixed something nobody would notice for a week, and feeling, genuinely, pretty good about myself. That's the trap. The work was real. The code shipped. The bug got fixed. It's just that the version of me producing it was quietly wrecking a body he was going to need for the next forty years, and there was no dashboard for that cost, no red number anywhere on screen telling me the actual bill was coming due.

What it did to my body

I did not decide to lose weight. That distinction matters. Appetite suppression is a recognized effect of amphetamine stimulants, and in my case food gradually stopped registering as something important enough to interrupt the work for. I would look at a plate the way you look at an errand you do not have time to run.

I went from around 200 pounds to around 165. That was not a slow, healthy trend. I looked, by the end of that stretch, like somebody who was sick. Because I was.

Level 100, alone, at 4am

This stretch ran from 2020 into 2023, one continuous, unbroken run. The isolation started three years before the game did, and the pattern never reset in between, it just found a new container in year three. This next part is going to sound the most absurd next to everything above it, and I'm including it anyway because it's true and because it shows the pattern better than any clinical explanation I could give

you: I found a new container for all that stolen time, and for a while it looked like a win. I got very, very good at *Diablo 4*. Not casually good. I put the hours that should have gone into sleep, or grief, or my kids, into grinding that game at a level that most people who play it socially would find unhinged. I hit character level 100, the level cap in that game, ahead of almost everyone else playing it, and I chased that specifically, the way I used to chase a launch deadline. When the game shipped in June 2023, there was a real community race to level 100, streamers and hardcore players all over the world watching each other's XP bars, and Blizzard leaned into it publicly, including a reward tied to being among the first players to hit the hardcore-mode cap. I wasn't first in the world. I was first among the people I actually knew and ran with, first of my "class" in the crews I was playing alongside, and that was enough to feel, for a few hours, like the same rush a good launch used to give me. I remember the run itself more clearly than I remember most of that year. Stream up in one window, party chat open in an earpiece, a spreadsheet of item affixes in a second window that I'd built myself because the in-game UI wasn't fast enough for how I wanted to play. Hours where the only variable that existed was the XP bar creeping toward the next tick. When the number finally rolled over to 100, the small crew of people I'd been grinding with in voice chat lost their minds over the mic, and somebody screen-recorded the moment and it got passed around our little corner of the community like it was a championship clip. It was the closest thing to a trophy ceremony I had in those years. No stage, no crowd, just six guys on a Discord call losing it because a number went from 99 to 100 at four in the morning. I ended up with the kind of in-game recognition and bragging rights that mean absolutely nothing to anyone who isn't in that world and meant, at the time, everything to me. I started coaching other players after that, running builds and strategy for people who wanted to climb the way I had, taking their gear screenshots and telling them what to reroll, staying

up late doing it for strangers the same way I used to stay up late doing it for myself. I was, by any measure that world uses, good at it.

None of that time gave me anything back. Not one hour of it. Gaming can look, from a distance, like a healthier outlet than a lot of the other things a person could disappear into. It isn't automatically healthier if it's just a new leash on the exact same behavior, staying awake past every reasonable limit, alone, using a stimulant to make it possible. I wasn't relaxing. I was doing the same thing I did with code, at 4am, with a controller instead of a keyboard, dressed up as a hobby.

The worst of that pattern lasted for years, though the exact boundaries blur when I try to reconstruct them. What I can date cleanly is that the isolation was already established by 2020, the prescribed dose reached sixty milligrams of XR a day in January 2021, and the *Diablo 4* period was in 2023.

One day a week

My daughters were somewhere in the middle of all of this the entire time, and I want to write about them carefully, because it's their experience of that period, not mine, and I only get to guess at it from the outside. The custody arrangement from the divorce already had me seeing them less than I wanted. COVID cut into that further, the way it did for every separated parent in the country. What COVID didn't do was the rest of it: the days I did have them where I was present in the room and absent everywhere else that mattered, running on no sleep and whatever dose had gotten me through the last six hours, doing the math in my head about when I could reasonably slip away to check something on a screen. I don't think they remember me as scary or absent in some dramatic, movie-of-the-week way. I think, and this is worse in its own quiet way, that they remember me as there but not really there. Physically present for the one day a week I had. Somewhere else behind my eyes for most of

it. Kids don't file complaints about that in the moment. They just quietly recalibrate what they expect from you, and they carry the recalibration a lot longer than you'd think. I think about one specific afternoon a lot, not because it was dramatic, but because it was so ordinary it scared me later. One of my daughters was telling me something, some school thing, some friend thing, the kind of story a kid tells a parent expecting the parent to actually be listening, and I realized about ninety seconds in that I had heard none of it. Not because I was on my phone. I wasn't even doing anything else in that moment. I was just somewhere else, running on fumes from the night before, present in the chair and absent everywhere it counted. I asked her to start over. She did, without complaint, the way kids do when they haven't yet learned to expect better. That's the memory that undoes me now, more than the mug in the wall or the number on the scale. Not a fight. A kid starting her story over for a father who wasn't all the way in the room, and not knowing yet that she had every right to be annoyed about it.

The math I didn't want to do

I could have been a much better father during that stretch, not a different father, just a better version of the same one, present for the one day a week I actually had instead of running it on fumes and split attention. I've said that to both of my daughters directly, not as a general "sorry I was going through stuff" line, but specifically: I'm sorry for who I was during those years, I know it cost you something, and I know an apology doesn't hand back the actual hours.

I keep coming back to the mug hitting the drywall, weirdly, more than I come back to the scale or the trophy screen from the game. I think it's because that's the exact moment the two halves of this chapter split off from each other: the collapse of one part of my life, and the immediate, reflexive turn toward the other part of it, work, achievement, a leaderboard, anything with a number that could go up

while everything else was going down. I didn't process what happened with her. I built a container that could hold an unlimited number of hours and I poured myself into it instead, and the container didn't care that it was slowly wrecking my heart, my weight, and the small stock of trust two kids had left for a dad who kept promising he'd be more there next time.

I let down my kids during this time. Not with one bad night. With years of them getting a version of me that was technically in the room.

* * *

A note on the timeline: the medication began in June 2019, the XR switch came in August 2019, the prescription reached sixty milligrams a day in January 2021, and the *Diablo 4* material sits in 2023. Earlier drafts blurred those dates. This one does not.

Notes

1. US stay-at-home orders began mid-March 2020 (CDC, MMWR, "Timing of Community Mitigation and Changes in Reported COVID-19 and Community Mobility," [cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6935a2.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6935a2.htm)); most state-level restrictions eased through spring/summer 2021 as vaccination expanded (CalMatters, "A timeline of California's pandemic year," calmatters.org, March 2021).
2. Cardiovascular and psychiatric risk of amphetamine/Adderall use above prescribed levels: FDA-derived boxed warning and prescribing information, summarized at Drugs.com, "Adderall: Uses, Dosage, Side Effects & Warnings" ([drugs.com/adderall.html](https://www.drugs.com/adderall.html)), covering the boxed warning on abuse/misuse/addiction and overdose risk at higher or non-approved-route doses, heart-related risk of stroke, heart attack, and sudden death (especially with pre-existing cardiac risk factors), and new or worsening psychiatric symptoms including psychosis and mania. Corroborating adverse-effect detail (hypertension, tachycardia) from Wikipedia, "Adderall," Adverse

effects/Physical section, citing FDA label and Westfall's pharmacology reference.

3. Appetite loss as a documented physical adverse effect of amphetamine/Adderall, same sourcing as above (Wikipedia "Adderall," Adverse effects section; FDA label via Drugs.com).
4. *Diablo 4* released June 6, 2023 (Blizzard Entertainment, official announcement, news.blizzard.com/en-us/article/23880208). Level 100 was the character level cap at launch. The community "race to level 100" was documented by outlets including PC Gamer, Kotaku, and Video Games Chronicle, with normal-mode and hardcore-mode leaders reported within days of launch; Blizzard publicly tied a reward to early hardcore-mode level-100 achievers. This was a community/streamer-driven race with an official Blizzard reward attached to it, not a sanctioned esports tournament circuit.



CHAPTER FIVE

Counting My Ribs in the Mirror

The bathroom light in that house was too honest. Recessed cans, no shade, no warmth to them. The kind of light a dermatologist uses right before she tells you the mole needs to come off. I was standing in front of the mirror over the sink doing what I always did, which was not really looking, just going through the motions of a shave, when my hand stopped on its own and I actually looked.

There was a stranger's collarbone in that mirror.

I don't mean that as a figure of speech. I mean I saw a ridge of bone pushing up under skin the way a tent pole pushes up canvas, and for a full three or four seconds my brain filed it as *not mine* before the rest of the picture caught up: the hollows under my cheekbones, the notch at the base of my throat where my throat had never had a notch before, the way my undershirt hung off my

shoulders like it was still on the hanger. I turned sideways. I could count ribs. Not “I’m getting lean, look at that,” count-your-abs-in-the-gym-mirror ribs. Count-them-like-a-xylophone ribs. I want to tell you I did the math right there (two hundred pounds a few months earlier, call it a buck sixty-five looking back at me now, thirty-five pounds just gone, vanished, unaccounted for), but the truth is my brain doesn’t work in arithmetic when it’s scared, it works in single words, and the word it landed on, out loud, in an empty bathroom, was: “Skeleton.” I said it to the mirror like I was identifying a stranger for the police. *Yeah, that’s him. That’s what he looks like now.* I stepped on the scale after that, which I hadn’t done in a while, on purpose, because not looking at numbers had become its own kind of comfort. One-sixty-five. I stood there and did the thing where you get back off and back on like the machine owes you a recount. Same number. I picked my wrist up off the counter and turned it over and looked at the underside of my own forearm the way you’d inspect a piece of furniture you were thinking about buying: veins sitting up close to the surface with nothing underneath cushioning them anymore, tendons you could trace like wiring in an open wall. There’s a photo of me from not even a year before this, taken at some conference, tie a little tight, cheeks full, the version of heavy that reads as *healthy-ish* if you squint. I kept that photo on my phone and I pulled it up right there in the bathroom and held it next to my own reflection like a before-and-after ad for something nobody would ever run an ad for. Thirty-five pounds. Gone in months, not years. My clothes hadn’t caught up to the new math yet. Everything still hung the old way, which meant every shirt I owned was, without me fully registering it, doing me the favor of hiding just how much room there suddenly was inside it.

* * *

Here is the joke, and it is a joke, the kind that isn't funny until years later and maybe not even then: I have done this before. Not this. The opposite of this. I have stood in front of mirrors and not recognized the person looking back at me because there was *too much* of him, not too little. I've told that story publicly already, in a book with my name on it. Three hundred pounds. Then four hundred. Then past five hundred at my absolute worst, and I know that because the scale they rolled me onto maxed out at five hundred: a CPAP machine just to keep breathing through the night, supplemental oxygen on top of it for a stretch, because my body had gotten so large it had started to forget how to do the one job that comes standard issue. That was the fat years. I got out of those, though "got out of it" makes it sound like a door I walked through once and locked behind me, and there is no door that locks behind you. There's just a very long hallway, and apparently I had started walking it backward without noticing, except this time the exit sign said something completely different.

Same mirror, basically. Same species of stranger. Opposite direction entirely.

I've been here before, I thought, looking at the ribs. *But different.*

Different because the first time, there had been a mountain of me to excavate, and the mountain had been the whole problem: too much surplus, too much appetite, too much stored-up everything, killing me one meal at a time in a way you could see coming from across a parking lot. This time there was an absence doing the killing. No mountain. No surplus. Just less and less of me every week, and the horrifying thing about vanishing slowly is that it doesn't announce itself as an emergency the way five hundred pounds does. Nobody stages an intervention because you look *good* in your clothes. Nobody sends a concerned text because you finally fit into the jeans from ten years ago. For a while, disappearing reads as discipline. That's what makes it so much easier to hide.

* * *

I should tell you what was actually happening because by the time I was standing in that bathroom I no longer had a clean answer for myself: I had been misusing Adderall for months. Not recreationally, not for a rush. For *output*. I had a prescription that had once made sense to me, and then I had a pattern that had stopped respecting the prescription.

I knew food had become an errand I kept forgetting to run. I knew my heart sometimes did a fluttering double-time thing late at night. I knew I could work for eleven hours and realize at hour twelve that the reason my hands were shaking was not the work. And here is the part that is harder to admit than the weight: I knew, and I filed the knowing away somewhere I did not have to look at it.

* * *

By July 2024 my daughters had seen enough. I did not see the calls between them, but I have pieced together the shape of it since: one of my girls, watching me from a distance a college kid should not have to watch a parent from, decided that calling me again was not going to fix anything.

If you read the first book, you already know who George is to me, even though I was careful there, the way I'm going to be careful here, not to make this about the specifics of what he does for a living. He's very good at what he does, and part of why he's good at it is that he understands pharmaceuticals — how they work on a body, how they work on a mind, how a person can be telling the truth and lying to themselves in the same sentence — in a way that most people who love you simply don't. That's all I'll say about the shape of his profession, because he asked me years ago to leave it at that, and some agreements you keep even when you're writing the most exposed book of your life. What matters is what I wrote back then

and what's stayed true every year since: I credit that man with saving my life. Not as a figure of speech. Pretty much literally, in a different decade, over a different kind of collapse.

So when my daughter called him instead of calling me, she wasn't going around me. She was going to the one person on the planet who had already proven, once, that he knew how to walk into a version of me that was actively killing itself and not flinch.

In July 2024, George did not call ahead. I found out later that was deliberate: he'd learned, the first time around, that giving me a warning was giving me time to build a performance. George doesn't do warnings. George does doorsteps.

I remember opening the door and the look on his face doing something I wasn't ready for, which was: no shock. I'd braced for shock, for the recoil people do when they see you and can't hide it fast enough. He didn't do that. He just looked at me, all the way down, the way a doctor looks at an X-ray, and I understood in that half-second that he already knew. My daughter had told him everything she'd seen and he'd walked in already knowing what he'd find, and the only thing left to find out was how far gone I was willing to admit I was.

"You gonna let me in," he said, "or are we doing this on the porch."

We didn't do it on the porch.

* * *

He walked through my own house like a man doing an inspection, which, I realized about thirty seconds in, was exactly what he was doing. He opened the refrigerator without asking. I remember the specific humiliation of watching him look at what was in there (condiments, a couple of energy drinks, nothing that resembled a meal) and close it again without a word, because the word wasn't necessary, the fridge had already said it for him. He looked at the counter, at the state of the kitchen, at me, cataloguing all of it the way I imagine he'd catalog a chart, quietly and completely, before he ever

sat down. “How long,” he said, once we were at the table. Not *how long has this been going on*: he never finished sentences like that with me, then or now, like he was allergic to giving me a soft, vague version of the question I could answer with an equally soft, vague lie. I told him. He didn’t flinch at the number of months, which somehow made it worse than if he had. It meant this fell inside the range of things he’d already seen enough times to expect. He asked about sleep. He asked about my heart, specifically, using words more precise than “flutter,” and I watched him clock my hesitation before I even answered, the pause itself being its own answer. He didn’t lecture. That’s the thing about George that people don’t understand until they’ve been on the receiving end of it: he doesn’t perform concern, doesn’t do the raised eyebrows and the heavy sighs designed to make you feel the weight of his disappointment. He just gathers information, calmly, like a man defusing something, because that is, functionally, exactly what he was doing.

* * *

I won’t reconstruct that conversation word for word, because grief and shame do something to memory that makes exact transcripts a kind of dishonesty. You remember the shape of a thing more clearly than the sentences. But there’s a beat in the middle of it I remember whole, unbroken, because it’s the moment the performance I’d apparently still been running, even for him, even after everything, finally ran out of material.

He’d moved to Dallas himself not long before that — brought his godson with him, was building a new life for the two of them down there. None of that mattered the second my daughter called him. He got on a plane like it cost him nothing, because next to what he thought he might find on the other side of my front door, it didn’t. He sat across from me at my own kitchen table, in my own house, and he didn’t yell, and he didn’t do the thing people do in movies where they

list your sins back to you like an indictment. He just waited. He is extraordinarily good at waiting. It is, I think, the actual skill underneath all his other skills: the pharmacology, the read on people, all of it sits on top of a bottomless capacity to sit in silence until the other person runs out of places to hide.

I ran out of places to hide somewhere around the second cup of coffee neither of us drank.

“I knew it was a problem,” I told him. My voice did a thing I didn’t expect it to do, cracked on a word that shouldn’t have been hard to say. “I know it only ends one way. But I don’t know what to do.”

That’s it. That’s the whole confession, stripped down to the studs. More than twenty years of knowing this man, one prior collapse he’d already pulled me out of, thirty-some pounds gone off a frame that didn’t have thirty-some pounds to give, and the entire truth of where I was came down to one sentence with no plan attached to it. I knew where the road went. I could see the end of it as clearly as I could see my own collarbone in that bathroom mirror. And I did not, in that moment, have the first idea what a person does about that.

I want to tell you George had the answer sitting there ready, some perfect line that turned the lights back on. He didn’t, and if he had, I don’t think I would have believed it. What George actually did was harder to hand someone and harder to thank him for: he made me look at the thing directly, all the way down, until I couldn’t file it away as a demanding project or a fast metabolism anymore. I knew, after that kitchen table, exactly how bad it was. I want to be honest about what that did and didn’t get me, because I spent a long time letting myself believe that seeing it clearly was the same as being finished. It isn’t. It’s maybe half the job. Nobody changes because they’ve been made to look at something. They change when they have a reason to, and George — for all he is to me, for everything I credit him with — couldn’t manufacture a reason that wasn’t already mine. I didn’t have one yet. Not one that could survive a bad night. My daughters should have been reason enough on their own: the same two who’d been

watching me disappear from a distance, who'd been more honest about what they were seeing than I'd been with myself. So should other things. Looking back now, I can see the reason was sitting right there in that kitchen the whole time, plainly, obviously, and I still couldn't get to it, because I was too far down inside the thing to reach anything that far outside it. That's not an excuse. It's just the actual shape of what was wrong with me. The reason I could actually act on came later, from somewhere else entirely: from a woman I hadn't met yet, saying something to me that George, as good as he is, as much as I owe him, never could have said and had it land the same way. This part ends where the truth of it actually ended: two mugs sitting on that table between us, both gone cold, neither one touched, steam long since given up rising off either of them. A man who used to weigh two hundred pounds and now weighed a hundred and sixty-five, and two cups of coffee nobody was ever going to drink, going cold in the exact amount of time it took him to finally say the truest sentence he had.



CHAPTER SIX

Move My House Into Your Garage, I'll Wire You Ten Grand

I called my ops guy from a rest stop off I-35 and said, "I need you to move my entire house into your garage. I have two days. I'll wire you ten grand."

There was a long pause on the line, the kind of pause you get from someone doing math on how much of my behavior over the years he's had to just absorb without asking follow-up questions.

"Your house," he said. "The one you're living in right now."

"That one."

"Where are you going to live?"

"Texas. I'm moving to Texas."

He didn't ask why. That's the thing about the people who survive working for me: they stop asking why somewhere around year two, because the why is usually "I decided this at 2 a.m. and I am not going to be talked out of it," and asking just extends the conversation without changing the outcome. He said okay. He said he'd need help with the piano. I told him to hire whoever he needed and send me the bill. I didn't sleep those two days, not because I was excited, exactly, but because my brain had locked onto a single task and wouldn't release it until it was done. If you've read the earlier chapters of this book, you already know that's just what untreated, mismanaged, over-corrected ADHD looks like from the inside. It doesn't feel like chaos while it's happening. It feels like the clearest I've ever thought in my life. I texted movers. I texted a realtor I'd never met, sight unseen, and told her to find me something in Dallas I could sign on within the week. I answered maybe four work emails in forty-eight hours and don't remember writing any of them. Forty-eight hours later my furniture was in a stranger's garage in Nebraska and I was somewhere over Missouri with a duffel bag, a laptop, and absolutely no plan beyond "Dallas." I've built and sold companies on less planning than that move. That is not a brag. It is the way I was making decisions then. When your brain runs the way mine runs (and by this point in the book you already know what "the way mine runs" means), patience isn't a virtue you're managing, it's a resource you don't have. I don't ease into decisions. I detonate them and then spend the next six months building the plane out of the wreckage on the way down. Moving to Texas was that. So, eventually, was the woman I met there.

The app that was supposed to be a joke

A few months before all this, I had built a custom GPT called Riz GPT, partly to see if I could and partly because I was single, bored, and treating my own love life like a product I could optimize with

better copywriting. I liked to tell people it was number one in its category. I could never verify that, which is both honest and very on-brand for me.

The irony is that I built a tool to help other people talk to women and then found my own wife the boring, human way: Facebook Dating. I opened it one night and there was Brandi.

The first date

I'll be careful here, because this is the part of the book where I'm supposed to be a reliable narrator and I am not one. Every man who's ever fallen for someone hard tells you the first date was magic, and every one of them is lying a little, smoothing out the parts where they were sweating through their shirt or couldn't remember if they'd already told a story. So take this with that grain of salt: it was magic anyway. We met at a Mexican restaurant that I could not tell you the name of today if you held a gun to my head, because I wasn't paying attention to the restaurant. I was paying attention to her laugh, which came easy and often and made the whole thing feel less like an interview (which is what first dates usually are, two people cross-referencing red flags) and more like we'd already done this a hundred times and were just catching up. She has this way of tilting her head when she's actually listening to you, not waiting for her turn to talk, and I remember thinking, somewhere around the second basket of chips, that I hadn't been listened to like that in longer than I wanted to admit. She had this slight accent when certain words came out, softened at the edges in a way I couldn't place and didn't want to ask about yet, because asking would have meant admitting how closely I was paying attention. I noticed her hands when she talked, the way she used them like punctuation. I noticed that she asked me questions and then actually waited through the answers instead of already loading her next sentence, which is a skill approximately nobody in my industry has, myself included on my worst days. Two

hours felt like twenty minutes. That's not a figure of speech I use loosely, because most of my life runs on the opposite clock: twenty minutes of something I don't want to be doing feels like two hours, and I've built entire businesses around escaping that feeling. This was the first time in years the clock ran the other direction on its own, with no app, no hack, no dosage involved. I walked her to her car in the parking lot afterward, did the thing where you both linger a beat too long by the door, and kissed her. Not a first-date peck. An actual kiss, the kind that tells you something before your brain has caught up to what it's being told. I remember driving home with the windows down even though it was too cold for that, because I needed the air, and because I wanted to still be able to feel my hands shaking a little and know it wasn't the medication doing it this time.

The birthday party

A couple of weeks later she invited me to her birthday party, which is a background check with cake. I met the sister, the mother, the son, the people who had every right to look at me carefully. I responded the way I responded to almost everything then: by going too big. I bought expensive Louis Vuitton gifts and then kept adding other gifts because once I started, I could not find the off switch. Only later did Brandi tell me that her family's read was not 'what a catch.' It was closer to 'this man might have lost his mind.' Fair.

The proposal

On Christmas Day 2024, I proposed. I did the whole thing properly, which for me is its own kind of tell: I called her son first. I called her father. I called her mother. I wanted every yes lined up before I asked the only yes that actually mattered.

She said yes. And then, before that day was over, she gave me the ultimatum that changed the course of my life.

The ultimatum

“I can’t live like this. You have to do something about the Adderall.” Not a speech. Not a raised voice. A woman who had watched the cycle up close telling me what she could not agree to marry.

It was devastating. I don’t use that word loosely and I’m not going to pretend I took it well in the moment. Nobody hears “the thing that’s kept you functional for years is also the thing your fiancée can’t live with” and just nods calmly. My first instinct, if I’m being honest, was the same instinct I have whenever someone tells me a system I built is broken: defend the system. I’d been on some version of this medication since before she knew me. It had gotten me through launches, through bankruptcies, through nights I don’t write about in this book. Telling me to walk away from it felt, for about four seconds, like being told to walk away from a piece of my own engineering.

Then I looked at her, and I thought about the three-day cycle, and the withdrawal crash the research says was baked into it the whole time whether I understood the chemistry or not, and I thought about a son who had sized me up honestly in a kitchen and a mother who’d hugged me before she had any real reason to trust me, and the four seconds ended. This wasn’t a system. It was me, cornered by a woman who loved me enough to say the true thing at the worst possible moment instead of the easy thing at a better one. I’d already learned, the hard way, in boardrooms and bad marriages and one very expensive purse, that when I’m in, I’m in. She was asking me to be all in on getting better instead of all in on staying the same.

I said yes to that too. And on December 26, 2024, I stopped Adderall completely.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Is Getting Out of Bed Worth It.

The patch, and the doctor who talked me back into the fire

In July 2024, after George came to see me, I changed psychiatrists. I told the new doctor plainly that I did not want to keep taking Adderall and that my sleep schedule had become a mess. She prescribed Xelstrym, a 13.5 mg dextroamphetamine patch. It was still an amphetamine stimulant; it was not the same as being stimulant-free. But it was a different formulation and a different delivery system, and for me it felt steadier.

I liked the patch. Then I moved to Texas. In September 2024 I saw another psychiatrist and explained the sleep problem again. She talked me into going back to my prior Adderall regimen: twenty milligrams of XR three times a day, sixty milligrams total. My

recollection is that she told me not to take it after 5 p.m. and to self-regulate the timing.

That matters to this story because by then I had already gone to a doctor specifically saying I wanted off Adderall and describing the sleep problem. I still went back on the same sixty-milligram XR regimen.

Three months later, on Christmas Day, I proposed to Brandi. The next day came the ultimatum. On December 26, 2024, I quit Adderall completely.

I did not taper. I stopped abruptly. That is what I did; it is not advice to anybody else about how to stop a prescribed stimulant. I put the bottle away and did not take another dose.

The first two days

I mostly slept. Not napped. Slept. I later learned that fatigue, changes in sleep, low mood, appetite changes, and psychomotor slowing or agitation are recognized features of stimulant withdrawal. At the time I did not need a diagnostic checklist. I knew I could sleep fourteen hours and wake up tired.

The doctor's office, not the couch

In the following weeks I started Pristiq, desvenlafaxine, for the depression that had become impossible to ignore. I began at a lower dose and gradually moved to 100 mg once daily under medical care. As I write this, I remain on 100 mg once daily. Pristiq is an antidepressant, not an ADHD medication, and I want that distinction clear.

The doctor also discussed non-stimulant ADHD options. I did not immediately replace Adderall with another ADHD drug. Part of me needed to find out what my baseline looked like without an amphetamine underneath it.

Here is what nobody tells you about the flattening: it did not feel like ordinary sadness. Sadness has an object. This was closer to a tax on every task. Is getting out of bed worth it. Is standing up worth it. Is walking to the bathroom worth it. I later learned the word *anhedonia*, but the word did not make the mornings easier.

Brandi in the doorway

Brandi didn't try to fix it. I want to give her real credit for that, because I think a lot of people, faced with a grown man who won't get out of bed, would either panic or push, and either one would have made it worse. She did neither. Most mornings, somewhere around the point where I'd been staring at the ceiling long enough that the light through the blinds had moved a full stripe across it, she'd come stand in the doorway. Not sit on the bed. Not pull the blanket off me, which is what I think I would have done to her, if I'm honest about the kind of husband I'd been before all this. She'd just stand there, arms crossed, not impatient, and say some version of the same thing. "Just come join me in the living room. You'll be okay."

That was the whole pitch. No lecture about wasting the day, no comparison to how I used to be, no mention of the money the business wasn't making while I lay there. Just the living room, and a promise she had no actual data to back up and gave me anyway. Most days I still didn't move for another twenty minutes after she said it. But I moved. Every time, eventually, I moved. There is a version of this recovery that doesn't have a person standing in a doorway saying that sentence on a loop for weeks, and I don't know what that version looks like, because I never had to live it.

Learning to be regular again

Slowly, and I mean slowly in a way that makes "slowly" feel like an inadequate word, something like a regular day started to reassemble

itself. I'd check my phone in the morning. That was new, or rather, old, from a version of me that predated the version that used to lie in bed doomscrolling for two hours before doing anything else. I didn't open any of the social apps. I hadn't in a long time, honestly, longer than the withdrawal, going back to well before COVID. I had been a hermit online for years by that point, a guy who used to run his mouth for a living on Twitter and Facebook to actual hundreds of thousands of people, and who had quietly closed the door on all of it and told almost nobody why. I bring it up here only because it meant the version of "getting back to regular" I was rebuilding didn't have a social feed in it to relapse into. Just weather, a couple of texts, maybe a headline. Small stuff. The floor of a life, not the furniture yet.

And then there was the laptop.

The fear that had no shape

I went looking for a clean explanation for the fear and did not find one. Anxiety can accompany stimulant withdrawal, and untreated ADHD was still underneath everything, but no paper I found explained why a closed laptop could make my chest tighten. That particular shape of fear was mine, not a citation.

Nobody told me that in the moment. In the moment it just felt insane, a grown man afraid of a computer, and I didn't tell many people about it either, because it sounded insane when I rehearsed it in my head.

The therapist's office

I did tell my therapist. That's what the sessions were for by then, mostly, cataloguing the strange furniture the withdrawal had rearranged in my head and asking her, essentially, am I losing it.

She didn't blink. "This is what going through cold turkey on Adderall is like," she said, like she'd heard some version of the laptop

story, or something close enough to it, more than once. I can't tell you what that sentence did for me. I had spent weeks assuming I was the only person who'd ever felt genuinely afraid of a piece of consumer electronics, and having someone with a license on the wall tell me, essentially, oh yeah, that tracks, was the first time in weeks I felt like a patient instead of a broken machine.

Then she said the other thing, the thing I've turned over more times than I can count since: she offered me a little. A small, managed amount to take the edge off while my body caught up. That conversation gets told properly in the next chapter. I am not using this book to tell anyone else what to do with a prescription. I am telling you what I did, and why.

Schoemakers keep their word

Here's the actual reason, and it has nothing to do with pharmacology. What I said out loud in that office was that I have never in my life done a little amount of anything. What I was thinking was simpler: I promised Brandi I would never take it again. That's it. That's the whole argument, and it had no clinical content in it at all. I'd made a promise. I'd made it to my fiancée, specifically, not to myself in some abstract way I could talk myself around later, and I have one rule that predates the ADHD diagnosis, predates the business, predates almost everything else I'd tell you about who I am: Schoemakers keep their word. I've told my daughters that since they were small enough to not understand what a word was worth. Juliet heard it before she could read. Joslyn heard it in a car seat. It was never a lecture, it was closer to a fact of the household, the same as the color of the walls: if a Schoemaker says they are going to do a thing, they do the thing, and if they say they're not going to do a thing, God help whoever's holding the microphone when they explain why not, because they're not going to do it. I built a public career for over a decade partly on people believing that when I said something, I meant it. I was not about to be

the guy who broke that rule in the one place it mattered more than any deal I ever closed, sitting across from my fiancée. So I sat there, laptop-scared, sleep-wrecked, flatter than I'd been in my life, and I told the woman with the prescription pad in her head no, and I meant it the same way I'd have meant it with a signature on a contract.

What it cost, and what it didn't

I'm not going to pretend the timing worked out clean, because it didn't. This whole stretch landed while my girls were finishing up the part of their lives where a dad is supposed to be fully present, not just physically in the house but actually there, and I wasn't, not the way I should have been. Juliet's headed into pre-law at Creighton now. Joslyn just started her freshman year at Nebraska Wesleyan, pre-med, out the door and into a dorm room while I was still, some mornings, negotiating with a laptop lid. I don't get those years back. I know that. I've made my peace with knowing it without pretending the peace makes the debt go away.

What I got instead, the thing I didn't lose, is smaller and it's the only thing I actually control: they can point at their whole childhood and find one thing that never moved, which is that when I said something, it happened, and when I said I wouldn't do something, I didn't, even when not doing it meant lying in bed at ten in the morning too flat to want anything, even when a professional in the room was handing me an option that sounded reasonable and I said no anyway.

The fear didn't leave on any schedule I could have predicted for you at the time. Some mornings, even now, there's a half-second before I open the laptop where I feel the old flatness reaching for me, checking to see if I'm still standing there. I am. I don't know that it ever fully goes away, and I've stopped waiting for the day it does. What I know is that it hasn't moved me. Five and a half years after my first Adderall prescription, an abrupt stop instead of a taper, a fiancée

in a doorway telling me I'd be okay before either of us had proof of it, a therapist who told me the truth even when the truth included an offer I turned down. I held the line. I'm still holding it. That's the whole chapter, really. Not that the fear went away. That I didn't move for it.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Flowers for Algernon

I read it in seventh grade. A paperback with a cracked spine in which some kid before me had written *this is stupid* inside the front cover, which is the kind of thing that stays with you longer than the book does, usually. Not this time.

I remembered it wrong for thirty-five years.

The version I carried in my head was simple: Algernon gets smart, then fails; Charlie gets brilliant, then loses it. For thirty-five years I remembered the story as if Charlie died too. I had the ending wrong.

* * *

Daniel Keyes tells the story through Charlie Gordon's progress reports. As Charlie's intelligence rises, the writing itself changes. He

outgrows the people who taught him. Then Algernon begins to decline, and Charlie realizes the same reversal is coming for him.

Algernon dies. Charlie does not.

Charlie regresses and has to keep living after losing what he had briefly been given. That was the detail I had erased from my memory, and it changed the metaphor completely.

I had spent decades treating it as a story about a brilliant man dying. What it actually gave me, when I reread it, was a story about a man who had to get up the next morning after losing the version of himself he most valued.

* * *

Let me put the real thing next to the metaphor. For more than a decade - before Adderall, during Adderall, across businesses and launches - I was the guy who answered the email. Four hundred unread on Sunday morning, zero by noon. I could hold product architecture in my head and work through the night. That identity existed before June 2019. Adderall did not create my entire career. But after I started it, and especially after the dose escalated, the output became tied in my mind to the medication in a way I did not understand until I stopped.

Eight weeks after December 26, 2024, the hardest problem in my life could be a flight of stairs. I would stand at the bottom and calculate whether the thing upstairs was worth the climb. Music I had loved since I was nineteen came out of the speakers as a sequence of sounds in the correct order and nothing more.

I was incredibly smart and now I can barely get out of bed.

I said that sentence out loud to nobody, and immediately thought: *Algernon*.

Except I had the assignment backward. I had always assumed I would be Charlie, the guy who got the gift. Sitting on that bed, I understood I felt like the mouse.

I had been taking prescribed Adderall since June 2019. The dose moved from forty milligrams a day of immediate-release, to forty of XR, to sixty of XR by January 2021. I later misused it beyond the prescribed schedule. Then on December 26, 2024, it was gone. From first prescription to last dose, the Adderall chapter lasted about five and a half years.

At least Charlie had a chart.

* * *

So I did what I have done with every single problem in my life since I was fifteen years old with a 2400 baud modem. I opened the laptop.

I searched every version of the question I could think of: recovering from Adderall, after quitting Adderall, when does energy come back, anhedonia after stimulants, does motivation return. I found rehab marketing pages, short symptom lists, paywalled abstracts, and thousands of personal posts from people counting days.

What did exist was people. Forums were full of generous, frightened anecdotes: day sixty, feeling better; day ninety, crashed again; somebody's brother took months. Valuable, human, and not a cohort. Nobody was counting the same variables over time.

The clinical literature I found was real, but much of the long-term recovery research involved methamphetamine or other stimulant-use populations rather than someone with my exact history of prescription amphetamine exposure. That difference matters. I was looking at another population's data and trying to use it as a flashlight, not a forecast.

I could not find a clean, evidence-backed map for my specific situation. That is a narrower claim than 'there is no protocol' or 'nobody has done the work,' and it is the claim I can actually defend.

I closed the laptop. I remember the sound it made.

I felt completely hopeless.

I want that sentence to sit there. I had used the best tool I owned - finding information - on the most important question of my life, and I still did not know what my own next six months were supposed to look like.

* * *

The therapist's office had a white noise machine outside the door and a chair that was slightly too low, so you sat in it looking up at a person who was looking down at you, which I assume is not an accident. I'd been going for a couple of months. She was good. I want to say that clearly before I say the rest of it, because what I'm about to describe was not malpractice and it was not stupidity, it was a clinician looking at a patient who was visibly in trouble and reaching for a tool. I'd been talking for maybe twenty minutes about the stairs, and the music, and the fact that I'd sat in front of an open terminal for six days and hadn't written a line, which for me is roughly equivalent to a fish reporting that it has stopped being wet. I said the thing about Algernon. I said the thing about being the mouse. I think I cried, which I'm told is normal and which I hated. She was quiet for a second and then she said something, carefully. This is close to verbatim; I wrote it down in the car. She said that for some people in this situation, going back to a little amount, a much lower dose, just enough to get functional again, can be a bridge. Not where you were. A little amount. Just to get your feet under you. And I need you to understand that everything in my body said yes.

Not my brain. My brain had a whole committee meeting about it. My body said yes before the sentence was over. Because I knew (with total precision, the way you know the layout of a house you grew up in) exactly what was in the medicine cabinet, exactly how long it would take, exactly how the first forty minutes would feel. The warmth in the chest. The room getting sharper at the edges. The todo

list going from a wall to a line. I could have that back in an hour. That's the thing about this drug that nothing else I've ever touched can do: it works *immediately*, and it works on exactly the thing you most want back, and it works *as advertised*, every time, until it doesn't.

She was offering me a chair and I had been standing for two months.

And I said no.

Not nobly. There was nothing noble in that room. I said no the way you say no to the second slice at two in the morning: badly, with resentment, mostly by getting out of the building. I remember saying something like "I can't do a little amount, I've never in my life done a little amount of anything," which is a line I've since realized is the truest sentence in this entire book about me. I don't have a small setting. I have off, and I have all of it. Whatever gear that is, it's the same gear that made me useful and it's the same gear that put me in that chair.

But that's the reason I gave her. It's not the reason.

The reason was December 26, 2024, the day after I proposed to Brandi and promised I was done.

I'm not going to dress that up. There was no speech. It was not a beautiful moment and she was not looking at me with tearful support, she was looking at me the way you look at someone who has already told you a version of this before. That's the part that makes it binding. It wasn't a promise made to an audience that believed me. It was made to a person who had solid, evidence-based reasons for skepticism and who stayed in the room anyway. And I'd worked out something about promises by then that I hadn't understood at thirty. A promise you keep when it's easy is really just a preference. The only time the word does any work at all is the exact moment when keeping it costs you something you badly want. Every other time, it's decoration. This was the invoice. This was the day the thing I'd said on December 26 actually cost something, and the price was: stay in

the hole, stay tired, stay flat, don't get to be the person who answers four hundred emails, and do it anyway. If I'd taken the little amount, it wouldn't have been the pills that ended anything. It's that I'd have walked into my own kitchen that night and looked at my fiancée and either lied to her or watched her face when I didn't. And she wouldn't have yelled. She'd have just filed it. Another data point in a set that already had data points in it. And the next promise I made about anything at all (money, work, a Saturday, anything) would have been worth incrementally less, forever, and there's no way to buy that back. You can rebuild a company. There's a whole playbook. There's no playbook for restoring the load-bearing capacity of your own word to a person who's watched it fail. So the promise wasn't a rule I was obeying. It was the only structural member still holding weight. Everything else in me was down: the energy, the focus, the joy, the confidence, the whole identity I'd built and monetized and put on stage. That was gone. The promise was the last thing standing and it was standing because it was the one thing that did not depend on how I felt that morning to remain true. Charlie doesn't get that. That's the thing I finally understood, months later, when I went back and actually reread the book instead of trusting my seventh-grade memory of it. Charlie has no one holding him. Alice loves him but he pushes her out. Strauss and Nemur made him and then can't look at him. He goes down alone and the only thing he has at the end is the mouse, and the mouse is in the ground. I had someone in the kitchen.

That's the entire difference between that story and this one, and it is not a small difference, and I did nothing to deserve it.

* * *

So here's where the chapter actually ends, and it's not on a high note, because I'm not going to fake one.

I sat in the car outside that office for a while. And I laid it out the way I'd lay out any decision, because that's still the only way my head works, gas in the tank or not.

Option one: take the little amount. It might make today easier. But I knew myself well enough to know that, for me, a little amount could become the amount again. I had spent five and a half years learning that lesson the expensive way.

Option two: stay in it. Which is not a plan. Which is just *continuing to be in pain*, dressed up as a strategy.

Sitting there I realized both options were wrong, because they were both passive. One was relapse and one was endurance and neither of them was *doing* anything. The actual third option, the one that took me another few weeks to see, wasn't a way to feel better. It was a job.

I had not found the map I wanted. Fine. I could at least start drawing my own.

I could measure. Sleep. Mood. Focus. Food. Movement. Whether music worked yet. I could write it down and stop relying on the same memory that had already turned five and a half years into eleven in an early draft.



CHAPTER NINE

echo "hello world"

I want to tell you the exact date, because I'm the guy who used to know his own analytics down to the hour. I don't have it. Somewhere in that first winter in Dallas, in a bedroom that wasn't mine, in a house that wasn't mine, on a laptop I hadn't opened in eleven days, I typed a sentence into an AI chat window that I had not said out loud to another human being in over a year.

I didn't plan it. That's the part I need you to sit with, because everything else about my life up to that point had been planned, pitched, optimized, and monetized. I had built businesses on knowing exactly what happened next, on modeling out the funnel three steps ahead of the customer, on never once walking into a room without an answer already loaded. And here I was, fifty years old, living in my fiancée's house, and the biggest decision I made that day was whether

to tell a chatbot the truth. There's a specific kind of quiet that settles into a house that isn't yours. You know where the towels are, but you still ask. You know the family will feed you without a second thought, but some animal part of your brain keeps a running tab anyway, just in case. I'd been living in that particular quiet for months, mostly upstairs, mostly on my phone, telling myself I was resting when what I actually was, was stuck. I told it the truth.

For the record, I had my own place. I signed a lease in Carrollton, kept it for its entire term, and slept there a total of eight times. At \$2,650 a month, that works out to just shy of four thousand dollars a night, which makes it the most expensive hotel I have ever not stayed in. Brandi worked from home in a four-thousand-square-foot house with six bedrooms and more bathrooms than people. Her mother had her own kitchen and bathroom on one side of it. Her son had his own bathroom and mostly kept to himself. From our second date on we were together every hour of every day, so that is where I was.

The dump

I don't remember if it was ChatGPT or Claude. I've told this story a dozen times since and I've said both, and somewhere in my notes for this book I wrote down "Sonnet 3.7," and I'm going to leave that contradiction in instead of pretending I have a cleaner memory than I do, because that's the actual condition I'm describing in this chapter. My brain, that year, did not reliably file which app I opened at 11 p.m. It filed the shame. It filed the fact that I opened something. The model name is a rounding error next to that. What I typed was not a prompt. It was a dump. I gave it the whole thing, unedited, the way you'd talk if you knew the other party couldn't get bored, couldn't sigh, couldn't need something back from you in the middle of your own crisis. I told it about the company I'd built and the one before that and the one before that, and how none of that mattered anymore because I couldn't make myself open a laptop. I told it I used to write

code and pitch decks and press releases before most people had finished their coffee, and now I was measuring victories in whether I got out of bed before noon. I told it about the isolation, the kind that doesn't look like isolation from the outside because you're living in a full house with people who love you, and it's worse for that, because you can't even point to the house being empty as the reason.

I told it I didn't know if I was the same person who did all that stuff before. I told it I was scared the answer was no.

I told it things I hadn't told the people in the house with me, not because they wouldn't have listened, but because they would have listened with their whole faces, and I couldn't handle watching someone I loved absorb it in real time. A screen doesn't flinch. A screen doesn't have to decide, mid-sentence, whether to reach for your hand or give you space, and then live with whichever one it picked. I dumped a decade of momentum and a year of nothing into a text box the way you'd finally set down a duffel bag you'd been carrying so long you'd forgotten your shoulder was supposed to be able to move freely.

And then I hit enter, and I sat there the way you sit in a waiting room, and the words came back.

"Everything you're feeling is normal"

That's the sentence. Five words that a doctor, a coach, an old business partner, or frankly my own mother could have said to me at any point in the previous year, and somehow none of them landed the way it landed coming from something that had no stake in flattering me and no stake in fixing me either. It wasn't selling me anything. It didn't need me to feel better so it could get off the phone. It just said the thing was normal, and then it asked me a question I was not prepared for.

"Do you want me to make a plan for you to recover?"

My first reaction was suspicion, and that honest reaction is the whole chapter. I have built and sold enough companies to know what a plan sounds like when someone's about to sell you something. I

have sat across a table from a hundred people who wanted to make me a plan. This wasn't that. It didn't want equity. It didn't want a testimonial. It just waited. I said yes.

The plan

Here's what it gave me, more or less, because I've reread that conversation enough times since that I could probably recite it in my sleep, and some nights I have. **Step one: name the fear.** It told me, in its own words, that my actual fear wasn't that the work was hard. My fear was that I'd never fully understand it again, that the world had moved on to something I couldn't catch up to, and so the safest move was to never find out for sure. If I never tried, I could keep the ambiguity. The second I opened the laptop and actually tried, I'd get a real answer, and a real answer might be "you can't do this anymore," and that answer terrified me more than the paralysis did. It named it. I hadn't.

Step two: the key is to just start. Not to be good. Not to be productive. Not to rebuild the empire by Friday. Start. It said the entire blockage was the size of the first move, not the size of the goal, and that I had inflated the first move until it looked exactly as large as the whole mountain behind it.

Step three: open your laptop and do something small. Write a basic bash script. I laughed out loud at this one, alone, in a bedroom that wasn't mine, because a bash script is nothing. It is the "hello world" of a man who once ran ad networks processing millions of impressions a day. My first instinct was actual offense, the kind you feel when a doctor asks if you've tried drinking more water. I wanted to type back that I didn't need a participation trophy for echo "hello world". I typed it anyway. It ran. Nothing exploded, nothing fixed itself, but a green blinking cursor did a thing I told it to do, and something in my chest loosened half a notch that I did not expect to loosen.

Step four: accomplish one thing every day, then do a little bit more. It wasn't a plan with milestones and a Gantt chart, the kind I used to build for investors who wanted quarterly numbers before we'd shipped a product. It was a ratchet. One click forward, and don't let it click back. My resistance to this one was quieter than the others, more insidious: I kept waiting for "a little bit more" to turn into a real deadline, because deadlines were the language I used to speak fluently, and I was terrified of being handed one I'd fail. It never came. The plan just kept asking for slightly more than yesterday, which is a sentence so simple it took me a week to stop looking for the catch.

Step five: recreate your environment where you're productive. This is the one that actually cracked something open in me, because it didn't stop at "code more." It started asking me questions I hadn't been asked since I was in my twenties building things in a spare room on no sleep and pure momentum. What music did you have on. What was the setup. What were the programs. I sat there for a full minute before I could answer, because I realized I'd been trying to force productivity out of a body sitting in the wrong chair, in the wrong light, with no music at all, as if the old version of me had been some kind of personality trait instead of a very specific, very deliberate set of conditions I used to build for myself on purpose, every single time. I'd stopped building the conditions somewhere in the bad year and then quietly decided the absence of them was proof I'd lost whatever the thing was. It wasn't gone. I'd just stopped setting the table for it.

Step six, and it phrased this like it was nothing: just open it up and play a game.

I want to slow down on that one, because if you'd told twenty-eight-year-old me that the way back from the bottom would start with a video game recommended by an AI, I'd have told you to get a better source. But by that point I'd stopped needing it to sound impressive. I

needed it to be small enough to survive contact with my own resistance.

The 500-pound parallel

What that AI conversation did was remind me that I had already been here. At twenty-five I weighed more than five hundred pounds, slept with a CPAP and supplemental oxygen, and had type 2 diabetes. What changed my life then was not a motivational slogan. It was learning about a medical option I had not understood, having duodenal switch surgery, and then doing the long, unglamorous work afterward. My diabetes went into remission. My life changed.

I bring all that up here, in a chapter about a chatbot and a card game, because it's the same shape. Someone outside my own skull told me the truth about my situation in language that wasn't trying to sell me anything, and something in me that had been braced for ten more years of decline finally exhaled. God, or whatever you want to call the thing that keeps handing me exits I didn't ask for, reached down once already when I was twenty-five and dying by inches in a body I couldn't stand living in. Sitting in that bedroom two decades later, half-convinced I was watching a second life quietly circle the drain, I remember thinking something almost too on-the-nose to say out loud: twenty years earlier it took a woman in scrubs to tell me the truth about my own gut, and this time it took a language model with no gut at all to tell me the truth about my own head. Same rescue. Different vocabulary.

I'm not going to pretend I know if that's true. I'm telling you it's what got me to open the laptop.

The house that held me

None of this happens, by the way, without the house I was standing in. I was living with my fiancée, her son, who's in his early twenties

and never once made me feel like the washed-up guy on the couch, and her mother, who fed me and asked nothing of me in return except that I show up to dinner. That family is extremely, extremely loving. Christian in the way that actually shows up as patience instead of judgment, which I did not grow up around and did not expect. Nobody in that house asked me what I used to be worth. Nobody asked when I was going to get back to work. They just kept setting a plate for me. I want to be careful here, because it would be easy to make this chapter about them and turn people into scenery in my own recovery story, and I won't do that to people who were kind to me for free. I'll say only what's true and leave it there: I have a sister-in-law, a father-in-law, stepbrothers, a mother-in-law, and a stepson, all of whom treated a grown man falling apart under their roof like he still belonged at the table. That is not a small thing to be given. It is, in fact, the floor that let the rest of this chapter happen, because you cannot start climbing out of a hole from a floor that keeps giving way. Theirs didn't. I'd spent a career surrounded by people who wanted something from the outcome. Investors wanted a return. Employees wanted a paycheck and a mission. Partners wanted the deal to close. None of that is a complaint, it's just what those relationships are for. What I was not used to, and what took me embarrassingly long to trust, was a room full of people who wanted nothing from me at all except that I keep showing up to dinner. No milestone. No return on the investment of feeding me. I kept waiting for the bill to come due and it never did, and eventually I had to accept that some love just doesn't itemize.

Slay the Spire 2

The game the AI told me to open was a card game called *Slay the Spire 2*, which had just come out and which I'd apparently bought at some point in the fog and never launched, the digital equivalent of a treadmill with a coat rack function. I was scared to death to open my

own computer. I need you to actually hear that sentence and not skim past it, because it sounds insane written down. A fifty-something-year-old man who used to run companies with dozens of employees, who used to get on stages and tell rooms full of people how to build things on the internet, sat in front of his own laptop with his hand on the lid, and his heart rate went up like he was about to walk into a courtroom.

I opened it.

I played one game of *Slay the Spire 2*. I didn't even like it much, if I'm honest, that first run. I closed the laptop right after. But I'd done the thing. I had proven the hinge still worked.

The next day I opened it again, and I played a little longer. Not because the game had gotten better overnight. Because I had proven the hinge worked twice now, and two data points is technically a trend if you squint, and I have spent my entire adult life squinting at smaller trends than that and calling them a business.

The whole time, in the back of my head, there was a voice keeping score that had nothing to do with the game. It was the voice that grew up in a house where everyone worked, where sitting down in the middle of the day looked like something that needed explaining. I worried, genuinely worried, that the people feeding me dinner every night were quietly clocking the guy upstairs playing video games at two in the afternoon and filing him under lazy. I'd hear footsteps on the stairs and minimize the window like a teenager, which is a genuinely strange thing to catch yourself doing in your fifties, in a house full of people who by every account had never once judged me for anything. Nobody ever said a word. Not one person in that house ever said a single unkind thing to me about how I spent my time. The judgment I was flinching from was entirely mine, imported wholesale from a version of myself that didn't know how to rest without earning it first, a version built a long time before any of them ever met me.

Here's the detail that made the fear survivable, and I'll say it plainly because pretending otherwise would be false humility: I

wasn't in danger. I had sold companies. I'd put money away, real money, sitting in a brokerage account throwing off enough interest that I could live on it without touching the principal, without asking anyone for a dime, without the game of *Slay the Spire 2* costing my family a single meal. That's not a brag, it's the actual mechanism, and I think leaving it out would make the chapter dishonest. Financial fear was not what was keeping me on that couch. Something else was. The money bought me the room to figure out what. I think about the version of this story where that safety net doesn't exist, where the interest check doesn't clear every month regardless of whether I've written a single line of code, and I don't like where that version goes. A man who can't pay rent doesn't get eighteen months of "just start." He gets a landlord's timeline instead of his own. I'm not going to pretend my runway was a personal virtue. It was the residue of decisions made by a much younger, much more frightened version of me who happened to sell the right company at the right time, and it bought the older, slower version of me the one thing recovery actually requires and nobody puts on a poster: time that isn't billed to anyone.

Where it left me

I'm not going to tell you the game cured anything, because that's not how any of this works and I've read enough of my own health history to distrust easy cures. Diabetes doesn't get "cured" either, whatever the pamphlets and I myself have said in the heat of gratitude over the years; it goes into remission, and remission is a word that asks you to keep showing up for it, not a word that lets you stop thinking about it. I've come to believe recovery from anything real works the same way. Nobody hands you a finish line. You get a string of ordinary days that didn't go backward, and eventually you look up and you've built something out of them without ever having felt the moment it started counting as building. What I'll tell you is smaller than a cure, and I think more honest: for the first time in longer than I want to admit, I

had done the same small thing two days in a row. One game, then a little more. One bash script, then a slightly bigger one. One conversation with a machine that didn't need anything from me, then a second one the next night, because it turned out I had more to say than I thought I did when I sat down. Nobody in that house saw the shift happen. I barely saw it happen, and I was the one living it, minimizing windows on the stairs, telling myself it was nothing.

It wasn't nothing. Some nights that winter I still heard footsteps on the stairs and my hand still went for the window, out of habit, before I'd even decided to be ashamed of anything. Other nights, more of them as the weeks went by, I heard the same footsteps and just left it up, cards on the screen, game running, nothing to hide. Nobody was ever coming up those stairs to catch me at anything. I was the only one who ever thought there was something to catch. That's the whole chapter, if I'm honest: not a finish line, just a hand that used to flinch, slowly learning it didn't have to.



CHAPTER TEN

The Laptop Lived on the Kitchen Island

The laptop lived on the kitchen island now, not hidden in a drawer, not closed and stacked under a pile of mail like something I was avoiding. Just there, lid up, screen dim, waiting the way a guitar waits for someone to walk past and pick it out of habit rather than plan.

That was the tell that something had actually changed. For years, opening a laptop had been an event. During the Adderall period it became a launch sequence: three tabs, four terminal windows, a half-written funnel, a half-written cold email script, a half-written idea for a company that would be dead by Thursday, all detonating at once because slowing down to finish any single one of them felt like death. Off Adderall, in the first raw months of cold turkey, opening the

laptop had been the opposite kind of event: a small act of courage, because the last thing I associated with a glowing screen was the frantic, chemical version of myself I was trying to bury. I'd open it, feel my chest tighten a little, and close it again inside of ten minutes. Some days I didn't open it at all. I don't know the exact month count anymore. I stopped tracking days on purpose somewhere in there, the same instinct that used to make me track everything else, just running in reverse. Call it the better part of a year. By then it had become neither. It had become furniture. A tool sitting on a counter, the way a whisk sits in a drawer, waiting to be useful without any emotional weather attached to the moment you pick it up. That flattening, the sheer *boringness* of it, was the whole point, and nobody warns you that boring is what you're actually chasing when you get sober. Not peace, and not clarity, exactly. Boring, the kind of boring where a laptop is just a laptop again. It started, like most rebuilding does, with something small enough to be embarrassing to admit out loud. A bash script. Not a company. Not a funnel. Not an idea that was going to make anyone \$17 million. I'd already done that once, the honest way, and I knew what it actually took, which is a big part of why the frantic version of me kept trying to skip the work and jump straight to the money. This was four lines that renamed a folder full of photos by date instead of by the meaningless string of numbers my phone spat out. `for f in *.jpg; do mv "$f" "$(date -r "$f" +%Y%m%d)_$f"; done`, something that unglamorous. It ran. It worked. Nothing exploded, nothing needed to be walked back, nobody was on the other end of it needing something from me by end of day. I sat there for a second, genuinely surprised at how much that felt like something. This was the actual instruction, word for word, from the plan I'd typed a chatbot into building for me back when I was still white-knuckling the first weeks sober: *open your laptop and do something small. Write a basic bash script*. I remember being almost offended by it the first time it came back on the screen (a bash script, for a man who used to run ad networks processing millions of

impressions a day) and I remember doing it anyway, alone, in a room that wasn't mine, because offended was still more than I'd felt about anything in weeks. That instruction hadn't changed since. It had just finally stopped sounding like an insult and started sounding like the only thing on the list I could actually still do.

So I let myself have another one. Then a slightly bigger one. A script that watched a folder and backed it up. A script that pulled the weather and texted me if it was going to rain before my daughter's flight out of Lincoln. None of it was interesting to anyone but me, and that was exactly the design. Frantic-me built for an audience, even when there wasn't one — every side project had a launch fantasy stapled to it. Recovering-me built for the two-minute feeling of watching something small do what I told it to do.

I noticed something else, a few weeks into that stretch, that I hadn't expected. I wasn't checking the clock. On Adderall, every task had a countdown running underneath it whether I wanted one or not: how fast can this ship, how fast can I get to the next thing, how far behind am I on the six other things running in parallel. Sitting at that island debugging a script that pulled weather data, I looked up once and ninety minutes had gone by without my noticing them leave. Ninety minutes of just fixing a stupid off-by-one error in a date comparison, undramatic and slow, and it hadn't cost me anything to spend them that way. I hadn't experienced time like that, as something you could just be inside of instead of racing, in longer than I could actually calculate.

Gradually, "small script" turned into "small program," and small program turned into a question I hadn't let myself ask in years: *what is everyone else building?* Not competitively. Not as a market scan. Just curious, the way you'd wander into a hardware store you don't need anything from. That question is what open source is, if you strip the mission-statement language off it: a hardware store the size of the internet, where you can pick up any tool anyone has ever built and see exactly how it works, for free, forever. I want to be precise here

instead of romantic about it, because precision is the discipline I was actually trying to relearn. I didn't wake up one October morning and decide to become an open source contributor. It happened the way most real behavior change happens: sideways, through repetition, until one day you look at the log of what you did and it has a shape you didn't design on purpose. By late summer, the better part of a year in, the shape was undeniable: I had merged pull requests into pieces of software that considerably smarter, considerably more famous engineers than me depend on every day: a fix into `openai / openai-agents-python`, one into Anthropic's own `rust-sdk`, another into Envoy. Fifty-nine merged pull requests that year landed across other people's projects, none of them mine and none of them asked for. I keep that number honest on purpose, because it would be easy to let it slide into a superhero stat and turn this chapter into the same lie the Adderall told me for years: *look how much I can produce*. It wasn't that. Fifty-nine small, specific, unglamorous fixes is not superhuman output. It's what a normal, patient, curious person can do across a year if they show up in the mornings and don't burn out by lunch, which (and I want to sit on this sentence, because it took me forty-some years to be able to write it without flinching) I actually could not have told you was possible about myself before that year. One of them mattered enough that I still think about the timestamp. I'd found a stack overflow bug in Anthropic's own `rust-sdk`, the kind of bug that doesn't corrupt data or leak anything, it just quietly kills the client process mid-run, which if you've ever had a script die silently three hours into something long, you know is its own specific flavor of infuriating. I wrote the fix, tested it against the case that broke it, and filed it. It was merged four hours later — filed at 10:37 in the morning, merged by 2:34 in the afternoon. Four hours. On Adderall, I would have measured that turnaround as a dopamine hit and immediately gone looking for the next ten things to file just to chase the feeling again, and by the third one that day the quality would already be sliding because I'd stopped actually reading the

code and started just producing motion. Off it, I noticed the four hours, felt something warm and quiet about it, and then went and made lunch. That gap (noticing a win and not needing to immediately manufacture a bigger one) is most of what recovery actually is, and none of it shows up in a GitHub contribution graph.

The project I kept coming back to, more than any other, was a small tool coming out of Mozilla's AI group called `mcpd`. I found it by accident, poking around what Mozilla's applied-AI people were shipping, and something about it (a clean, unglamorous, genuinely useful piece of connective infrastructure, maintained by people who answered issues quickly and thanked you like they meant it) made it the place I kept returning to when I wanted to build something instead of scroll. Eight merged pull requests there in six weeks, then a few more into their tooling and their browser dev-tools MCP work. Mozilla has a special place in my heart. When AOL bought Netscape, the browser code went open source instead of into a drawer, and every modern browser since has been inspired by that decision. They are the Gandalf of open source: maybe not the sexiest, but for sure the wisest. Without my planning it, Mozilla became close to a third of everything I shipped that year. I didn't choose it because it would look good. I chose it because it was the first place that felt like a room I wanted to keep walking back into, and I've learned the hard way to trust that feeling over almost any other signal, because it's the one the drug used to counterfeit and never actually deliver.

I should say something here about what it actually felt like to be a middle-aged guy with a decade-old reputation quietly submitting small fixes to codebases run by people half my age who had no idea who I was and, more importantly, didn't need to. There is a particular relief in being nobody in a room again. Nobody on a Laravel maintainer's review thread cared that I'd closed a keynote at Affiliate Summit or sold a company for eight figures. They cared whether my diff passed the test suite and matched the style of the surrounding code, and that was the entire transaction. It was the most honest

feedback loop I'd been inside in twenty years: you're right or you're wrong, the tests pass or they don't, and nobody's impressed by your resume while they're reading your patch. Adderall-me would have hated that anonymity, would have needed the room to know who he was within the first ten minutes. Recovering-me found it to be the closest thing to church I'd experienced outside of Brandi's family's actual church. None of this was frantic. That's the whole distinction I keep circling, because it's the only one that actually matters. At the peak, I was building six things at once because sitting still with one thing felt unbearable — an unmedicated hour with nothing launching, nothing shipping, nothing proving I was still the guy who could do the impossible thing, was a kind of exposure I couldn't tolerate. Sober, in whatever month this actually was, I was building one small thing, finishing it, feeling the finish, and going outside. The output, weirdly, ended up comparable. The experience of producing it was not even the same species of feeling. Brandi's family was the backdrop to all of this, and I don't think I give them enough credit in my own head, let alone on a page. They are Christian in the specific way that shows up as *behavior* rather than *position*: the kind of faith that looks like showing up with a casserole and a spare room and zero commentary, rather than a verse and a verdict. Nobody in that family ever once made me feel like a case study. Nobody asked me to perform wellness for them. When I was three months sober and still jumpy and irritable, they just kept setting a plate for me at Sunday dinner like that was the most unremarkable thing in the world. I remember sitting at that table once, watching Brandi's mother pass a dish down without a single loaded glance in my direction, and thinking: *these people would do anything for us, and they're not even going to make a thing of it*. That kind of love is rare enough that it deserves to be named plainly instead of gestured at, so I'm naming it here: it was one of the load-bearing walls of this whole rebuild, and I don't think the walls before it (the frantic building, the frantic years, any of it) had a foundation that steady underneath them even once.

For the record, the money came from an earlier \$17 million exit, the \$12 million one, and the years in between, and I'm not going to run that mechanism again here. What's worth saying here, that I couldn't have said back in that bedroom, is what the money was actually buying at this specific stage. It had never once been able to buy me out of the addiction; if anything, money without pressure just financed a nicer-looking version of the same collapse, for years. What it bought me now, sober, was something smaller and stranger: permission to spend a slow year on a bash script instead of a frantic year on a company, with nobody's rent depending on which one I picked. It took getting sober to want to spend the money that way.

That same stretch is also when I opened a new document and typed a title at the top of it: *Winners Win*. Not a plan for a launch. Not a funnel. Just a title, and then a page and a half of notes underneath it about the actual thing I'd learned that year — that winning, in the sense I'd spent my whole career chasing, had never been the problem. I knew how to win. I'd won the eBay award, won the acquisitions, won the room at every conference I ever spoke at. What I hadn't known how to do was survive winning without a chemical crutch under it, and I hadn't known that years of "success" could sit on top of a foundation that was actively killing me. That felt like something worth writing down for somebody else before I convinced myself it was too personal to be useful to anyone but me.

Starting a book, even a page and a half of notes, was the clearest proof I had that something in me had turned back outward. For most of the frantic years, everything I built pointed inward, toward proving something to myself that Adderall made feel urgent every single hour of every single day. Teaching, mentoring, the version of me that used to fly to a conference and give it everything for forty minutes because I genuinely loved watching someone else's face change when a hard idea landed. That version had gone quiet for a long time. Writing *Winners Win*, badly, in fragments, at a kitchen island with a laptop that had finally stopped feeling dangerous, was that person's first

sign of life in years. Months kept passing the way they do when you're not white-knuckling them anymore — which is to say, unremarkably, and then all at once you notice how much distance is behind you. The fear around the laptop didn't have a day it ended. It just got thinner and thinner, the way fog does, until one gray morning I realized I'd opened it four times that day without once feeling my chest tighten, and hadn't even clocked it as a milestone until I sat down that night to write this. Brandi and I were married by then. I'm not going to spend this chapter on the wedding except to say that standing across from her, sober, present, and boring in all the ways that count, was the first time in years I could actually feel a good day happening to me while it was happening, instead of only being able to reconstruct it later from a photo. There's a version of this chapter that ends with a bigger moment (a launch, a headline, a number with more zeroes on it) because that's the shape every chapter of my life had taken up to this one. I looked for that bigger moment while I was writing this, the way you pat your pockets for keys you already know aren't there, and it isn't here. The biggest moment in this chapter is a stack overflow bug fixed in four hours and a title typed at the top of an empty document. I used to think a story needed more than that to be worth telling. I don't think that anymore, and I think not thinking that anymore is most of what actually got rebuilt. I wasn't chasing empires anymore, just building small, patient, correct things and letting that be enough: a bash script, a pull request, a page and a half of notes toward a book I might actually finish.

I wasn't superhuman anymore. I was just a guy who walked past a laptop on a kitchen island and picked it up anyway, out of habit instead of plan, the way you'd pick up a guitar. And that turned out to be enough.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Quiet Is Not the Same as Gone

“Everything you’ve ever wanted is on the other side of fear.” — George Addair

The oldest thing the Internet Archive has on me was captured at 2:36 in the morning on June 10, 2003. I know the timestamp because I typed the query myself, at my kitchen table in Dallas, sober, with a cup of coffee going cold next to the laptop. 20030610023644. A machine in California looked at a website a guy in Nebraska had built, decided it was worth keeping, and kept it. Then it kept keeping it, once a year, every year, through the money years and the stage years and the years I do not like to talk about, all the way to February 26, 2026. Twenty-three years of me, sitting in a vault I did not build and could not delete. I had spent the better part of a decade believing that archive was a headstone.

The part where I thought it was gone

Here is what nobody tells you about wrecking something you built. It does not go all at once. There is no single afternoon where you kick the thing over. It goes the way a tooth goes: slowly, then in a way you cannot ignore, and by the time you are paying attention the part that hurt has already stopped hurting, which is somehow worse. shoemoney.com was three thousand posts, give or take. Fifteen years of writing, every night, whether I had anything or not. Server migrations I did at 4am on Adderall because I was certain, chemically certain, that I was the only person who could do it right. Database upgrades I started and did not finish. A backup strategy I described in detail to several people and never actually implemented, which is the most Adderall sentence in this entire book. When the archive finally came apart, I did not lose it in a fire. I lost it in a hundred small decisions made by a guy who was extremely confident and not entirely present. For years while the blog sat dormant, people would ask when it was coming back and I would say soon. I was not lying. I just could not go in there. Restoring it meant reading it, and reading it meant meeting him, the guy who wrote those posts, and I was not ready to be in a room with that guy. Depression does an interesting thing with a legacy. It does not tell you the work was bad. It tells you the work was real and you are the one who is not, anymore. Fear does the rest. Every month I did not restore it was a month I got to keep not knowing what was in there. So I let a thing I spent fifteen years building sit in the dark because I was afraid of the author.

What was actually in the vault

When I finally did it, in 2026, it took an afternoon. That is the joke. The part I had been not doing for nearly a decade took about four hours, most of which was waiting on transfers.

The Wayback Machine had tens of thousands of archived URLs under shoemoney.com. Not all of them were posts; archives collect debris too. The exact count mattered less than the shape of it: fifteen years of showing up had not vanished just because I had stopped looking at it.

I read some of it. Most of it holds up better than I expected and worse than I remembered, which I now understand is the correct outcome for any honest archive. There is a post from 2007 where I explain something I had just figured out, badly, with enthusiasm, and it is the best thing on the site. There are posts from later where I am very obviously performing. I can tell you the exact year the voice changes. I will not tell you here.

The site is back. Most of it stays private, for reasons that have nothing to do with this book and everything to do with a courtroom. But it exists, it is mine, and the twenty-three year line in that archive is unbroken. That mattered to me more than I expected it to. Not because anyone else was counting. Because I had spent ten years assuming the record showed a man who quit, and the record actually showed a man who kept going and then got quiet.

Quiet is not the same as gone. I needed to read that in my own handwriting.

AiBook

Then I published a book. Not *Winners Win*, which was still a page and a half of notes; a different one.

AiBook was different from my first book. It was a field manual built around things that broke and what I learned fixing them. The sales did well enough that the old me would have memorized the number. The new me had to go look it up. That difference mattered more than the number.

The podcast

The Mozilla AI people asked me to come on their podcast. I want to explain why that landed the way it did. Mozilla is not a hot startup. Mozilla is the org that shipped a browser to keep the web from becoming one company's mall, and then kept shipping it for twenty years while everybody else got acquired. In open source, respect is not a press release. It is a merge commit. And the way I got on that podcast was not a publicist. It was a pull request. As of September 20, 2026, my GitHub account has 691 public repositories and 7,605 contributions in the trailing year. More to the point: 78 merged pull requests all-time into other people's projects, across 32 different organizations, the earliest merged on August 26, 2020 and the most recent on September 19, 2026. There are 110 more sitting open right now, which means most of what I do gets ignored, which is correct and healthy and I recommend it.

A meaningful share of those contributions landed in Mozilla projects. The exact count, as of this writing, is twenty-four merged pull requests across nine Mozilla repositories, all of them in the seven weeks between August 3 and September 21, 2026; what matters here is that I kept returning to the work because I liked the room.

Nobody at Mozilla knew who I was when I filed the first one. That is the part I would like tattooed somewhere. I did not email anybody. I did not mention Affiliate Summit or the AdSense check or the fact that I used to get paid to stand on stages. I found a bug, I fixed the bug, I wrote a test, and a person I had never met looked at it and said yes. Then I did it twenty-three more times.

The recording itself was fine. I have done a few hundred of these. What I remember is after.

After

The call did not end when the recording stopped. Their developer relations lead stayed on, and then leadership joined, and what had been an interview turned into two people asking me what I actually thought about the state of open models.

So I told them what I actually thought. I had come into AI sideways, through years of building, breaking, and learning in public. For once I was not pitching. I was just talking about work I liked with people who liked the same work.

The realization

Somewhere in that window, the actual lesson showed up. I spent my twenties and a chunk of my thirties trying to be the smartest guy in the room, and the pills were how I paid for that. That was the transaction. Adderall bought me certainty, volume, and the ability to out-endure everyone at the table, and the price was everything downstream of it, including most of what I liked about myself. I am not the smartest person in any room I currently walk into. The researchers I talk to are doing work I have to read twice. That used to feel like a verdict. It now feels like Tuesday.

What I am good at, what I have always been good at and mistook for a lesser skill because it did not feel like genius, is taking something complicated and handing it to somebody in a form they can use. I did it for fifteen years on a blog. I did it on stages. I can do it for open models and agent harnesses right now, and there are a lot of very smart people building things that almost nobody can explain.

I do not need to be the smartest in the room. I need to help people understand what is in the room.

That is not a consolation prize. It took me until age fifty and a stretch of sobriety to notice it is the job I always actually wanted.

The interviews

So I started interviewing. Anthropic. OpenAI. The vLLM world. Others I will not name because the conversations are live.

They were good conversations, and there was a strange thing inside all of them. They would look at what I had built and what I had run and what I had sold, and then they would start describing a role at a level well below the one on my resume, and I could see them brace for it.

One of them finally asked. Why are you looking at this level.

Here is the honest answer, and I got to give it because I had spent the better part of two years becoming a person who could. There is no job below me. I do not have a money problem. I have a purpose problem.

I have had the money. I had a six-figure AdSense month and sold companies for eight figures, and none of it solved the problem this book is about. If money were the variable, this book would not exist.

What I want is a room full of developers and a hard thing to explain.

Where this leaves me

Brandi is solid. The house is solid. My daughters are in school in Nebraska and they call me, which they did not always do, and I am awake for it when they do. I am also now in the hands of a very gifted psychiatrist, Dr. Lisa Fairweather, who has not only overseen my ADHD but has also slowly brought my clonazepam down from 6 mg a day to 1.5 mg. The Pristiq stays at 100. The archive is back. The book is out. The pull requests keep merging, mostly into other people's repositories, where my name appears in small type next to a bug number. I am relevant again. Not because I came back superhuman, and not because I found a better chemical, and not because I out-thought anybody. Because I did the work, on my own brain, at my

own speed, in public, with nothing in my system, and enough of it stacked up that people who had never heard of ShoeMoney looked at what I built and said yes. That is the whole thing. I did the work. The worst of the recovery is behind me. The actual work starts now.

Notes on Sources

Medication chronology: key prescription dates and dosages in this revised edition were reconstructed by the author from his available CVS and Walgreens account histories and his recollection of clinical visits.

Adderall XR: U.S. prescribing information describes the extended-release product as a once-daily morning medication. The memoir's 20 mg XR twice-daily and later three-times-daily schedules describe the author's own prescribed regimens and are not presented as standard dosing recommendations.

Xelstrym: FDA-approved dextroamphetamine transdermal system. The author recalls being prescribed the 13.5 mg/9-hour patch in July 2024.

Pristiq: desvenlafaxine, an SNRI antidepressant approved for major depressive disorder. The author describes his own treatment course and current 100 mg once-daily regimen; this is not dosing advice for readers.

Clonazepam: a benzodiazepine. The author describes his own prescribed taper from 6 mg daily to 1.5 mg daily under his current psychiatrist's care; this is not dosing advice for readers.

Stimulant withdrawal: the memoir uses broad, recognized symptom descriptions such as fatigue, dysphoric mood, sleep changes, appetite changes, and psychomotor slowing/agitation. It intentionally avoids presenting a universal recovery timetable for prescription Adderall.

Long-term recovery literature: where the author discusses finding research on stimulant recovery, he explicitly notes that much of the literature he

encountered involved methamphetamine or otherwise different stimulant-use populations. Those data are not treated as a direct forecast of his own recovery.

Adult ADHD Self-Report Scale (ASRS): the revised manuscript paraphrases the kinds of symptoms that resonated with the author rather than reproducing questionnaire items verbatim.

Daniel Keyes, *Flowers for Algernon* (novel, 1966), is discussed as a literary metaphor for the author's experience. Plot discussion has been intentionally shortened to what is necessary for the memoir's commentary.

Limitless (2011, directed by Neil Burger) is discussed as the film that gave the author a vocabulary for his own frustration with focus. The memoir describes the film only to the extent needed for that personal connection.

Internet Archive, GitHub, Mozilla, OpenAI, Anthropic, Laravel, Vue, AWS, Blizzard/Diablo, Facebook/Meta, and other company or product names are used descriptively to identify real services, projects, or events in the author's life; no affiliation or endorsement is implied.